Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs) have in recent years received increased attention as an important strategy for formally gauging children’s developmental status when they enter kindergarten. When states that applied for federal funds made available through the 2011 Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC) initiative (see box) were given the option of proposing how they would develop a KEA, 35 of the 37 applicant states chose to include KEAs in their plans.

This issue brief, which is based on reviews of the proposals submitted by states applying for RTTT-ELC funding, takes both retrospective and prospective looks at the KEA experiences of the applicant states. Part 1 of the brief discusses the current status of state KEAs and noteworthy trends and promising proposals from the RTTT-ELC applications; Part 2 looks ahead to key issues that all states working on KEAs should consider as they start to implement KEA plans. Readers can consult the Appendix tables for state-by-state summaries of applicants’ plans for KEAs.

The information does not necessarily reflect what states are actually doing. It is based on the RTTT-ELC applications. Most states did not receive the grant and, therefore, might not have moved forward with their plan and even those states that were awarded grants may have made revisions to their plans.

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Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge

In May 2010, Congress committed $500 million for the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant. In October 35 states, DC and Puerto Rico submitted applications for grants ranging from $50 to $100 million, based on the relative population of low-income young children in a state. These innovative, competitive state-level grants were intended to address the needs of the most vulnerable young children through a comprehensive approach—supporting activities to enhance quality in early childhood education programs, align standards, and coordinate disparate elements of early care and education services into a more efficient, unified, high-quality system with measurable outcomes. Nine states—California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington—received Round One funding for a grant period that lasts from December 31, 2011 to December 31, 2015.

Source: Adapted from First Five Years Fund website, http://www.ffyf.org/content/early-learning-challenge
Through the brief, we hope to give a window on the many choices, challenges, and considerations around issues such as teacher training and support, using KEA data, engaging families in the process, and addressing the special needs of sub-populations of children such as dual-language learners. The brief also promotes opportunities for cross-state learning and collaboration and other recommendations that could facilitate the success of upcoming KEA efforts.

**Background on the KEA Section of the RTTT-ELC Competition**

The guidelines for the competition set forth several expectations for the KEAs to be covered in the applications – namely that the KEAs would: be aligned with early learning standards; cover all domains of school readiness (language and literacy development; cognition and general knowledge, including early mathematics and early scientific development; approaches to learning; physical well-being and motor development, including adaptive skills; and social and emotional development); be valid, reliable, and appropriate for all children; be reported to statewide data systems; be implemented by the 2014-15 school year; and be funded, in significant part, with federal or state resources other than those available under the RTTT-ELC grant.

In addition, states were expected to ensure that any use of assessments conformed to guidelines from the National Research Council, which sets high standards for using assessment data for high-stakes decisions about children, teachers, and programs.

All nine states that received RTTT-ELC first-round funding included discussions of proposed KEA work in their applications. Applicant states that expressed interest in working on KEAs but that did not win first-round funding will not necessarily move ahead with these plans; however, many will likely proceed with some version of their KEA plans.

**Part I. State Proposals: Trends and Highlights**

**Overview of Current KEA Instruments**

All 37 applications (including the two that did not propose further KEA work) included information on the status of their states’ KEA efforts at the time they submitted the applications.

- Thirteen states indicated they currently used no assessment at kindergarten entry (AZ, GA, IL, KY, ME, MA, NE, NV, NY, OR, RI, WV, WI).
- Of the remaining 23 states:
  - Four states were using a modified version of the Work Sampling System (MD, MI, MN, NJ).
  - Three states were using the Teaching Strategies GOLD Assessment System (CO, DE, WA).
  - Eleven states were using another multi-domain observational assessment. (AR, CA, CT, FL, HI, KS, MO, NC, PA, PR, VT). With the exception of Arkansas and Florida, these instruments were developed by the states themselves.
  - Five states were using a largely language and literacy assessment, with some giving local districts the option of selecting the instrument (IA, MS, NM, OH, OK).

Of the 23 states that gave specifics on their existing assessment instruments, 13 reported that the assessments covered all five domains of school readiness.

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outlined in the RTTT-ELC. Four states reported coverage of four domains (Arkansas, California, and Pennsylvania did not cover physical well-being and motor development, and Connecticut did not cover approaches to learning). In Connecticut, Hawaii, and Minnesota, the existing KEAs covered only early math skills, but not science, under the general cognition category. As noted, five states were using assessments largely limited to language and literacy.

**Proposed Plans for Developing and Implementing KEAs**

Thirty-five of 37 states (all applicants except for Maine and Missouri) proposed how they would develop, revise, or expand a statewide KEA that covers the five domains of school readiness. Many states proposed to do some pilot testing of the instrument before expanding to statewide use, which was scheduled for 2014-5 in most states (although larger states often had a longer timeframe for full KEA implementation). Minnesota did not commit to assessing all children in the state, taking the option to continue with a representative sample of students, as it has been doing in the past. California proposed to allow districts to implement the KEA on a voluntary basis.

In terms of the actual design of their KEAs, almost all states proposed to select an observational or authentic assessment instrument to be used by kindergarten teachers in the first two months of school. The following provides a summary of the different state plans:

- Twenty states indicated that they were going to develop a new statewide KEA, starting with a planning process to guide the selection or development of the KEA (AZ, AK, DE, DC, FL, GA, DE, IA, KY, MD, MS, NE, NV, NM, OH, OK, OR, RI, WV, WI). Of these states, Maryland and Ohio indicated that they planned to work jointly in developing their statewide KEAs, using their states’ previous experiences with KEAs as a foundation for their new efforts.
- Three states indicated that they would proceed largely with statewide implementation of their existing, selected KEAs (CO, PR, WA).
- Three states indicated that they were already in the process of developing a new KEA for their state and were proceeding with that process, which included piloting and planned roll-out of the KEA (IL, MI, NJ).
- Seven states indicated that they were planning to revise and build on their existing KEAs (CA, CT, KS, MN, NC, PA, VT).

  - Massachusetts proposed offering local entities a choice of approved instruments (Work Sampling System (WSS), Teaching Strategies GOLD, and HighScope Child Observation Record), indicating that the state would develop a common metric to allow for comparable reporting of the readiness of kindergartners across jurisdictions. New York is taking the same approach.

All states were explicit in mentioning the need to cover the five domains of school readiness and to align with the state’s early learning standards. As will be discussed in Part 2, some states, including Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, also saw the focus on KEAs as an opportunity to track the holistic development of children beyond kindergarten entry.
**Training Teachers to Administer the KEA**

The reliability and validity of KEA data depend largely on kindergarten teachers’ ability to administer the assessments and record the results appropriately, accurately, and consistently. Most states discussed providing initial training and materials to support teachers. Proposals for other strategies generally fell into four categories:

- **Provide ongoing technical assistance and coaching** (e.g., DE, IL, NJ, WA). For example, New Jersey proposed that after the initial training from the assessment publisher, the state would provide ongoing professional development and on-site technical assistance to ensure reliable implementation of the KEA. Illinois specified that each district would have one KEA coach for every 25 kindergarten teachers.

- **Establish regional centers** (e.g., KY, MA). For example, Kentucky proposed establishing “Early Learning Leadership Networks” through which state and regional trainers would work with local teams of teachers and assist with the implementation of KEAs.

- **Create online platforms and resources** (e.g., MD, OH). Ohio’s plans included developing “web-accessible content and access to professional learning communities to support administration and use of assessment.”

- **Develop a certification process** (e.g., MD, OH). These two states proposed developing a certification system that would require teachers to demonstrate their effectiveness in administering the KEA through simulations before the teachers actually conducted the assessments.

**Using KEA Data**

The RTTT-ELC guidelines emphasized that the KEA should be used “to inform efforts to close the school readiness gap at kindergarten entry and to inform instruction in the early elementary grades.” Overall, the applicants’ plans to use KEAs for these purposes spoke about general, prospective uses that would be made clear later as the KEAs were implemented. The plans did not provide illustrations of how the use of KEA data would lead to specific changes in classroom practice or help answer questions about improving practice at the student, classroom, or administrative level. Still, states described some promising strategies and models for using KEA data to inform early elementary practice and, to a lesser extent, to improve early care and education programs.

**Informing Early Elementary Practice**

Minnesota’s application indicated that the state sought to use KEA data to inform literacy instruction in early elementary classrooms. The state proposed to provide technical assistance materials to help districts use KEA data both to identify students who may need more intensive intervention than what is available in the standard school program and to inform the districts’ local literacy plans, which they must develop under the state’s new “Reading Well by Third Grade” legislation.

A number of states (e.g., CA, CT, IL, MD, NM, OH, and RI) planned to use online platforms and data systems (usually the state’s K-12 longitudinal data system) to help teachers access both KEA data for individual children and instructional resources that would help the teachers address issues surfaced by the data. New Mexico’s plan, for example, indicated that “Once student assessment data is reported into the platform, teachers will then be able to run queries that allow them to group students and plan instruction.”
Other noteworthy examples include:

- Illinois proposed integrating KEA data into the state’s statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS), which would have the capacity to create a “Kindergarten Learning Map,” identifying “a student’s progression against the learning goals for math and English language arts included within the Common Core State Standards for kindergarten.”

- California proposed developing web-based technology that would give kindergarten teachers access not only to individual-level data, but also to classroom and site-level profiles and reports of children’s kindergarten readiness.

- Connecticut’s plan for an online platform was presented as part of a larger array of professional development resources (for example, written materials, coaching) to help kindergarten teachers use the KEA data. Under the state’s proposal, teachers would receive support to better address children’s social and emotional development issues, which, the state wrote, are not “typically addressed” either by the professional development that is offered to these teachers or by the early elementary curriculum.

Besides creating online resources to promote the use of KEA data to inform early elementary practice, states also planned to provide professional support for this use of the data by developing cadres of coaches (e.g., DE, VT) and establishing regional training centers (e.g., KY, MA, WA). Massachusetts, for example, proposed regional “Readiness Centers” to help educators choose assessment tools, administer them properly, and interpret and use the data to inform instruction and engage families. Some of these states – KY, MA, WA, VT – also mentioned using KEA as an opportunity to organize joint professional development events and activities for early childhood and kindergarten teachers. Washington planned to create regional “Early Learning HUBS” to bring administrators, teachers, and early childhood staff together as “Transition Committees.” Through these “HUBS,” the state would then work with the Committees to use KEA data to inform transition plans and other practices.

Given that the RTTT-ELC application specifically asked states to conform to “the recommendations of the National Research Council reports on early childhood,” it is not surprising to find several states
explicitly stating that the KEA in no instances would be used for high-stakes testing, labeling, or tracking children, or for determining readiness for kindergarten entry.

**Informing Early Care and Education Programs**

States’ plans to use KEA data to inform early childhood practice and policy generally were less fully articulated than their plans for applying the KEA results to early elementary practice. However, several states did offer more specific proposals for using KEA data with preschool programs. Illinois had one of the more substantive plans. Preschool program directors would receive a Kindergarten to Preschool Feedback Report that would include aggregated school readiness data for the children in their programs, along with district and statewide averages that would provide a context for interpreting the individual results. The goal for these directors would be to “obtain critical information to support alignment and program improvement activities.” Connecticut had similar plans to conduct data analyses and produce annual reports on kindergartners’ readiness levels in order to identify either learning and developmental domains or populations that would need further attention. Under the proposal, the state department of education would support the Governor’s Early Childhood Office and local communities in using the KEA data to inform policies that help young children increase their readiness for school. Notably, Florida planned to continue its practice of using KEA data to evaluate preschool providers. The state proposed what it described as a “value-added approach” by incorporating into the KEA process “pre- and post- observation-based assessment scores and results of a valid teacher-child interaction assessment tool” in order to evaluate the performance of state-funded prekindergarten programs. Using this methodology, the state proposed to cut funding to prekindergarten programs that persistently score low on these metrics.

A few states – CO, OH, and NJ – planned to tie their KEA data to their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS). Of these three, only Ohio suggested using the data to inform practices in programs that participate in the QRIS. Colorado proposed to use the data as one variable for validating the state’s QRIS ratings. New Jersey developed performance targets that tie increases in kindergarten readiness levels to the percent of programs that have high QRIS ratings.

**Gathering Information from and Engaging Families**

A teacher-administered KEA is not the only source of information about children’s development. Some states specified how they would engage families and draw information from them that would be used in the KEAs. Several states (e.g., CO, DE, DC, IL, WA) indicated that they would augment the assessment with information from families. For example, Delaware will rely on a family questionnaire, while Washington plans on conducting in-person meetings at schools or in homes.

Other states (e.g., CO, CT, HI, IL, NM, NY, OH) indicated that they planned to use the assessment information to engage families and to help them support their children’s learning across the five domains. Ohio, Illinois, and New Mexico reported that they plan on including KEA data in their school and district report cards. These three states and Colorado also made general statements about providing parents with resources to understand the KEA data and providing guidance to help parents support children’s learning and development at home. Hawaii reported on an approach – unique among all the applicants – to taking family engagement into account in the KEA process. The state’s KEA
process involves the principal completing an annual survey about school policies and practices that support transition to kindergarten and early elementary instruction, including those that relate to parent involvement and communication with families.

**Addressing Special Needs in Subpopulations of Children**

Although the application guidelines asked how the KEA would benefit children with “high needs,” most proposals provided little specific information on how KEA data would be used to improve instruction or services for these children. State proposals that did speak to issues related to cultural diversity and special needs children mostly discussed these issues in the context of KEA design and administration.

In discussing how the KEA would be designed, a number of states – CA, DE, IL, KS, MD, MA, MN, OH, PA, and WA - made explicit reference to addressing issues of diversity and being responsive to different cultures, races, ethnic, and linguistic groups. Some states, including Minnesota and Pennsylvania, noted that they would seek to translate materials into multiple languages and develop strategies for communicating with families who are non- or limited-English speakers about KEA results. Other states reported how the design of their KEAs took into account the particular needs of diverse populations. Washington indicated that its Cultural Bias and Sensitivity Committee screened all community, teacher, parent, and student materials from the pilot KEA. On the basis of the Committee’s recommendations, some of the materials were revised and reviewed again to ensure that the KEA showed an awareness of and accommodation to a multiplicity of experiences, backgrounds, and cultures. California’s KEA included a domain for English language development that took into account that dual language learners (DLLs) have unique learning trajectories – for example, young children who develop proficiency in two languages simultaneously may have different patterns of language learning than children who speak only English.

Maryland and Ohio offered some of the more specific proposals for ensuring that the KEA data for DLLs and special-needs children are valid and reliable. To avoid mistaking DLLs’ lack of fluency in English for low performance in certain domains, Maryland has been training teachers to assess the learning and development of these children using methods that do not depend on language proficiency. Teachers are also “trained to coordinate with special education teachers in recording their observations and to take progress on students’ Individual Education Plans into consideration.” As Maryland’s partner in KEA development, Ohio is also taking steps to ensure that KEA measures for special-needs children and DLLs reflect the true capacities
of these children. The state is offering kindergarten teachers guidance on how to administer tests in ways that minimize barriers that keep DLLs and special-needs children from accurately demonstrating their full competencies in various domains.

Part II. Key Considerations for Developing and Implementing KEAs

States’ proposals to establish KEAs suggest that, as they move forward in their plans, they will likely encounter a number of common challenges and issues, offering opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. This section discusses some key considerations that all states should keep in mind as they start to put their plans into operation. The section also points to promising practices and proposals that some states are using and that others may want to learn more about.

KEA Design

Most of the states that submitted RTTT-ELC applications proposed to develop or adopt new KEAs or significantly revise their existing instruments. As they do so, it is likely that many of them will need to wrestle with a common set of decisions: Should they develop home-grown assessments or adopt off-the-shelf products? Should they require the use of a common instrument across the state or offer districts choices of which instrument to use? Should they assess every entering kindergartner or sample a representative group of students?

A few states have taken distinctive approaches to making these kinds of design decisions, and their experience may prove instructive. For example, Massachusetts stands out as the only RTTT-ELC winner that proposed allowing districts to choose from a limited set of state-approved KEAs and plans to develop common metrics for all of these assessments to allow for inter-district comparisons.

Minnesota is considering continuing its practice of sampling kindergartners rather than assessing every child. Clearly, doing so limits the ability to use the KEA to inform instruction of individual students. At the same time, sampling reduces the potential for misuse. But will sampling enable a state to achieve at least some of the major goals associated with developing a KEA? Notably, even if this approach does not allow for using KEAs to inform the instruction of individual students, will it allow for using these assessments to inform overall early elementary instruction? How easily can data from samples be used to inform improvements at the school or classroom level? And in connection with the approach used in Massachusetts, do the benefits of choice outweigh the costs of standardizing the results? It will be important to answer these and other questions about KEA design as states continue this work.

As states design KEAs, they also may consider taking the more fundamental step of articulating the questions that stakeholders would like to address through a KEA: Do stakeholders want to use the KEA to inform practice in both early childhood and early elementary settings? Should the KEA help inform policies at the local and state levels? Is the KEA also a tool to engage families in a more data-driven way? Are data from the KEA intended to help stakeholders understand children’s developmental trajectories and analyze predictors of school readiness and later academic success? Are stakeholders interested in differences in levels of school readiness among children from different racial/ethnic, income, socioeconomic, or regional/neighborhood backgrounds? As will be discussed further in upcoming sections, getting clarity on questions like these could not only inform KEA design, but also lead to changes in policies and practices related to professional development, data systems, data reporting, and family engagement.
KEA as part of a Comprehensive Assessment System

Kindergarten entry is a unique point in time for gauging children’s development and using assessment data to both look backward and look forward. Since public school systems serve most kindergartners, they have an opportunity to obtain a statewide perspective on students’ developmental status at a critical juncture and to use that information to inform both early childhood and early elementary practices and policies. An aligned assessment system from birth through third grade can provide a longitudinal perspective on children’s developmental status with respect to a common set of outcomes that are associated with or predictive of school success. In turn, knowing the factors that influence the birth-to-third grade trajectory allows states to identify practices and policies that support such success. In other words, KEA provides data that can be used to inform efforts to improve the array of programs designed to promote school readiness (looking back) and to promote children’s continued growth in all domains of learning and development through the early elementary years (looking forward).

By including KEA as one of the major policy levers, the RTTT-ELC put these issues on the table and gives states an opportunity to better understand and address achievement gaps at a much earlier point in children’s development. Although the federal guidelines themselves may not have provided explicit direction to states about how to use KEAs for these purposes, the decision to adopt a statewide KEA raises the possibility of doing so. And, some states are moving in this direction and are taking steps to incorporate KEAs into larger assessment systems. Notably, in Pennsylvania, the KEA was conceived as part of the “Keystone Child Outcome Framework,” which is a “standards-based birth-to-eight child outcome reporting framework” that allows programs and teachers on that continuum to measure and report on children’s development with respect to a common set of outcomes. This assessment system would give child care providers, teachers, program administrators, state policymakers, and other stakeholders a common understanding of how children in this age span should be developing over time and what, if any, interventions are needed along the way. While Pennsylvania’s application is somewhat short on the technical details of how this plan would be carried out, the state’s proposal reflects a comprehensive approach to KEA implementation and could serve as a model for other states.

Other states that indicated interest in taking smaller but still noteworthy steps to incorporate KEAs into broader systems include North Carolina, which proposed developing comprehensive, formative assessments for grades K-2 to inform how early elementary practices and policies can support children’s development in all domains. Maryland and Ohio, the two states working together to design their KEAs, proposed to link their KEAs with other formative assessments through the kindergarten year to track children’s progress in multiple domains.
Supporting Effective Uses of Data

This review suggests that states have a great opportunity to promote sharing of KEA information among different stakeholders in ways that inform and improve practice, policy, and child outcomes. Three key considerations in the area of KEA data use concern its use to inform early childhood practice, the mechanisms needed to support good use of the data, and provisions for preventing inappropriate use.

Using the Data to Inform Early Childhood Practice
As discussed, it appears that states’ proposals to use KEA data to inform policies and practice in the early elementary grades were more specific than their proposals to support continuous improvement in early childhood programs or classrooms. There are reasons why states might have focused more on using the data for kindergarten than for early childhood programs. First, since KEAs are conducted by kindergarten teachers, these teachers and the schools they work in have the most immediate access to the results. Second, at best, KEA results would only be available to early childhood providers months after their children have left the program.

Still, the guidelines do call for the KEA results to be entered into the state’s SLDS and an early childhood data system – mechanisms that would allow for early childhood programs and policymakers to get a sense of how KEA results relate to children’s early childhood experiences and to use this information to improve early learning programs. Once the KEA data are available and integrated into early childhood data systems, states and the federal government may want to take more proactive steps to encourage and support early childhood professionals as well as early childhood organizations to use the KEA data in this way. One reason for a proactive approach is that early learning providers have varying levels of experience, education, and training in the use of assessment and data. States may need to allocate resources to develop this skill set through their early childhood credentialing and professional development policies.

Mechanisms to Support Use of the Data
As noted, the mechanisms that states proposed to use KEA data to inform practice and improvement in the early elementary grades generally fell into three categories: creating online platforms, using coaches, and establishing regional support centers. However, it is unclear if there is evidence that any of these strategies, or a combination of them, is effective in changing teacher behavior or improving practice at the student, classroom, or administrative level. But some states may have helpful lessons to offer on whether particular strategies are useful. One such state is Colorado, which already has an online platform called Results Matter that stores early childhood assessment data, provides videos that help teachers use assessments to inform practice, and offers both online and in-person professional development opportunities.
In some cases, too, states developing KEA resources may want to incorporate them into existing platforms. For example, as states implement the Common Core State Standards, many of them also are creating websites that support teachers to implement the standards, and states may want to look into adapting these platforms to give teachers a centralized online location where they can find support for using assessment data.

**Preventing Inappropriate Use of Data**

While the development and expansion of KEAs can support more data-driven efforts to improve education, they also open up possibilities for inappropriate uses of data. As noted, in their RTTT-ELC applications, states were asked to conform to guidelines from the National Research Council (NRC) on how assessment data should be used. For example, NRC recommends that states use assessments for high-stakes decisions about programs only if they include other measures of effectiveness and take into account children’s background characteristics and the level of resources and supports that the programs receive. Some states explicitly indicated that they will follow such guidance, but they were not explicit in demonstrating how they would prevent misuse from occurring. States like Florida that are considering using assessment data to inform program funding decisions should put in place policies that reflect the safeguards recommended by the NRC.

While the RTT-ELC is clear on its requirements for using data, states pursuing KEAs without federal funding are under no similar restrictions on data use. Therefore, states implementing KEAs without RTTT-ELC funding need to be especially vigilant about inappropriate uses of KEAs. All states can consult The National Research Council report, *Early Childhood Assessments: Why, What, and How*, for research-based guidance about how to prevent misuse of assessment data.

**Harmonizing KEA with Early Elementary Practice**

Many states proposed KEAs that would both cover the five domains of school readiness and be aligned with both early learning standards and early elementary standards, including the Common Core State Standards (which have now been adopted by 46 states). Data from KEAs that are aligned with Common Core will provide teachers with information about whether entering kindergartners are on track to achieve those standards in English and math by the end of the school year or if they need more intensive supports. At the same time, KEAs can give teachers access to more comprehensive information about all learning and developmental domains, including social-emotional development and approaches to learning, which are important to learning in the early elementary grades but not typically included in states’ early elementary learning standards. Because the proposed KEAs will cover this kind of information, they may offer educators, whose practice has increasingly been influenced by “core” academic standards and test-based accountability practices,
States need to ensure that the KEA is a reliable and valid instrument for all children, including those with different learning trajectories such as dual-language learners and children with special needs.

different ways of thinking about the meaning of learning, success, and teaching in the early elementary grades. States that are interested in promoting this kind of paradigm shift must be prepared to pose and answer questions about what they can do to maximize the capacity of KEAs to help elementary educators take a broader range of developmental domains into account. Key questions include:

- Are early elementary teachers equipped to use data from KEAs to support their children’s development across all domains?
- Do these teachers have the training needed to help them appreciate the importance of these domains?
- Can curriculum and classroom practices, particularly when organized under the Common Core standards, address children’s holistic needs?
- Are educational leaders – at the school, district, and state levels – setting policies that encourage a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning?

To support teachers’ capacity to maximize the potential of KEA data to inform instruction, states may need to revisit policies like teacher credentialing and professional support, which govern and support teachers’ classroom practice. States may also need to work with higher education institutions that offer early elementary certifications to help teachers understand all major domains of development and how each of them is critical for children’s growth. For example, Connecticut’s proposal discussed providing inservice training to teachers to help them use KEA data to address areas like social-emotional development that are not typically addressed by early elementary standards. Other states, including Massachusetts, Washington, and Vermont, proposed organizing professional development opportunities for both early childhood and kindergarten teachers to discuss KEA data. Such joint trainings can also promote alignment of philosophies and practices between early care and education professionals and public school teachers and administrators.

North Carolina is taking a step beyond what other states are doing to harmonize KEA and early education practice. The state is expanding its K-3 standards and assessments to cover the five domains of school readiness as articulated by the RTTT-ELC. Assuming that teachers are also trained to implement these standards and assessments, this strategy would allow early elementary teachers to use K-3 assessment data, including data from the KEA, to support students not only in reading and math, but in other domains of development that are associated with long-term academic success.

KEAs’ Applicability to Subpopulations

As is the case with designing any assessment of students, states need to ensure that the KEA is a reliable and valid instrument for all children, including those with different learning trajectories, such as dual-language learners and children with special needs. In general, the ELC applications made little specific mention of how to differentiate and respond to children of different cultural, ethnic, geographic, socioeconomic and other backgrounds and how to use KEAs to better respond to -- in the words of the guidelines -- “children with high needs.” To advance in this area, states may need to consider:

- How the KEA should be developed or interpreted with respect to cultural groups that may differ from the mainstream in their modes of social and emotional self-expression and in their values with respect to individual versus group identity, competition, notions of time, and teacher-directed versus child-directed learning.
- How KEAs should be administered and interpreted with dual-language learners whose predominant language is not English – and whether classrooms...
with English-only teachers are appropriate settings for administering KEAs for this population.

- How the KEA process and data should be linked to screenings and assessments for young children served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and how KEAs can inform the Individual Educational Plans for these children.

In general, to be culturally and linguistically responsive to all students, states should develop KEAs that reflect the different learning trajectories of children from different backgrounds. There is a strong research base on the benefits of dual-language learning at an early age, but growing up with multiple languages has implications for children’s developmental trajectories and therefore, for assessments of DLLs – not only assessments of their language and literacy but also assessments of their cognition, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning. Moreover, children who are excluded or devalued because of their English-language development, culture, or race experience harm that can impede their development in the classroom and achievement of educational success. In addition to being sensitive to different cultures and styles of learning as KEAs are developed, states should ensure that KEA information is conveyed appropriately to families from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

As states work in this area, they can benefit from joint learning that identifies and promotes sharing of best practices and lessons learned. As a start, states may look to California and Maryland for promising practices in this area. As mentioned, Maryland has significant experience with training teachers to use KEAs appropriately when assessing special populations of children. California’s KEA includes items on English-language development that are tailored to the learning trajectories of dual-language learners. The state’s department of education has also developed a website to support teachers in administering and using the state’s preschool assessment with special-needs children. While this online resource is not specifically related to the KEA, it could serve as a model for other states looking to provide a type of support to kindergarten teachers that is similar to the type of support featured on the website.

Opportunity for Cross-State Collaboration

The many activities associated with planning and implementing KEAs that states will be undertaking offer important new opportunities for cross-state learning and collaboration. While states may have somewhat different early learning standards, the information in this issue brief indicates that indicates that states are likely to be working on common issues and facing common challenges as they begin implementing KEAs. As noted, Maryland and Ohio
have explicitly agreed to collaborate on developing their KEAs. The two states will work together to develop test-item prototypes, performance tasks, and scoring guides for their KEAs. Other states should consider similar opportunities. North Carolina’s application noted that the state would “welcome the opportunity to lead and/or participate in a multi-state consortium.” Minnesota and the District of Columbia also expressed such an interest, and other states indicated that as they developed their KEAs, they would draw upon the work in other states to move forward. (New Jersey indicated it would model its system on efforts like those in Maryland and Minnesota.) Whether or not a state won a RTTT-ELC grant, it can benefit from participating in some kind of cross-state community to advance its KEA work.

Coordination of activities could potentially establish at least a core set of items for the different developmental domains included in a comprehensive KEA or a starting point for more individualized state KEAs. For example, the five states – AR, CA, IA, MS, and PA – that discussed plans to incorporate assessments of physical well-being and motor development into their KEAs could learn from each other’s efforts instead of developing five distinct protocols. States may also consider the potential for joint work to create an open-source KEA instrument or set of core elements that could be used by any state. Likewise, states that have similar plans for teacher training, using KEA data, validating its usefulness for subpopulations, and involving families in their KEA systems can take advantage of each other’s resources and experience. For example, as noted, DE and WA are incorporating information from families into their KEAs, and even more states have plans to use KEA data to promote parents’ involvement in children’s education. These represent opportunities for states to work together to develop strategies and tools that benefit from everyone’s experiences and creativity.

At least seven states (AZ, AK, DC, IL, MD, MA, OH) made explicit references in their applications to their involvement with the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium, which is developing K-2 formative assessments. However, PARCC has not taken specific actions to work on KEAs, and it is unclear to what extent the PARCC initiative is informed by or aligned with states’ work in this area. PARCC states, especially those that are moving forward with their KEA plans, may wish to form a subgroup of the Consortium that works to ensure that its work is aligned with states’ work on KEAs.

Importance of Stakeholder Buy-In

The application did not specifically ask states to discuss how they would encourage different groups of stakeholders to buy into the use of KEAs. However, this is an important issue for states to consider because there are reasons why KEAs could meet with resistance. For example, both parents and teachers may have concerns about the possibility of over-assessing or inappropriately pressuring kindergarten-age children. Teachers and principals, who are already responsible for significant reform efforts like the Common Core, may perceive KEAs as an additional burden. They could also feel

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burdened by the time and resources necessary to learn how to use the KEAs. To address these kinds of concerns, states will need to proactively provide accurate information to community stakeholders about the intended use of KEAs. States will also need to ensure that the assessments are integrated into teachers’ everyday work and produce actionable data that improve instruction.

More broadly, especially if states are to abide by their ambitious timelines for implementing KEAs, they will need to seek support for KEAs from community and political leaders. The proposed legislative and regulatory changes or even financial incentives to support statewide implementation lay the groundwork for successful use of KEAs but these measures alone may not be sufficient; it will be important for states to garner political and community buy-in throughout the KEA development and implementation process.

Conclusion

The use of kindergarten entry assessments is not a new concept. But because of the RTTT-ELC process, states for the first time have a common framework to guide them in developing and implementing this kind of assessment tool. Both the potential and the stakes are high. Effective uses of KEAs can help close the achievement and developmental gaps among children of different socioeconomic status; races; linguistic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds; and abilities and needs – both before and after children enter kindergarten. Much of the future success of statewide KEAs in helping to realize these goals hinges on three factors:

- The quality of the KEAs
- How well the KEAs apply to kindergartners of all backgrounds,
- How effectively states support teachers, early learning providers, and school administrators to implement the KEA instruments, and
- How the KEA data is used to inform practice and policy in both the early childhood and public education systems.

Policymakers have a significant role to play in promoting good practice in all of these areas. For example, they can provide sufficient resources to support successful planning and implementation of KEAs and they can set parameters to promote appropriate and responsible uses of KEA data.

The good news, as this brief highlights, is that states can draw on their peers’ experiences and ideas. States have much to gain from tapping into existing networks or developing new ones that can serve as venues for KEA collaboration. In particular, states receiving RTTT-ELC grants now have the resources and the opportunity to work with one another and the federal government, to be leaders in developing materials, resources, and models for effective use of KEAs that can eventually benefit all states.

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1 The authors reviewed Section E1 and Table A1-12 from the applications. The information does not necessarily reflect what states are actually doing. It is based on the RTTT-ELC applications. Most states did not receive the grant and, therefore, might not have moved forward with their plan and even those states that were awarded grants may have made revisions to their plans.

II Florida also includes a literacy-focused assessment as part of its kindergarten readiness assessment process.
The BUILD Initiative helps states create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children’s health, mental health and nutrition, early care and education, family support, and early intervention. BUILD’s vision is at the center of an emerging and vibrant state-based policy movement in the early childhood development field. We work with those who set policies, provide services and advocate for our youngest children to make sure that they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school.

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