

Why Parents Should Be Concerned About the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment

What is the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment (OKA)?

The OKA was developed by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and the Early Learning Council (ELC), part of the Oregon Educational Investment Board (OEIB). The OKA is given to all Oregon public school children at kindergarten entry. The assessment has several parts. The Child Behavior Rating Scale (CBRS) is a worthwhile tool for a teacher to assess a child's abilities to control his or her behavior and get along with others. The academic component consists of sections of the easyCBM test and assesses the following:

1. Upper- and lower-case letter names in a one minute timing of random letters
2. Letter sounds (including blends) in a one minute timing, and
3. Math concepts related to numbers and operations (including addition and subtraction) in a multiple choice format with the child pointing to the correct answer.

What is wrong with the OKA system?

The easyCBM does not measure readiness. The results of these particular literacy and math tests cannot tell us if our children are ready for kindergarten, because:

- They assess what children will learn *in* kindergarten, **not** what they should know *before* they get there. Therefore, the test is designed for a first-grader, not a kindergartener.
- They **omit** important aspects of literacy and math, such as writing and comprehension.

Faulty data leads to faulty conclusions, which leads to faulty solutions. This happened when our state's educational leaders used the OKA results to decry how few children are ready to start school because they know so few letters and numbers. *Putting pressure on young children to memorize symbols is not the way to get more children ready.*

What children need to succeed in school is simple. They need:

- Safe, language-rich, nurturing homes, communities, child care, and preschools
- Good nutrition and health care
- Opportunities for interesting experiences
- Schools that are ready to effectively both teach all children and support their natural love of learning and investigative thinking

Research studies **overwhelmingly** support child-centered, play-based preschools — and kindergartens — as the learning style that is the most effective for student success by the end of third grade.

An analogy: Learning to drive. When you teach a 16-year-old to drive, how do you know that he or she is ready? Do you just put him or her behind the wheel? Of course not. That is why the learner's permit test is very different from the driving test.

When it comes to academics, the OKA expects kindergartners to already know "how to drive." It tests knowledge of the kindergarten curriculum — not what they should know *before* kindergarten. Solving a single-digit addition equation is a kindergarten skill; counting ten objects is a skill that shows a child is *ready* to learn addition.

Also, the test only looks at a few literacy skills — and not the most important ones. This would be like a driver's test that only includes parking and making a U-turn. The OKA completely leaves out many important factors that predict success in school (and in life), including physical health, motor skills, problem-solving skills, and motivation.

If our driver-in-training knows that he or she will only be tested on parking and making a U-turn, then that is all that he or she will focus on. The driver may pass the test, but will be an incompetent driver. In this same way, bad tests in education negatively influence teaching practices. If literacy is measured only with letter and

letter-sound tests, then parents and teachers will emphasize these skills over all the other important aspects of literacy — as well as other key components of an excellent preschool program.

Why the OKA is not a good thing for a child who is about to enter kindergarten

Children deserve a positive transition to kindergarten. Asking a child questions that are too difficult — both the content and the test format — is unfair and stressful, particularly during the first days of school. In an article in the *Statesman Journal* (September 12, 2013), reporter Queenie Wong wrote:

Kindergartner M correctly identified the missing number in a sequence verbally. But ... M pointed to a different number in the three choices provided in the assessment booklet. When naming/sounding out letters, M repeatedly said [the same] letter until time ran out.

How would you feel if this were your child? Why should the child have to begin kindergarten feeling as though he or she has failed before school has even started?

It may impact preschool curriculum. What is measured has consequences because it wrongly suggests what is important. Preschools and families may feel that they need to focus on the narrow academic content of this assessment, instead of providing rich and meaningful learning experiences for children.

Preschoolers have many important tasks: learning to communicate, share, problem-solve, explore, and figure out how the world works. **Learning** to read is not part of a preschooler’s job; becoming a successful *learner* is.

Many of a child’s strengths will not be seen or considered important. Many children — boys, in particular — will not do well on tests of letters and math, but they **can** do many things very well: create complex block structures, tell fantastic stories, organize games, and negotiate with friends, for example. These are *all* important skills for kindergarten.

What can you do?

Everyone can take action to get the easyCBM test portion of the OKA revised or discontinued.

Parents	Preschool Teachers and Administrators	Kindergarten Teachers and Administrators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share your concerns with teachers and administrators in your child’s school. • Share the issue with other kindergarten families. • Opt out of the OKA test. (It is allowed!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the OKA with your colleagues and director. • Discuss it at parent and school meetings. • Express your concerns to the administrator of the school the children will be entering. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share your concerns with your colleagues, principal, district, union, and professional organizations. • Talk about the OKA at PTA, school, and parent meetings.

Email your concerns to:

- nancy.l.golden@state.or.us, Chief Education Officer, OEIB
- serena.stoudamire@state.or.us and hilda.roselli@state.or.us, staff for Early Childhood Transitions
- jada.rupley@state.or.us Director, Early Learning Division
- Your state legislators (oregonlegislature.gov) and Governor Kitzhaber (Oregon.gov)

Write to a local newspaper, post on relevant blogs, and tell your friends.

For more information, go to: oregonka.weebly.com

This flyer was written by a group of concerned early childhood educators and child development specialists. We support teaching academics in ways that are responsive to children’s abilities and how they learn best. We support kindergarten assessments if they are comprehensive and designed for that purpose. And we support more funds for high-quality early childhood programs because they promote children’s development, assist working families, and help children succeed in school and life.