

Pre-Reading Activities

A: Discussion

Answer these questions in pairs.

1. Can you remember when you did your first exam?
(This could be at school, for a sport or for music).
How old were you? What was it for? Why did you have to do it?
2. What feelings did you have about it? Do you think it was necessary?
3. What are the benefits of doing exams for the groups involved: for students, for teachers, for educational planners?
4. What are the disadvantages of exams for the groups involved: for students, for teachers, for educational planners?
5. How do you feel about exams now? Do you enjoy them or dread them? Why?



Reading Activities

A: Reading For The Main Ideas

Read **Part One** of today's article and then fill the gaps in the headline of today's article.

Part One:

_____ -year-olds put to the test as _____ - exams gain steam

Tue Sep 25, (Reuters) - With school in full swing across the United States, the littlest students are getting used to the blocks table and the dress-up corner - and that staple of American public education, the standardized test.

A national push to make public schools more rigorous and hold teachers more accountable has led to a vast expansion of testing in kindergarten. And more exams are on the way, including a test meant to determine whether 5-year-olds are on track to succeed in college and career.

Paul Weeks, a vice president at test developer ACT Inc., says he knows that particular assessment sounds a bit nutty, especially since many kindergarteners aspire to careers as superheroes. "What skills do you need for that, right? Flying is good. X-ray vision?" he said, laughing.

But ACT will soon roll out college- and career-readiness exams for kids age 8 through 18 and Weeks said developing similar tests for younger ages is "high on our agenda." Asking kids to predict the ending of a story or to suggest a different ending, for instance, can identify the critical thinking skills that employers prize, he said.

"There are skills that we've identified as essential for college and career success, and you can back them down in a grade-appropriate manner," Weeks said. "Even in the early grades, you can find students who may be at risk."

At least 25 states now mandate at least one formal assessment during kindergarten. Many local school districts require their own tests as well, starting just a few weeks into the academic year. (Continued.../)

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B: Reading Carefully

Read **Part One** carefully and answer these questions.

1. The first paragraph introduces the idea of the article. How does it do this in a way that suggests that this idea is unusual?
2. What is the reason for the growth in testing at an early age?
3. What are some ways that young children might be tested?
4. How, according to Weeks, might these tests help?
5. What percentage of states now insist that 5-year-olds take formal exams?



C: Reading For Ideas

What are the arguments for or against having formal exams for young children?

Make notes in the space below using information from **Part Two** on the next page.

For:	
Against:	

Part Two:

(Continued.../) The proliferation of exams for five-year-olds has sparked a fierce debate that echoes a broader national divide over how much standardized testing is appropriate in public schools.

Advocates say it's vital to test early and often because too many kids fall irretrievably behind in their first years of schooling. The most recent national exams for fourth graders found just 34 percent proficient in reading and 40 percent proficient in math.

Opponents counter that testing puts undue stress on 5- and 6-year-olds and cuts into the time they should be spending playing, singing and learning social skills. They also contend that most tests for kindergarteners are unreliable because the children have short attention spans and often find it difficult to demonstrate skills on demand.

'WE SHOULD KNOW BETTER'

Formal tests give a narrow picture of a child's ability, said Samuel Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute, a graduate school in Chicago focused on child development. He urges teachers instead to assess young children by observing them over time, recording skills and deficits and comparing those to benchmarks.

But Meisels fears such observational tests won't seem objective or precise enough in today's data-driven world; he says he too often sees them pushed aside in favor of more formal assessments. "I am worried, yes," he said. "We should know better."

Kari Knutson, a veteran kindergarten teacher in Minnesota, has seen the shifting attitude toward testing play out in her classroom.

During her first two decades of teaching, Knutson rarely, if ever, gave formal tests; kindergarten was about learning through play, music, art and physical activity.

These days, though, her district mandates a long list of assessments. Knutson started the year by quizzing each of her 23 students on the alphabet and phonics, through a 111-question oral exam. Last week, she brought the kids to the computer lab for another literacy test. Each kindergartener wore headphones and listened to questions while a menu of possible answers flashed on the screen. They were supposed to respond by clicking on the correct answer, though not all could maneuver the mouse and some gave up in frustration, Knutson said.

This week, it's on to math - and a seven-page, pencil-and-paper test. "It's supposed to show them what they'll be learning in first grade," Knutson said. "Like they really care."

In her view, the kids are far too young to tackle formal exams, especially in their first weeks of what is for many their first school experience. "Half of them are crying because they miss mom and dad. When you tell them to line up, they don't even know what a line is," Knutson said.

Despite her frustration, Knutson acknowledges the tests have some advantages. The results help shape her lesson plans, she said, as she can quickly group kids by ability. Now and then, the exams reveal hidden strengths or unexpected weaknesses in her students.

Plus, when scores rise, both she and her students feel a genuine pride. "At the end of the year, it's like 'Wow, we really improved.' It's cool because you can see it," Knutson said. (Continued.../)

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D: Summarizing

What kind of tests are described in **Part Two** of today's article. Write two or three sentences describing what the children do.

E: Completing A Table Of Information

Complete this table of information using **Part Three** of today's article.

Result of testing young children in 1980s:	
Name of law that encouraged schools to improve reading and math scores:	
What happens to schools who have weak results in standards:	
Reasons why schools have decided to introduce testing to kindergarten grades:	
Financial benefit of agreeing to test kindergarten age children:	
Number of American states that now have assessments for kindergarten-age children's development and cognitive skills:	
Iowa Test of Basic Skills requires children to...	
Brigance Kindergarten screen requires children to...	

Part Three:

ACCOUNTABILITY

(Continued.../) Testing young children is not a new concept. In the 1980s, many states assessed children to determine whether they were ready to enter kindergarten or first grade. Experts in child development denounced the practice as unfair and unreliable and it faded out.

In recent years, however, the federal law known as No Child Left Behind has put pressure on schools to raise scores on the standardized reading and math tests given to students starting around age 8. Schools that post poor scores are labeled failing; principals and teachers can lose their jobs.

With the stakes so high, many administrators have decided to start testing in the earlier grades, to give kids practice and to identify students who need help.

The Obama administration accelerated the trend in 2011 with a \$500 million competitive grant to bolster early childhood education. States that pledged to assess all kindergarteners earned extra points on their applications.

After all, taxpayers are investing more than \$500 billion a year in public education and “we need to know how children are progressing,” said Jacqueline Jones, a deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education. “There has to be some accountability,” she said.

The administration’s grant guidelines encouraged states to develop holistic assessments that measure the 5-year-olds’ social, emotional and physical development as well as their cognitive skills. About a dozen states, including Georgia and Maryland, have developed such broad assessments, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Other states, though, focus more narrowly on reading and math skills; some are even beginning to evaluate kindergarten teachers in part on how well their students do on those exams.

The format of kindergarten assessment varies widely.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which is used by schools across

the United States, runs more than an hour as a teacher reads dozens of questions aloud and kindergarteners mark their response on a multiple-choice answer sheet. A typical question asks kids to pick the picture that illustrates the word ‘sharp’ from choices including a piggy bank, a glove and a pair of scissors.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Brigance kindergarten screen[ing test] is set up as a game that students play one-on-one with a teacher, who may ask them to stand on one foot for 10 seconds, to count to 30, or to copy complex shapes like a diamond. The test takes 10 to 15 minutes and costs about \$4 per child.

In addition to these comprehensive tests, curriculum writers are now incorporating multiple shorter exams into kindergarten lesson plans.

Consider the 68-page manual recently published by New York City education officials to guide kindergarten teachers through a math unit aligned to the new Common Core academic standards rolling out nationally. The unit, meant to introduce 5-year-olds to algebraic thinking, includes three short pencil-and-paper exams, culminating with a test that asks students to calculate all the ways they could divide six books between two shelves.

Some parents welcome all the tests as an indication that their kids are truly being challenged. If their children spend too much time finger-painting or playing at the sand table, “parents will say, ‘This isn’t academic enough,’” said Peggy Campbell-Rush, a longtime kindergarten teacher in New Jersey.

But other parents want kindergarten to be the way they remember it, as a time of relaxed exploration.

Dao Tran, a mother in New York City, said her heart sank when she learned that her neighborhood school emphasized standardized testing even in kindergarten. She scoured the city to find an alternative for her daughter. The public school she chose requires a 45-minute commute each way, but Tran says it’s worth it.

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Post-Reading Activities

You may do one or more of these.

A: What Do They Think?

Work in pairs or groups of three. Read today’s article again quickly and then take turns to summarize the points of view of these groups mentioned in the article:

kindergarten teachers

developers of tests for kindergarten students

parents of kindergarten students

government education administrators

education experts

B: What Do You Think?

Work in pairs or groups of three. What is your response to today’s article? Are you in favor of what is happening or do you have fears about it? Give reasons for your answers.



TEACHERS' NOTES AND ANSWER KEY

Reading Activities

A: Reading For The Main Idea - Answers

Five-year-olds put to the test as kindergarten-exams gain steam

B: Reading Carefully - Sample Answers

1. It lists the activities you would normally find a child doing in a kindergarten classroom and then adds one extra: the standardized test. By putting the items you would normally expect together with one you wouldn't, the reader becomes aware that this is something new and different.
2. Because there is pressure of public schools and teachers to be more accountable. The tests, supporters hope, will indicate whether young children are getting what they need to prepare them for college and careers.
3. Being asked to predict the ending of a story or suggest an alternative ending.
4. They demonstrate the development of critical thinking skills which are needed to be successful in later life. The tests will identify which of those students are not 'achieving'.
5. 25%.

C: Reading For Ideas - Sample Answers

For

--It is very important to test early and regularly because many children fall behind in the first few years of school and are unable to catch up. Statistics shows under 35% of fourth graders were achieving in reading and only 40% were achieving in math.

--Exams can give clear results which can then be used for effective lesson planning and grouping of ability of children. Exams can reveal a child's weaknesses or strengths which might otherwise not be detected.

--Exams allow teachers to measure progress clearly: when results rise both teachers and students feel proud.

Against

--Formal testing only gives a narrow view of what a child can do. Instead teachers should gather information of a child's ability over a length of time by watching them and then noting what they are able to do. However, an advocate of this alternative is worried that observational tests won't be seen as exact or objective enough.

--Children are too young for formal testing in these early years. They are preoccupied with missing their parents and often do not understand enough to complete the tests.

D: Summarizing - Answers

At the beginning of the year each child was given a 111-question oral exam on the alphabet and phonics. Children do a literacy test in the computer lab and listen to questions, clicking on the correct answer. They also do a 7-page math test answering the questions with pencil and paper.

E: Completing A Table Of Information - Answers

Result of testing young children in 1980s: experts said it was unfair and unreliable and it decreased in popularity

Name of law that encouraged schools to improve reading and math scores: No Child Left Behind

What happens to schools who have weak results in standards: they are labeled as failing and teachers may lose their jobs

Reasons why schools have decided to introduce testing to kindergarten grades: to give kids practice in testing and identify students who need support

Financial benefit of agreeing to test kindergarten age children: they get extra points on their applications which earns them funding

Number of American states that now have assessments for kindergarten-age children's development and cognitive skills: 12

Iowa Test of Basic Skills requires children to...answer a multiple-choice one-hour test as a teacher reads questions aloud.

Brigance Kindergarten screen requires children to...follow a teacher's requests over a 15-minute period.

