

Kindergarten Entry Assessments

An Examination of Best Practices, National Trends, and Recommendations

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Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs) are evaluations administered to students before or during the initial weeks of kindergarten. Their primary role is to guide instructional practices and assess developmental progress, with an aim to support children's learning. They encompass various domains, including language, early literacy, and social-emotional skills (Harding et al., 2019).

This brief was developed to support policymakers and practitioners in making data-driven decisions regarding the selection and implementation of a high-quality KEA. Research and subsequent information were gathered from the latest accessible data, including current legislative and regulatory language. The brief outlines the characteristics of high-quality KEAs, explores how these assessments may be used, reviews different types of KEAs and related national trends, and concludes with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Key Points

- KEAs are evaluations administered to young learners at the start of kindergarten to assess their developmental progress and guide educators' practices.
- High-quality KEAs are comprehensive assessments that span five developmental domains: physical well-being, social–emotional skills, learning approaches, language and literacy, and cognitive development.
- KEAs are designed with clear administrative guidelines that are culturally and linguistically responsive. They align with curriculum standards and other early childhood assessments. They are supported by additional resources, such as professional development, to ensure fidelity and effective implementation.
- KEA data may be utilized with various interest holders in diverse ways, including informing tailored instruction, shaping schoolwide programming, guiding resource allocation, and evaluating progress towards state goals.
- Effectively choosing KEAs requires considering cultural and linguistic diversity, reliability and validity, resource allocation, training, alignment, collaboration, and parental involvement.
- Only 16 states and the District of Columbia mandate kindergarten attendance.
- As of May 2024, 37 states require that some type of statewide or district-level KEA be administered to all incoming students.

Characteristics of High-Quality Kindergarten Entry Assessments

A high-quality KEA is characterized by appropriate content, clear administration guidelines, and alignment with curriculum standards and other early childhood assessments. Its content typically encompasses five child development domains that are designed to gather comprehensive student data: physical well-being, social–emotional skills, learning approaches, language and literacy, and cognitive development (K–3 Formative Assessment Consortium, 2019; Weisenfeld et al., 2020; Yun et al., 2021). Ideally, KEAs should cater to diverse learning styles, respond to cultural contexts, accommodate linguistic needs, ensure reliable data collection, and reach all students (Brown et al., (n.d.); K–3 Formative Assessment Consortium, 2019; Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2012; Yun et al., 2021).

Alignment to standards is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of KEAs. Moreover, integration with student formative assessment over time not only enhances the impact of KEAs on students' educational journeys but also promotes consistent instruction and a shared understanding of developmental milestones (Weisenfeld et al., 2020). Furthermore, this alignment with other elementary school assessments can foster cohesion, potentially close achievement gaps, and improve child outcomes (Kauerz & Coffman, 2019).

Continuous educator support is also pivotal in maximizing the effectiveness of KEAs. Professional development opportunities for teachers, along with timely documentation tools and user-friendly data management systems, are essential for educators to utilize KEA data effectively (Shields et al., 2016; Yun et al., 2021). This comprehensive support ensures that KEAs are seamlessly integrated into the teaching and learning process.

Appropriate Uses of KEAs

KEAs can be used for a variety of purposes. They enable early education teachers to tailor instruction, pinpoint the strengths and needs of individual children and groups, identify students who need additional assessments, foster stronger teacher–parent partnerships, and monitor student progress (Garver, 2020; Yun et al., 2021).

Additionally, KEAs may be used to identify and plan needed supports, guide early learning programs, inform professional development, and improve collaboration and alignment across grades (Garver, 2020; Yun et al., 2021).

Trends and data from KEAs can also inform decisions regarding state programs, policies, and resource allocations (Regional Educational Laboratory Program, n.d.).

While KEAs may serve diverse purposes, it is important to note that KEAs cannot do all of these things simultaneously. See Table 1 in the Appendix for a more detailed description of the potential uses of KEAs at the classroom, building or site, district, and state levels.

KEA data should *not* be used as part of an accountability system for students, teachers, or early learning providers. Additionally, KEAs should not be utilized to delay the start of kindergarten for a student or to diagnose a child with a learning disability (Yun et al., 2021). The effectiveness of using a KEA to evaluate programs depends on the presence of a dedicated study designed for that purpose.

Types of KEAs

There are two main types of KEAs: state assessments and national standardized assessments. This brief refers to state assessments as tests designed by or for a specific state or states, while national standardized

assessments are tests created with a broader applicability across any state. Both state and national KEAs have the potential to inform instructional decisions, support family engagement, and guide policy-level efforts to enhance early learning systems. Neither type is necessarily more beneficial than the other.

The effectiveness of both types of assessments depends on critical factors, including the quality of the assessment, their alignment with established standards, and the strategies employed for their implementation. The decision to use a state-specific or more broadly applicable national KEA depends upon the state's intended objectives for utilizing the assessment. This includes choosing from a variety of assessment types, such as observation-based, direct, criterion-referenced, or norm-referenced. The choice of assessment should respond to a state's specific context, the composition of that state's population, and the desired mechanisms for implementation.

State KEAs

State KEAs are generally tailored to each state's specific early learning standards and educational priorities (Yun, 2021). These assessments aim to evaluate a wide range of domains, including language, literacy, math, science, executive function, and social–emotional skills, in an effort to provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of each child's readiness for the kindergarten curriculum. The content and structure of state KEAs vary, as states have the flexibility to design assessments that align with their educational objectives and the needs of their student population (Yun, 2021).

National KEAs

National KEAs seek to provide a consistent, standardized measure of child development across multiple states. These assessments encompass key domains, including social–emotional, cognitive, language and literacy, mathematical and scientific reasoning, and physical development, intending

to offer a holistic view of each child's skills and abilities. The content and administration of national assessments are typically more uniform, facilitating cross-state comparisons and identifying national trends in kindergarten readiness (Yun, 2021).

National Trends

High-quality KEAs effectively guide educators' practices; however, most states are still in the nascent stages of exploring, developing, and implementing these assessments. This slow adoption is underscored by the fact that only 15 states and the District of Columbia mandate kindergarten attendance for all children within their jurisdictions. Of these, 11 still require that students take a KEA: Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina, and Virginia. For more information on each state's kindergarten attendance and entry assessment requirements, see Table 2 in the Appendix.

Current research accounts for 37 states that mandate a statewide or district-level KEA for incoming students. Of those 37 states, 23 use state-specific KEAs, while 13 utilize national assessments. Texas is the only state that offers both state and national assessment options. Hawaii is the only state that does not detail its KEA options, although it requires students to take a KEA.

The most common commercially created KEAs include Teaching Strategies Gold (offered by five states), the Desired Results Development Profile (offered by four states), and the Brigance Assessments (offered by four states). See Table 2 in the Appendix for more details surrounding KEA requirements and types of assessment offered.

Recommendations for KEA Considerations

The following recommendations are provided for policymakers and practitioners to consider in the selection and execution of a high-quality KEA: cultural and linguistic responsiveness, standardization and reliability, resource allocation and training, alignment to other educational levers, as well as collaboration and parental involvement.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

KEAs should be culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate, ensuring equitable assessments for all children regardless of their background (Yun et al., 2021). To achieve this, assessments must accommodate English learners and children with special needs, and policies should address the linguistic capacities of assessors (Ackerman, 2018a, 2018b). Proficiency in native languages should be considered alongside English to ensure a more inclusive assessment approach (National Research Council, 2008). Additionally, the diverse backgrounds of all students, including Hispanic/Latino students, Indigenous students, and students who speak various dialects, should be considered. Students' families' countries of origin, dialects, language use at home, and length of time in the United States should also be considered. Moreover, the KEA should avoid being highly scripted, inauthentic, or excessively lengthy to ensure successful implementation. They should encompass a comprehensive range of developmental domains and aim to avoid bias in assessment design or implementation (Weisenfeld et al., 2020).

Standardization and Reliability of Assessment

High-quality KEAs are reliable, valid, fair, and aligned with state learning standards (National Research Council, 2008; Yun et al., 2021). They provide clear administration guidelines, facilitate reliable data collection, and allow for refinement based on teacher feedback (Ackerman, 2018b). Moreover, addressing construct-irrelevant issues, such as linguistic and cultural biases

in assessment design or implementation, is vital, particularly for multilingual learners (Ackerman, 2018a).

Resource Allocation and Training

Allocating additional resources for support is essential for accurate and reliable KEA administration. This includes providing professional development opportunities for teachers in addition to offering them access to user-friendly data management systems. Additionally, the assessment process should avoid being overly scripted or lengthy for both educators and students (Ackerman, 2018b). Teachers may also require additional training or technical assistance to assess multilingual learners (Ackerman, 2018a) effectively. With the judicious allocation of time and resources, the KEA can bridge assessments from early childhood education and later K–3 or other elementary assessments.

Alignment

Beyond being a standalone assessment, the KEA should align with formative assessment practices, professional learning, and systemic support. A balanced focus on various language and literacy skills is essential for accurately gauging children’s development in these areas in kindergarten and beyond. To realize meaningful change, a KEA must be integrated into a holistic educational framework.

As stated previously, a KEA must be aligned to a state’s desired purpose. Although the assessment can achieve many different outcomes, it cannot meet all possible uses simultaneously. Instead, the KEA must be tailored to serve a state’s specific purpose, considering the diversity and complexity of its population.

Collaboration and Parental Involvement

Collaboration plays a crucial role in the effective implementation and enhancement of KEAs. Interest holders, including educators, school and district leaders, state policymakers, researchers, and families, must work together to refine assessment tools, promote data-driven decision-making, and support student learning (Hanover Research, 2013). By working collaboratively, efforts enhance the alignment of KEAs with state standards and early childhood and elementary assessments, fostering cohesion and improving child outcomes.

Furthermore, involving parents in the assessment process is essential for fostering stronger teacher–parent partnerships. This necessitates consistent practices for communication and obtaining informed consent (National Research Council, 2008). To support this, timely tailored reports and targeted professional development are crucial in helping educators effectively use and share the KEA data with families (Golan et al., 2016). Such shared data facilitates transparent communication pathways between educators and parents, ultimately strengthening family and school partnerships.

Conclusion

Implementing a high-quality KEA requires careful consideration of content, alignment of standards and other assessments, and resource provision. By adopting best practices and drawing from successful examples in other states, policymakers can establish a robust KEA system that supports students' holistic development and lays a strong foundation for their educational journey. Through continuous improvement and a commitment to excellence, policymakers and practitioners can ensure that their KEA fulfills its role as an effective tool for enhancing instructional practices that foster positive learning outcomes.

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Appendix

Table 1a. Potential Uses of Kindergarten Entry Assessments at Different Interest-holder Levels (adapted from Garver, 2020; Yun et al., 2021)

Interest-holder Level	Use of Kindergarten Entry Assessment Data
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform and adapt instructional practices to tailor individualized instruction. • Identify students requiring targeted services and create a school readiness plan for each child. • Engage with families through information sharing and involvement in instruction and resources.
Building or Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shape schoolwide programming and support for students and families. • Systematically track students using a data management system, highlighting their performance history (e.g., aligned assessments from early childhood education through third grade). • Inform strategic placement of students in kindergarten classes. • Identify students in emergent and developing areas for targeted support. Facilitate communication of student needs among teaching staff, including specialists.
District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure curriculum effectiveness and track long-term trends in student performance to measure the impact of various initiatives and interventions on cohort-level outcomes.* • Inform equitable resource allocation and investments in early childhood programs. • Plan and design professional development and training sessions. • Inform district-wide strategic planning by identifying trends, gaps, areas of success, and the extent of potential learning losses.
State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support federal reporting and state-level reporting required by federal agencies. • Evaluate progress towards state goals, pinpoint opportunity gaps, and continuously monitor the state’s long-term trends and advancements in early literacy to use as an indicator of state preschool program impacts.* • Allocate funding and resources for specific programs (such as preK) more effectively by directing support to schools, districts, or regions. • Identify schools or districts that require targeted interventions and support, such as professional development or specialized programs, to address literacy gaps.

**Requires a dedicated study with the purpose of evaluation*

Table 2a summarizes the research for this report that was conducted from January 2024 to April 2024. The scope of the study was limited to the 50 states and Washington, D.C., omitting U.S. territories. Research exclusively utilized publicly available information; therefore, no non-disclosed or internal policy changes within SEAs could be captured. The findings from this report are based on the latest accessible data within the research period.

Table 2a. National Scan of Kindergarten Requirements and Entry Assessments¹

State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
Alabama	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Alabama Kindergarten Inventory Developing Skills (ALAKiDs)
Alaska	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten or first grade are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP)
Arizona	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Teaching Strategies GOLD
Arkansas	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): There are four state-approved options districts may choose from: Curriculum Associates: i-Ready, Istation: ISIP, NWEA: Map Growth, and Renaissance: Star.
California	No	No
Colorado	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): There are ten state-approved options districts may choose from: Acadience Math K-6, Brigance Early Childhood

¹ The research team used the following definition to identify states that require or do not require kindergarten attendance: kindergarten is required for students who are five years old at the start of the school year or when the compulsory attendance age is five. This definition includes students who turn 6 during the school year or before the start of the following school year. When a state's compulsory age was 6, this was considered "not required".

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State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
		Screens III, COR for Kindergarten, Desired Results Developmental Profile-Kindergarten (DRDP-K), Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-4), FastBridge earlyMath, FastBridge early Reading, FastBridge SAEBRS, Teaching Strategies GOLD®, Istation's Indicator of Progress (ISIP), and North Carolina KEA.
Connecticut	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Kindergarten Entrance Inventory (KEI)
Delaware	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Delaware Early Learner Survey (DE-ELS)
Florida	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) Star Early Literacy test
Georgia	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS) Readiness Check
Hawaii	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment: None stated.
Idaho	No	Not specified in statute or regulation.
Illinois	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS)
Indiana	No	No
Iowa	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Districts may select a valid and reliable universal screening instrument as prescribed by the Department of Education.

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State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
Kansas	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Ages & Stages Questionnaires®, Third Edition (ASQ-3) and Ages & Stages Questionnaires®: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2)
Kentucky	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Curriculum Associates BRIGANCE® Kindergarten Screen (K Screen)
Louisiana	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): There are eight state-approved options districts may choose from: Developing Skills Checklist (DSC), Teaching Strategies GOLD, Desired Results Developmental Profile Assessments (DRDP)-K, Developmental Indicator for the Assessment of Learning-Third Edition (DIAL-3), Developing Skills Checklist (DSC), Brigance K & 1 Screen, Early Screening Inventory-Revised, and Screening Test for Education Prerequisite Skills (STEPS).
Maine	No	No
Maryland	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Maryland Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Massachusetts Kindergarten Entry Assessment (MKEA)
Michigan	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Michigan Kindergarten Entry Observation/ Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (MKEO/KRA)

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State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
Minnesota	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): There are four state-approved options districts may choose from: COR Advantage, Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Teaching Strategies GOLD, and Work Sampling System (WSS).
Mississippi	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Renaissance Star Early Literacy
Missouri	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): There are three state-approved options for districts: The Kindergarten Observation Form, Desired Results Developmental Profile for Kindergarten (DRDP K-Essential), and Brigance Inventory of Early Development III Standardized.
Montana	No	No
Nebraska	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): Districts may select a valid and reliable universal screening instrument as prescribed by the Department of Education.
Nevada	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (National): The Brigance Early Childhood Screen III: K & 1 published by Curriculum Associates and The Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
New Hampshire	No	No
New Jersey	No	Yes Assessment: None stated.
New Mexico	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): New Mexico Kindergarten Observation Tool (KOT)
New York	No	No

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State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
North Carolina	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): North Carolina Early Learning Inventory (NC ELI)
North Dakota	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): North Dakota Kindergarten Entry Assessment
Ohio	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Ohio Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Revised (KRA-R)
Oklahoma	No	No
Oregon	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Oregon Kindergarten Assessment
Pennsylvania	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Pennsylvania Kindergarten Entry Inventory
Rhode Island	No	No
South Carolina	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)
South Dakota	Yes	No
Tennessee	Yes	No
Texas	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State/National): Texas Kindergarten Entry Assessment by the Children’s Learning Institute and mCLASS Texas by Amplify1
Utah	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Utah Kindergarten Entry and Exit Profile

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State	Kindergarten Requirements	KEA Requirements
Vermont	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Vermont Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System
Virginia	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP)
Washington	No	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)
Washington, D.C.	Yes	No
West Virginia	Yes	Yes, all students entering kindergarten are required to be assessed. Assessment (State): West Virginia Early Learning Reporting System (WV ELRS)
Wisconsin	Yes	No
Wyoming	Yes	No

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