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NATION

The stumper: Point to 'nostril'

As preschoolers get a standardized test, critics call timeout

By Kathryn Masterson, Special to the Tribune
Tribune staff reporter Stephanie Banchemo contributed to this report from Chicago

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WASHINGTON -- Head Start teacher Enrique Renteria sits on the floor, holding up a book and asking the dozen 3- and 4-year-olds sitting around him about the flowers in the picture: What color is this flower? How do you say it in Spanish? What shape is this petal?

The children shout out the answers and Renteria praises them or prompts them to try again.

Then, less than 10 minutes after sitting down, the kids are up, off to another activity.

Loudell Robb, a program director in charge of Head Start for Washington's Rosemount Center, where Renteria teaches, says young children learn best that way: through play and with activities suited to their short attention spans and bursts of energy.

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What preschoolers aren't suited for, in Robb's opinion, is a 20-minute standardized test that requires them to sit and focus on a series of questions about letters, numbers and vocabulary intended to assess their school readiness. It's a test called the National Reporting System that's required of all Head Start pupils ages 4 and 5 every spring and fall, a controversial program that Congress is considering doing away with.

Congress is set to vote this spring on bills that would suspend the test, measures that recently passed House and Senate committees by wide margins.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of children across Illinois will take the exam next month as Head Start teachers attempt to measure the progress the youngsters have made since the beginning of the school year.

There are about 36,000 Illinois 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds enrolled in Head Start programs statewide. The 3-year-olds are exempt from the exam.

'Such an intrusion'

"I have found the test to be of no validity," said Robb. "It's such an intrusion into the lives of low-income children. ... It's unfair to children who do not have exposure to some of the vocabulary items they're testing."

She points to words on the test such as "decorating," "nostril," "horrified," "nutritious" and "farm," which children are asked to identify from four pictures. Nutritious is represented by a loaf of bread, a nostril is in a picture of a nose. ("Children don't use that word -- they say nose," Robb said.)

The National Reporting System has been in place since 2003. About 400,000 preschoolers enrolled in Head Start, a federal program started in 1965 to provide education, health and nutrition services to poor children and their families, take the test at the beginning and the end of the school year.

The test starts with a game of Simon Says, then progresses to asking the child to identify pictures of objects such as a frog or a bee. Children are tested on vocabulary by identifying a picture and asked to name letters from an alphabet pictured. The math portion tests their knowledge of numbers and ability to count and has some elementary bar graphs.

Supporters of the test say it provides accountability, showing whether Head Start programs, which serve more than 900,000 U.S. children, are preparing them for school.

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"It gives us an opportunity to really assess how well our children are doing," said Channell Wilkins, the director of the federal office of Head Start which is under the Health and Human Services Department.

Wilkins said he believes some opposition stems from a misconception that test results will be used to shut poorer-performing programs.

Assessment data are intended to improve programs, not penalize them, he said.

Wilkins also disagrees with critics who argue that the test is not age appropriate.

One of those critics is Samuel Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute, a Chicago graduate school in child development. Among his objections: The test is too long for preschoolers' attention spans; it doesn't take into account that young children learn in uneven spurts, so a snapshot taken one day of what words they know may not accurately assess their vocabulary; many of the words are too hard for preschoolers, ("horrified," "swamp," "vase"); and the test doesn't measure the social or emotional development that Head Start provides. "I think this was an incredibly uninformed test," Meisels said.

The test may actually harm young children who feel they have failed when they don't know some of the answers, Meisels said. In turn, teachers and parents may believe children know less than they do.

Continuous assessment

Jie-Qi Chen is a professor at the Erikson Institute who teaches Illinois educators classroom techniques to observe the progress of young children. Chen argues that daily or weekly monitoring provides a better gauge of progress.

To measure a child's literacy development, for example, a teacher can observe over time as the child first learns to hold a book properly, then identifies pictures and letters, and eventually retells the story by looking at the pictures and progressing through the pages.

Other critics argue that program and individual child assessments are already required for Head Start pupils.

"Head Start is probably one of the most evaluated programs that exists," said Joel Ryan, the director of government affairs for the National Head Start Association, an organization that advocates for Head Start programs and has worked to end the test. National Head Start Association does not oppose assessments, Ryan said; the group opposes this standardized test.



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"It's just unfair and a total waste of taxpayer money," Ryan said. "This means time away from other important things programs could be doing."

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