

**Kindergarten Screening Tools Used by
Maine Public School Districts**

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June 2021

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Published by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute in the School of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine (Gorham, ME), and College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine (Orono, ME).

The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI), is jointly funded by the Maine State Legislature and the University of Maine System. This institute was established to conduct studies on Maine education policy and the Maine public education system for the Maine Legislature.

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This study was funded by the Maine State Legislature, and the University of Maine System.

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Kindergarten Screening Tools

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Introduction

The purpose of this study, conducted in spring 2021 by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at the request of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, is to gain a current list of the assessment tools that public schools are using to evaluate their incoming kindergarten students. Early childhood education provides a critical foundation for students' future learning, and schools work hard to identify students' needs as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Kindergarten assessment is also an area of heightened interest for researchers and policymakers who seek high-quality data on the readiness of our youngest learners as they enter the K-12 system.

Background

Public schools have a long-established practice of conducting screening assessment of students as they enter kindergarten. Schools use different assessment tools based on which of these basic purposes they are trying to meet:

- **School readiness.** As its most basic function, kindergarten screening provides schools with information on the skills and capabilities that children will bring to the classroom on the first day of school. This can prepare teachers for each student's individual instructional needs in the early weeks of acclimating to school. Schools with more than one kindergarten classroom can also use this assessment information to inform classroom placement decisions.
- **Child Find.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that each state have a comprehensive system for identifying whether the children living in the state have need of special education services. In Maine's current system, the Child Development Services (CDS) unit oversees the Child Find requirement for children from birth to age 5, and public school districts assume the responsibility once a child reaches 5 years old. School districts must provide this service for all children residing within their area, and are not just responsible for those who enroll in their public school kindergarten

programs. However, because the vast majority of five-year-olds do enroll in public schools, the kindergarten screening process is a major component of meeting Child Find requirements. Screening tools that are commonly used for Child Find, and also provide basic evaluation of incoming students, include: Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-4)¹, BRIGANCE², Devereux’s Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), and the Early Screening Inventory (ESI).

- **Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs).** Schools may wish to evaluate skills more thoroughly at the beginning of kindergarten to 1) provide teachers with more robust information on each child’s developmental needs and 2) to serve as the basis upon which to measure their educational growth in the early years of school. To serve as valid and reliable baseline data, these assessments are lengthier and more robust than screening tools used for placement or Child Find. They also explore a broader scan of developmental domains than screening tools. This category of tools is often called Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEAs). Common commercially-produced KEAs include Teaching Strategies GOLD³, the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)⁴, and HighScope COR (Child Observation Record)⁵. Several state consortia have also collaborated to develop their own assessment tools with federal grant funding; Maine has had involvement in once such effort centered in North Carolina.

The assessment tool(s) that a school opts to administer to incoming kindergarten students will depend largely on which of these above goals they are trying to accomplish.

The use(s) of the screening data also impact the timing of the assessment process. If a district’s primary goal is to identify children in need of special education services, they are likely to want to conduct screening as soon as a child is enrolled for kindergarten—as early as the spring before starting school. In this way, any child identified as needing services may have the opportunity to begin receiving interventions as soon as possible in the fall (or even during the intervening summer in some cases). This system requires that schools have a backup-screening

¹ <https://www.pearsonassessments.com/store/usassessments/en/Store/Professional-Assessments/Academic-Learning/Brief/Developmental-Indicators-for-the-Assessment-of-Learning-%7C-Fourth-Edition/p/100000304.html>

² <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/products/brigance/early-childhood>

³ <https://teachingstrategies.com/>

⁴ <https://www.desiredresults.us/drdp-forms>

⁵ <https://kaymbu.com/assessment/>

process in the weeks immediately before or after the start of school to capture students who, for varying reasons, are not enrolled in kindergarten until the last minute.

In contrast, schools who adopt more intensive Kindergarten Entry Assessment protocols administer them in the early fall of the kindergarten year. This controls for learning that has occurred before the start of the school year and provides greater consistency from one student to the next by using the same point in time. KEAs collect observational data in the natural setting over more than one occasion. This contributes to their reliability but makes them unfeasible as a quick screening tool.

With the increasing prevalence of publicly-funded pre-K programs in Maine, many school districts are taking advantage of their captive audience of pre-kindergartners and are conducting kindergarten screening assessments during pre-K program time. This is not only efficient, it is helpful to the children to be assessed in a familiar setting. Children who are screened in pre-K do not need to be re-screened in the fall of the kindergarten year—though in some cases a school may wish to do so to introduce the child to new teachers or to assess a child’s development over the summer.

This practice of conducting screening during pre-K classroom time also has relevance to state policy for Child Find for children younger than five. Under current guidelines, the responsibility for Child Find is with Child Development Services (CDS) when a child is aged three or four. However, a school district has easier and more immediate access than CDS to screen the four-year-olds enrolled in their public pre-K programs. CDS currently partners with public schools in various ways to fulfill its oversight role for Child Find for these students; there are examples of successful collaborations where the school district administers the screenings to preschoolers with support from CDS. It has been suggested that this practice could be adopted more broadly and/or that local school districts should have more formal oversight for screening and evaluating students in their pre-K programs. Importantly, if school districts were to take over responsibility for Child Find for this age group, they must oversee the system for all resident students in this age group – not just those enrolled in their public pre-K programs.

At the time this report was compiled, this is an area of active conversation among state policymakers and is a potential topic for future MEPRI study. However, the scope of this current report is limited to the use of screening assessments for kindergarten and does not directly address Child Find challenges for children younger than kindergarten age.

Methods

To investigate the tools and timing of kindergarten screening a survey of special education directors was conducted in the early months of 2021. Because MEPRI conducted multiple studies this year with need for feedback from this population of educators, the survey of special education directors covered three distinct topics. In addition to kindergarten screening, the survey also investigated issues related to the delivery of services to students with an IEP via telehealth, and explored the current challenges with billing MaineCare for services rendered to students with special needs. The survey included two fixed-choice items related to districts' kindergarten screening practices. Self-reported demographic data such as school county, ruralness of school, and district size were also included and were used to sort responses into sub-groups. Due to the small sample size, statistical significance testing was not done. Because of the number of different themes that we needed to explore with the special education directors the number of survey items related to kindergarten screening was limited.

The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) staff listing was used to obtain contact information for all special education directors (n=145) and assistant special education directors (n= 60). In mid-February, an email invitation to participate in an anonymous survey was sent to all of these educators. The following week, Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC) emailed the anonymous survey link to members. Reminder emails were sent to special education directors and assistant special education directors. A total of 97 surveys were completed, for a response rate of 47%. However, only 68 individuals (70% of the respondents) completed the survey items related to kindergarten screening tools. Some directors skipped these questions because they served districts that contain only secondary schools and therefore are not involved in kindergarten screening. However, others discontinued taking the survey before reaching the items that are relevant to this report. While the number of respondents is adequate to gain an understanding of the general patterns of screening across different school districts, a more comprehensive inventory of all districts would yield a more accurate picture.

Findings

The first relevant survey item was a multiple choice question asking respondents to identify the screening tools used in their district. Directors were asked to name all of the screening tools their districts currently use for kindergarten screening; they were instructed to select all choices that apply. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Maine Districts’ Kindergarten Screening Tools

	District Use	
	Percent	Number
DIAL-4	75%	51
BRIGANCE	12%	8
Both DIAL-4 and BRIGANCE	7%	5
Other Assessment	4%	4
Total	100%	68

Based on special education directors’ responses, the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-4) tool is by far the most common screening assessment used in Maine public school districts, with 82% of districts using it either by itself or in combination with other tools. The “Other” assessments listed above were the Early Screening Inventory, Devereux’s Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), and Kaplan’s Learning Accomplishment Profile (LAP-D). Nine respondents (13%) indicated that their districts supplemented these assessments with additional tools, often custom developed by the school or district to fulfill specific needs. Additional analysis of the survey responses was conducted to investigate whether the types of tools used varied by districts’ enrollment size and urbanicity/rurality. There were no discernable patterns of variation based on these district characteristics.

Next, districts were asked about the timing of screening assessments. This survey item was again a multiple-choice question and directors were permitted to choose more than one response if applicable. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Timing of Districts’ Kindergarten Screening Processes

	Districts Responding	
	Percent	Number
Spring prior to enrollment	58%	42
In the weeks just before or after the start of school	49%	35
Screening conducted while enrolled in the district's preschool program	32%	23
Summer prior to enrollment	14%	10
Total		72

In Table 2, the numbers add up to more than 100% because most directors selected more than one choice – i.e. they conduct screening during more than one time period. From these results, it is evident that the majority of schools are conducting kindergarten screening over the course of several months. About one third of the responding school districts indicated they are conducting screening while children are participating in a public pre-K program. Both of these findings have policy relevance as discussed below. As with the screening instrument question, this survey item was also analyzed to find patterns across districts of different sizes or rurality, and no significant differences could be discerned.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Based on these survey findings, it is evident that the large majority of Maine school districts are using one of two tools, DIAL-4 or BRIGANCE, to screen children as they enter kindergarten and identify individuals who may require additional support or further testing. The DIAL-4 in particular is already in use in four out of five districts. This suggests that these two tools are commonly understood among early childhood professionals, and are therefore likely to be of use in cross-district conversations about kindergarten readiness. Summary group reports, for example, could be used in professional development as teachers learn to plan or adapt instruction to respond to their students' identified needs.

In addition, these screening tools can be used with children younger than four years old. The DIAL-4 is validated for use with children as young as 2 years and 6 months (and as old as 5 years and 11 months). The BRIGANCE Early Childhood Screen (III) has a version that can be used with ages 3, 4, and 5 as well as a version for grades K and 1. Since school districts are already familiar with these tools, it seems plausible that districts could reasonably expand their use with younger students enrolled in their public pre-K (4 year-old) programs. Additional resources such as staff training and practice time may be required, as well as ensuring that staff have adequate time to administer the screening tools to additional students. But this would likely be feasible for districts that are already using the assessment systems. Indeed, about one in three districts already administers screening assessments to 4 year-olds in their pre-K programs. This is an encouraging finding for stakeholders who are interested in having public school districts become the responsible agencies for managing Child Find for children aged 3 and 4 (i.e. those covered in federal policy by IDEA, chapter 619). Importantly, though, this shift would need to

include strategies for public school districts to provide screening for all of their resident children, including those not enrolled in public pre-K programs.

However, the fact that these kindergarten screening assessments are administered at varying times of the year (beginning in the spring and as late as early September) mean that the data obtained from these processes has limited value as a quantitative measure of student readiness. Given the rapid development that occurs in young children, assessment results gathered in spring cannot be directly compared to those taken in early September. Thus, data taken at these various points in time cannot be validly aggregated together as a group measure of “kindergarten readiness” for a given cohort or class of students. Moreover, these types of screening tools are not detailed enough to serve as baseline data for evaluating an individual child’s learning growth over time. Policymakers and practitioners may wish to have more robust measures as a way to identify schools in need of supplemental programs or extra attention on early childhood learners, or to help evaluate the impacts of a schoolwide intervention program. However, the current screening practices are not up to those tasks. Such uses would need a more robust and controlled evaluation system such as Kindergarten Entry Assessments conducted in the beginning months of the school year.

This research suggests that it may be feasible to focus future conversations about early childhood screening tools on the specific merits of the two assessment systems that are already in wide use across the state. While a small handful of districts have selected other tools, over 95% of districts responding to this survey indicated they use the DIAL-4 and/or BRIGANCE (either one or both combined). This shared experience means that rather than thinking about screening tools in the generic sense, educators are likely able to advance directly to concrete questions about the role that these particular tools can appropriately play in Maine’s evolving early childhood education system.