

Lack of Consensus on How to Evaluate Programs for Preschool Children with Disabilities Leaves States Floundering

WITH NO SINGLE DEFINITION of how publicly-funded programs for preschool children with disabilities should define or measure success, states are struggling to develop accountability systems that demonstrate results and understand how to best serve children and families.

With the accountability movement finally trickling down to the preschool setting, leaders in early childhood development must set aside territorial differences to provide a collaborative set of recommended child and family outcome standards, according to the authors of the report, "Issues in Designing State Accountability Systems," published in the *Journal of Early Intervention*.

The report also calls on state leaders to help local programs work through the existing maze of federal reporting requirements. Currently each federal program requires separate data. A universal mapping of the array of requirements would eliminate the need for individuals in each state to engage in the same time-consuming and challenging task.

Challenges in Designing State Accountability Systems

Children with disabilities are routinely served by a myriad of federal programs. Often these programs provide similar services that draw from different pots of money. In response to the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, each federal program must identify program goals, develop indicators to measure success, and provide annual progress reports to Congress.

A lack of coordination at the federal level has resulted in each program using different indicators and criteria to determine effectiveness. Thus, local programs are often burdened by having to provide different data to different agencies at different intervals and states have no national model for developing a more collaborative system. Furthermore, programs may lack adequate and appropriate tools for measuring outcomes identified at the national level. The result in many cases is that measurement tools have been selected simply because they were the most expedient.

Semantics or nomenclature has added another layer of confusion. A great deal of time has been spent debating whether terms like "standards" and "outcomes" can be applied synonymously. Regardless of the term used, the purpose is the same—to provide a mechanism for administrators, teachers, providers, and families to articulate expectations. Once expectations are clear, standards and outcomes provide a framework for how to observe and record changes in behavior.

These are just some of the challenges that currently make it impossible to compare the progress of children and families in one state with those in another. Nor is there any way to paint a national picture of the benefits of service provision. Those who are least well served by what can at best be described as organized chaos are the children and their families.

Overcoming the Challenges

To overcome these challenges, the authors recommend that:

- All relevant stakeholders are included in the identification of outcomes or standards.
- The accountability system for children with disabilities is coordinated with other relevant accountability initiatives for young children.
- Efforts focus on the type of results wanted for children and families, instead of arguing over whether to call these results outcomes or standards.



- Accountability systems contain program standards, personnel standards, and child and family outcome standards.
- Standards and outcomes require appropriate and effective child and family assessment, recognizing the unique ways that children develop and learn.
- Accountability systems go beyond compliance and provide data that facilitates and encourages program improvement in all program components.

The article contains a series of check lists that can be used by individuals at the state and local levels as they embark upon the daunting task of developing sound and useful accountability systems and seek to overcome these challenges.

Conclusion

The demand for accountability data is not likely to fade away. Members of Congress and state legislatures across the country are eager to know if the money invested in programs for infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities and their families have resulted in positive benefits.

Identification of standards or outcomes and their accompanying measurement processes are critical to the ability of state agencies to ensure the effectiveness of programs serving young children with disabilities and their families. Leadership is needed at both the state and national levels if we are to develop accountability systems that are sound and provide the type of data needed to document the results of public investment, while simultaneously providing information to better serve children. ■

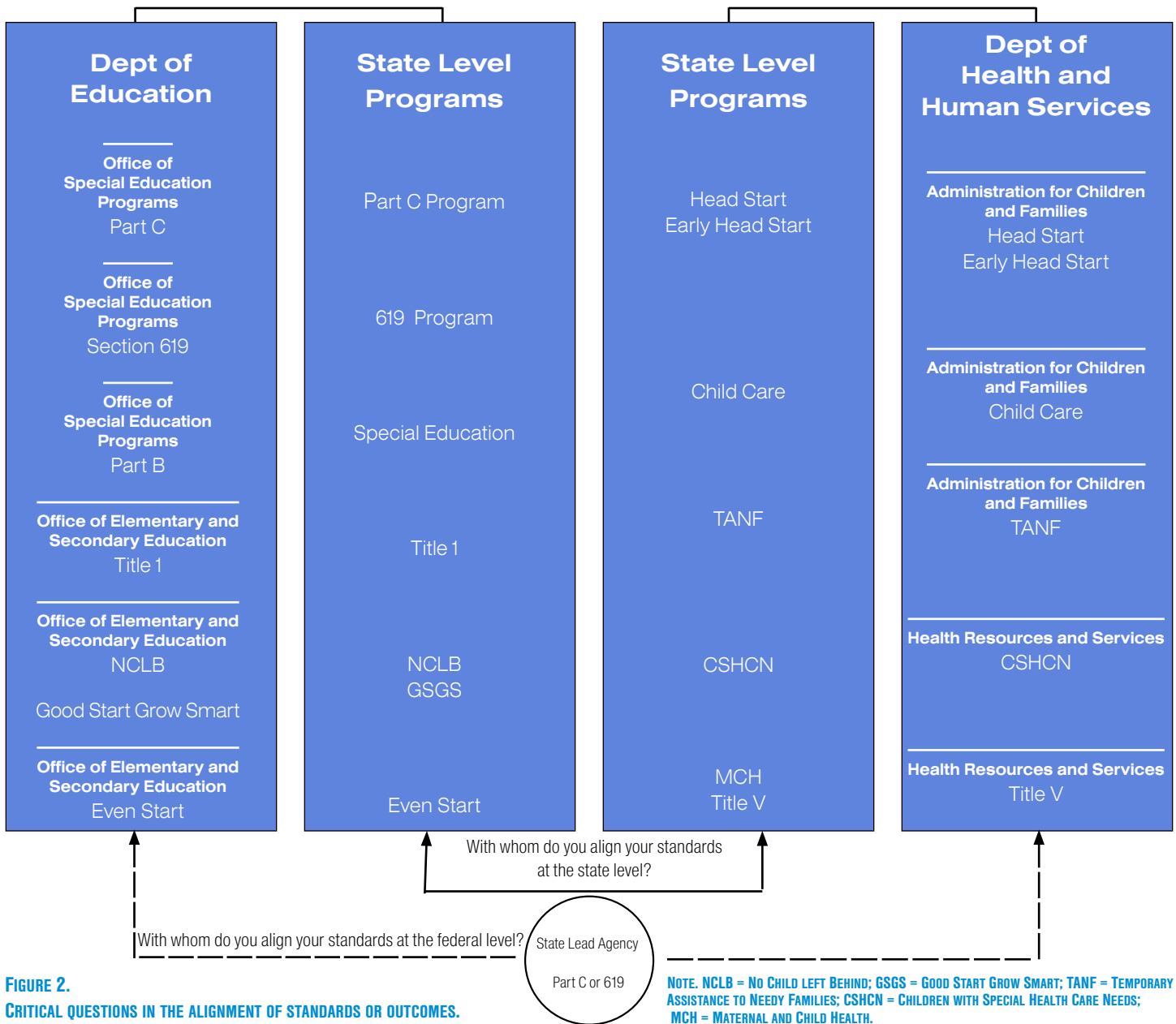


FIGURE 2. CRITICAL QUESTIONS IN THE ALIGNMENT OF STANDARDS OR OUTCOMES.

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Note. From "Issues in Designing State Accountability Systems," by G. Harbin, 2005, *Journal of Early Intervention*, 27 (3), p. 148. Copyright 1998 by the Division for Early Childhood. Adapted with permission.