

## The Movement Towards Standards-Based Education Reform:

NHSA Research and Evaluation Event

### Research Luncheon

Sponsored by Assessment Technology Incorporated



April 17, 2007

Neon-2 p.m.

Location: Hyatt-Regency Ballroom

Tickets: \$70



**John R. Bergan**  
*President, Assessment Technology Incorporated*

Dr. Bergan has more than 30 years research experience in child development. He is the author of several books and more than 70 articles in scientific journals in education and psychology. He has been recognized by the American Educational Research Association, the National Child Care Association, and the Arizona State Psychological Association.

Dr. Bergan's research contributions include studies of children's cognitive and social development as well as policy research studies on the development of Head Start children and their transition into elementary school. As president of Assessment Technology Incorporated, he has designed and developed new technology to assist Head Start and private child care programs enhance children's development.

#### The Movement Toward Standards-Based Educational Reform: Implications for Head Start

Standards-based education is now firmly established in early childhood education, including Head Start. States across the nation and the federal government have established standards to guide the provision of children's learning opportunities and the measurement of learning outcomes. The standards-based movement carries with it a commitment to close the achievement gap between children from low-income families and those of the more affluent majority. This presentation discusses the implementation of standards-based education in Head Start and its contribution to closing the achievement gap.

#### NHSA congratulates the Edward Zigler Research Scholarship winner for 2007

Sarika Sarpatwari, Doctoral Candidate, Early Childhood Special Education, University of Maryland

### Implications for Head Start

**John R. Bergan, Ph.D., Assessment Technology Incorporated**  
**Prepared for the 2007 National Head Start Association Annual Conference**  
**Research Luncheon**  
**San Antonio, Texas**

It is well known that the early childhood years are marked by amazing developmental accomplishments. During this period children acquire a vast array of skills. They learn to manipulate objects in the environment and in so doing acquire a fundamental understanding of the world around them. They also acquire the ability to move about and as a result expand their knowledge of their surroundings. They acquire language, which makes it possible for them to communicate their thoughts and needs clearly to others and to receive communications from others. They learn to read and to reason and to carry out mathematical computations. They acquire essential social skills: they learn to play together, to share, to cooperate, and to pursue individual and common goals.

Given these spectacular accomplishments, it is quite understandable that society should take special care to support growth during the early years of life. The founding of the Head Start program in 1965 and the continuing support of the program since that time constitutes national recognition of the need to provide special resources to support children's early development.

The need for Head Start is now greater than it has ever been. The demands of modern life for low-income families increasingly require adult care givers to spend long hours out of the home, and in many cases they must pursue multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. The continuing challenge for the Head Start program is to promote children's development as it proceeds in the varied families of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Past Accomplishments

Past and current research has provided clear evidence that Head Start is meeting the challenge of effectively promoting the development of young children. Data summarized over two decades ago in the Head Start Synthesis Study revealed that Head Start children entered school with an advantage over low-income children who did not have the Head Start experience. Findings from the Head Start Impact Study provide continuing support for the benefits of the Head Start experience.

#### Current Challenges: Closing the Achievement Gap

There is much that Head Start can be proud of in these findings. Yet, much work remains. During recent years, the nation has become increasingly focused on the challenge of closing the achievement gap between low-income children from diverse ethnic backgrounds and their more economically advantaged peers. Head Start has much to offer in meeting this challenge. Indeed, Head Start's contribution is critical. This is the case for two reasons: First, Head Start positively impacts development during the period in which growth is most rapid. Second, Head Start recognizes that children do not develop in isolation. Development occurs in the context of family and community life. Because of its commitment to the family and community, Head Start is now more than ever uniquely positioned to make dramatic contributions to children's growth and as a consequence to the effectiveness of American education.

## **The Achievement Gap and Standards-Based Education**

The call to close the achievement gap is occurring in the context of the standards-based educational reform movement. The movement is based on the premise that teaching should be goal directed and that assessment is required to determine the achievement of instructional goals. Proponents of the approach have advanced the compelling argument that if education is to be improved, goals for improvement must be set and measures to determine whether or not goals have been achieved must be established. The movement has grown steadily for many years and received significant support through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002. As a result, standards-based education is becoming firmly established in the nation's schools and early childhood programs.

Standards-based education promotes the pursuit of shared educational goals formulated in the main at state levels. States across the nation have now established standards extending from the early childhood years through high school. These standards provide a set of common goals for programs within each state. They also provide the key to closing the achievement gap because they indicate in concrete terms what children need to learn as they progress through school.

## **Closing the Gap**

Closing the achievement gap is a daunting task. The goal is clear, but the path toward achieving the goal is far less certain. I have suggested that standards are the key. Standards provide a framework within which to formulate plans for closing the gap. The discussion that follows offers a standards-based approach to the problem. Head Start plays a central role in this approach because the approach focuses on closing the gap during the early childhood years and because, as the premiere early childhood program in the nation, Head Start has a track record of innovation and research capabilities that are unmatched in our society.

The following key features provide an outline for a standards-based approach to closing the achievement gap.

### **Collaboration**

If the achievement gap is to be eliminated, it makes sense to pursue the task of eliminating it aggressively during the early childhood years when development is occurring most rapidly. Closing the achievement gap during the early childhood years will require collaboration among the various agencies and organizations affecting children's lives throughout this period. Standards-based education demands continuity in instructional goals, curriculum practices, and assessment practices. Providing continuity during the early childhood years requires collaboration because multiple agencies are typically responsible to children's learning during this period. In the early childhood years, children make the transition from Head Start into the elementary school. Transition typically occurs over an extended time span from Head Start through the second grade. Collaboration is needed to insure continuity in instructional goals, curriculum practices, and assessment practices throughout the transition period.

Head Start is in an excellent position to assume leadership in forging the partnerships necessary to provide continuity as children make the transition from Head Start into the elementary school. Those of you engaged in Head Start research are especially well positioned to contribute to initiatives aimed at closing the achievement gap during the early childhood years.

### **New Assessments Aligned to Standards**

In standards-based education, assessments are used to inform instruction. In order to fulfill this function, assessments must be aligned to standards. The achievement gap is currently measured by statewide assessments administered beginning in the third grade. The period from the end of Head Start through the second grade is currently what might be called a black hole from an assessment perspective. Moreover, available assessments were typically developed before the onset of standards-based education. New Assessments aligned to standards are needed for Head Start and the early elementary grades to provide the information needed to guide instruction during the critical early childhood period.

### **Assessments Aligned to Standards in Different States**

Each state has a different set of standards. If we are to be successful in eliminating the achievement gap, we need assessment instruments aligned to state standards. The movement toward alignment is under way in early childhood programs. However, much work remains. As previously indicated, in many cases what we currently have are instruments built prior to the development of standards. Alignment is established after the fact. What we need are instruments designed specifically to be aligned to state standards. This requires the creation of banks of developmental indicators that can be flexibly applied to the construction of scales customized to meet standards in specific states.

### **The Standards-Based Curriculum**

Closing the achievement gap will require changes in what children are taught. In the past teaching has been guided in the main by curriculums determining the content to be covered in instruction. Standards-based education requires curriculums that are aligned to standards. The standards-based curriculum is an essential tool for closing the achievement gap because it guides teaching in ways that increase the likelihood that children will have learning opportunities leading to standards mastery.

### **Achievement Levels to Determine Standards Mastery**

The achievement gap is currently measured by the mastery of state standards. Mastery of standards is determined by segmenting the distribution of ability scores on a statewide test into achievement levels. For example, children who achieve at or above a given score may be classified as meeting the standard in a given domain of knowledge such as literacy or math. From the third grade on, achievement levels are established by the state. Achievement levels are needed for earlier grades to determine whether or not educational programs are on course for closing the achievement gap.

We recently conducted research to determine the feasibility of establishing achievement levels that could be used to determine whether or not children were on course to meet state standards in Arizona. In this research, local assessments were administered three times in the first grade, three times in the second grade, and three times in the third grade. We used these assessments to forecast whether students would meet state standards as measured by the Arizona statewide test in the third grade. In the first grade, we correctly forecasted standards mastery classifications for 88% of the children. In the second grade, we correctly forecasted mastery classifications for 89% of the children, and in the third grade we correctly forecasted mastery classification for 90% of the children.

These findings are important because they show that it is possible to determine in advance what children need to know to be on course to meet state standards. The findings also underscore the need for additional research. We need continuing research linking the mastery of standards in Head Start to the mastery of standards in the elementary school. That research would provide a clear picture of what children need to accomplish during the early childhood years in order for the achievement gap to be closed.

### **Conclusion**

The challenge of closing the achievement gap calls for a massive change in education. The fact that there is an achievement gap provides compelling evidence of the need for change. Individual differences in abilities are to be expected. Group differences are not to be expected in a democratic society. In some cases their existence may be a sign of systemic societal problems. There are those who say that group differences exist in our society because of the bigotry of low expectations. Others point to the ravages of poverty as an explanation for these differences.

Whatever the cause or causes may be, it is clear that as educators we have an obligation to do what we can to close the achievement gap. The task will not be easy. There will be failures along the way, but there will also be successes and we will learn from both.

During my forty years as an educator, I have learned a great deal from Head Start. The Head Start Program thrives on challenge. Moreover, it is constant source of innovation. Thus, I look to Head Start to play a critical role in meeting the challenge of closing the achievement gap and in so doing to spearhead innovations that will change the character of American education.

# The Movement Towards Standards-Based Education Reform:

## ***Implications for Head Start***

**Jason K. Feld, Ph.D., Assessment Technology Incorporated**  
**Prepared for the 2007 National Head Start Association**  
**Annual Conference**  
**General Session Invited Presentation**  
**San Antonio, Texas**

NHSA Presents

### **General Session**

**April 18, 2007**

9-10:30 a.m.

Location: CC-Ballroom C1

**Presiding/Remarks** ..... **Janis Santos**  
*Vice Chair*  
*NHSA, Region I*

**Greeting** ..... **Venetia L. Peacock**  
*President*  
*Texas Head Start Association*

**Welcome** ..... **Phil Hardberger**  
*Mayor*  
*San Antonio, Texas*

**Helen H. Taylor Award for**  
**Management Excellence** ..... **Johnson & Johnson**  
*Solo*

**Head Start/Pre-K Panel** ..... **Office of Head Start**  
*National Head Start Association*  
*Pre-K Now*

**Remarks** ..... **Jason Feld**  
*Assessment Technology Inc.*

**Closing Remarks** ..... **Janis Santos**

It will come as no surprise to anyone here that the standards-based education reform movement is now firmly embedded in our nation's schools and has established strong roots in early childhood education. In a nutshell, the movement calls for the assimilation of national and state standards into Pre-K and K-12 education, including curriculum and assessment. Over the past few years, this movement has been strengthened with the arrival of the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB). At its core, NCLB advances the idea that standards-based approaches to education are not only vital to nurturing children's growth and development, but also essential for closing the achievement gap. As with any new education initiative, the standards-based movement has triggered a national dialogue concerning what to do in early childhood and K-12 education to best serve the needs of children and meet the goals of reform.

This brings me to the fundamental question for my remarks this morning – What are the implications of the standards-based reform movement for Head Start?

Historians and educators who have studied the evolution of American education over the past century, might suggest that paradigm shifts of the magnitude we are experiencing today tend to be accompanied by dramatic changes in at least three areas: collaboration; assessment; and curriculum.

With respect to collaboration, standards-based education presents us with some powerful opportunities. Here's the first one. Since a major focus of this new reform is to promote the pursuit of shared educational goals for children, the successful achievement of these goals will require continuous communication and decision-making both among and between early childhood and K-12 education providers.

A second collaboration opportunity has to do with new advances in the design of assessment and curriculum. In order for standards-based reform to fulfill its promise, a new generation of assessment and curriculum tools will be needed to properly articulate public policy of promoting and documenting children's success in mastering standards. This new generation of tools will make it possible for communication and collaboration both within and across educational program boundaries to be meaningful, actionable, and in the best interests of children. This is because standards provide a very concrete and clear way to engage in shared decision-making to achieve common goals. They provide a level playing field and a common language so that all stakeholders know what children need to learn as they progress toward and through school.

With regard to implications for curriculum and assessment per se, it is important to note that the jury is still out on whether any specific approach or a one size fits all approach is likely to work for programs participating in standards-based education. "Why so?" you might ask. Well consider this. While there is certainly a degree of commonality in Pre-K and K-12 standards across the states, there is also a considerable degree of diversity in their scope and sequence. Long and short of it – 50 states, 50 sets of standards, plus the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework. In fact, to even assume that any one assessment or curriculum can adequately do justice to both national standards and the diverse standards of 50 states is, to put it mildly, not reasonable. Research initiatives documenting the impact of curriculums on the mastery of standards and the use of assessments to document this mastery will need to occur in the years ahead.

Here's another little tidbit. Because of the speed with which new standards at the national and state levels have emerged over the past few years, most everyone is still playing catch-up. In fact, a more than insignificant number of assessment and

curriculum tools in use today pre-date currently approved standards. While some efforts have been made to identify areas of alignment with the new standards, this exercise is in fact, an after the fact response but not a long-term solution. To truly serve the best interests of children and programs, we will need to reflect, rethink and consider the ways in which we will need to redesign our assessment and curriculum systems. Maintaining the status quo, quite frankly, is not the best option. But perhaps developing a new generation of assessment and curriculum tools to meet the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century education is a road to consider traveling for the sake of our children. To quote an anonymous writer, "If we don't do it, it won't happen."

So, is it conceivable that today's traditional assessments will give way to a new generation of standards-based tools? Is it conceivable, for example, where innovations akin to the development of "assessment bank libraries" will make it possible to simultaneously build assessments customized to individual state and national standards? Maybe...if we do it, it will happen.

Is it conceivable that advances in technology will make it possible for head Start programs to update these new assessments in response to local program needs and changes in standards over time? Maybe...if we do it, it will happen.

Is it conceivable that we can develop a new generation of early childhood curriculum tools clearly articulated to standards at the individual state and national levels? Is it also conceivable that advances in technology will make it possible for us to update these tools continuously to meet our ever changing needs? Maybe...if we do it, it will happen.

Is it conceivable that the diversity of stakeholders across early childhood and K-12 programs can seize upon standards-based reform to help them find common ground and common goals for the benefit of children? Maybe...if we do it, it will happen.

We know that American education is at a crossroads, where the choices we make going forward will have an enduring impact on our nation's children. These choices have to do with how we in Head Start will influence and be influenced by the standards-based reform movement sweeping our nation. Head Start excellence has historically been fueled by a commitment to deliver a comprehensive program helping to build mind, body, and spirit, where readiness for life, not just school, is the key to successful outcomes. As we move forward in meeting the goals of standards-based education, let us always keep this fundamental vision in the forefront of our thoughts and actions, remembering that the principal goal of standards-based education is to improve children's lives. Seems to me this is consistent with our mission in Head Start and with the Head Start Performance Standards.