

HEAD START NATIONAL REPORTING SYSTEM

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is the Head Start National Reporting System (HSNRS)? The HSNRS is an assessment administered to four- and five-year-old children in Head Start. The test is designed to measure language skills, vocabulary knowledge, letter naming, and pre-math skills. The stated purpose of the HSNRS is to enhance local child assessments, create greater accountability for students' academic preparation, and improve the training and technical assistance available to Head Start programs. This accountability system was included in President Bush's Good Start Grow Smart Initiative, which emphasizes the importance of testing every Head Start child.

Does the law require the HSNRS? The changes in Head Start law in 1994 and 1998 strengthened program standards, with a particular focus on literacy and other cognitive development, and accountability. However, there is nothing in the law that requires the HSNRS or a test of every child in Head Start.

Do children who speak languages other than English get tested? The HSNRS is available in English and Spanish. As a result, thousands of children not yet proficient in either language are excluded from the test. In addition, the assessment begins with a pre-test designed to measure a child's English language skills and to determine whether or not the child will be tested in English.

Is the HSNRS good for Latino children? While assessment is an important component of quality educational programs, the HSNRS as currently designed contains serious flaws that limit programs' ability to demonstrate the educational gains of all children, particularly Latinos. The Spanish version of the test does not account for regional differences in language, and is not accurate for assessing bilingual children, who may possess varying degrees of knowledge depending on the language in which a particular question is asked. In addition, the HSNRS testing protocols are troublesome. For example, a Spanish-speaking child must fail the English pre-test before being administered the Spanish test. Taken together, these factors could lead Head Start programs to conclude that assessing non-English-speaking children is not worth the risk of facing corrective action. Subsequently, English language learner children could face additional barriers when seeking Head Start services.

How could the HSNRS be improved? Legislative proposals in Congress call for an independent body of child assessment experts to determine the content, application, and use of an assessment system in Head Start and how to improve the use of local assessments. Moreover, there must be an emphasis on appropriate assessments and protocols for young English language learners given the paucity of measures for these children.

What can I do about the HSNRS? Call, write, or schedule a meeting with your Member of Congress and ask him/her to suspend the HSNRS for one year so that recommendations can be made on how to fix the flaws in the HSNRS. For more information on the HSNRS, visit www.nclr.org.