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# Head Start's National Reporting System Fails Our Children. Here's Why.

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Nearly 40 years ago, the black and Latino communities embraced the Head Start program because of the promise it held for challenging the inequities in our education system. Since its inception, Head Start has prepared millions of low-income black and Latino children to thrive in school. Today, a new national test—a test that is badly designed, culturally biased, and fiscally wasteful—threatens the continued success of this valuable program and of the nearly 650,000 black and Latino children who depend on it to help level the playing field.

**An assessment system for Head Start should be linguistically and culturally appropriate, but the National Reporting System misses the mark.**

The new test, called the Head Start National Reporting System, was developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to enhance local assessments, create greater accountability for students' academic preparation, and improve training and technical assistance. Unfortunately, in its current form, the system is so flawed that it does not meet these goals.

Our organizations, the National Black Child Development Institute and the National Council of La Raza, are concerned about the threat this test represents to some of the nation's most vulnerable children. We have urged Congress to postpone testing to allow the National Academy of Sciences to complete a study and make recommendations for more appropriate testing of young children.

Our organizations have long recognized that a sound assessment system is a critical part of a high-quality education program. We know that testing is important for maintaining accountability for what and whether children learn. In fact, these types of assessments have been vital in exposing the inequities of the education system and the persistent achievement gap that our children experience. So, why do we have such a dire view of National Reporting System testing? There are several reasons.

First, while Head Start focuses on the development of the whole child, emphasizing socialization skills, emotional growth, and motor skills, as well as academic preparation; the reporting system's test does not. For black and Latino children, this broad focus is essential for success in school, and in life, because our children continue to suffer disproportionately from the grinding effects of poverty. The results are obvious. Kindergarten teachers say they can tell right away which children participated in Head Start

and which did not. Head Start children are ready to learn, because they have begun to develop the social skills that are so essential for young children in school. By any measure, Head Start's social services remain as vital today as they were 40 years ago.

The National Reporting System test, on the other hand, is much more narrowly defined, assessing only children's language and mathematical ability. In a critique published this year in the journal *Young Children* (January 2004), early-childhood-assessment experts Samuel J. Meisels and Sally Atkins-Burnett write that both the National Education Goals Panel and the National Research Council have "urge[d] that children below age 8 not be administered the kinds of tests that are represented by" the National Reporting System. They make a persuasive argument that the system's test uses methods so flawed that there is a high probability the results will be inaccurate and unreliable as a predictor of future academic success.

Anyone who has spent time with preschoolers knows that you simply cannot get an accurate picture of their knowledge and skills by sitting down with them twice and asking a standard set of questions. A more suitable assessment system would review their progress on an ongoing basis, rather than at fixed points in time. Head Start is tailored to meet the comprehensive and age-appropriate needs of its students, so why shouldn't the reporting system's test be, too?

Second, the test—by, for example, using only Caucasian facial features in a majority of questions—disregards Head Start's long-standing commitment to respecting the rich diversity of its children and families. Head Start services have always reflected the culture of the local communities in which they operate. In fact, many of us fought hard to include requirements for language and cultural competency in the program standards. While this was important to us years ago, today it is even more so. Approximately 27 percent of the children in Head Start speak a language other than English at home, and nearly 65 percent of program participants are black or Hispanic.

An assessment system for Head Start should be linguistically and culturally appropriate, but the National Reporting System misses the mark. Its test is offered only in English and Spanish, thereby giving up on thousands of children who are not familiar with either language. For speakers of Spanish, the test requires that 4- and 5-year-old participants first fail the English-language test before they can be administered the test in Spanish. It should trouble us all that this test requires a large group of children to be labeled as "failures" or otherwise ignored. We have other options, and we can and must do better.

Moreover, the test does not accommodate regional variations in language or meet the needs of bilingual children who have varying degrees of knowledge depending upon the language in which questions are asked. Head Start is committed to providing culturally and linguistically responsive services, so why shouldn't the National Reporting System test be, too?

Third, the reporting system's test wastes resources by duplicating assessment efforts that are already in place and working well. Local assessments of Head Start evaluate individual student progress and inform decisions on curriculum and teacher training. National assessments measure the overall effectiveness of Head Start in preparing children for kindergarten.

Every program paid for by our tax dollars needs the accountability that assessments can provide. Head Start is among the most rigorously evaluated federal programs, including two national studies, the Head Start Impact Study and the FACES Study, which report on the program's impact on a broad set of school-readiness indicators. Local assessments also are done regularly to evaluate children's ongoing development in a broad context and to inform program decisions.

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Research shows that Head Start works. While it is not a magic bullet, it does what it was asked to do—narrow the achievement gap for poor children. Black and Latino families, in particular, have seen firsthand the developmental leaps experienced by children in the Head Start program. Thanks to Head Start, thousands of children, who otherwise might not have had the opportunity, arrive at kindergarten possessing English-language skills and the confidence to keep learning.

The evidence for National Reporting System testing is weak. The system does not enhance local assessments. Rather, it bypasses the local community and dictates from Washington

what children should be learning.

If there is a need for more national testing, it should be for testing that truly improves the quality of academic instruction, informs training needs, and helps develop priorities within the program. These are laudable goals, but the National Reporting System doesn't meet them. It's so poorly designed that the results cannot be relied upon to provide new or valuable information. Instead, the reporting system drains 10 percent of the Head Start training and technical-assistance budget. We'd prefer to see this limited resource put to better use, rather than being diverted into what is essentially a flawed experiment.

For these reasons, we believe that it's crucial for Congress to suspend the National Reporting System for a year, and allow the National Academy of Sciences to put the system to the test. Does it work? Is it providing us with important information? How can it be improved? Does it meet the needs of a diverse child population? These are important questions that demand answers.

The Head Start program encourages our children to grow, broaden their horizons, and master new fields of learning. They deserve better than what this reporting system delivers. Surely we can devise an assessment system for Head Start that is better designed, more comprehensive, and culturally relevant.

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