

Frequently Asked Questions about the Ready Kindergartners Survey

The Survey

1. How was the survey developed?

A workgroup including staff from the state Department of Education, and the Agency of Human Services departments of Health, Mental Health, and Children & Families; University of Vermont (UVM) researchers; and community-based early childhood advocates reviewed Vermont's earlier kindergarten readiness assessments, as well as emerging guidance and examples at the federal level (including the National Education Goals Panel) and in other states. This resulted in a draft list of items.

Input on early versions of the assessment was collected from focus groups of kindergarten teachers, parents, and early childhood care providers. Pilot data were collected in several regions of the state, resulting in further revisions of the instruments. UVM staff evaluated the instruments' psychometric properties.

In addition, Vermont's work in this area benefited from our participation in a multi-state, federally-funded child indicators project, and another multi-state initiative, the School Readiness Indicators Project. Both projects allowed us to learn from the experiences of those in other states working along similar lines, and from the advice of nationally-recognized experts.

2. How does this fit with VELs?

The Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS) was developed prior to the introduction of the Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELs) (2003). The KRS contains 30 items across five domains while VELs has 38 broad learning goals across eight domains.

<u>VELs</u>	<u>KRS</u>
Approaches to Learning	Approaches to Learning
Social and Emotional	Social and Emotional
Physical Health & Development	Health & Well-Being
Language, Literacy & Communication	Communication
Mathematics	Cognitive Development &
Science	General Knowledge
Social Studies	
Creative Expression	

There is not a strict alignment between KRS and VELs at present; however, there is overlap between many items because both are based on sound child development principles and early education practices.

Readiness

3. How is "readiness" defined?

There is no single consensus on how to define "readiness," though nearly all agree that it is multi-dimensional. Practically, for our reports "ready" in a given

domain means “practicing” or “performing independently” on *all* items within that domain. (The “health & well-being” domain is a little different; there, being “ready” means “practicing” or “performing independently” on the self-help item, and learning “never” or “seldom” inhibited by hunger, fatigue, or illness).

4. Should children entering kindergarten be at least “practicing” all the skills addressed in the survey?

Not necessarily. All of the targeted skills are ones children entering kindergarten can reasonably be expected to know and do. We consistently find that three-quarters or more Vermont kindergartners are in the “ready” range for most of the items. Of course, there is wide variation among young children, even those developing normally, and this period is often one of rapid change. For these and other reasons we consider this an assessment appropriate for *groups* of children, *not* for individuals.

5. Whose responsibility is it to see that children are “ready”?

“Readiness” is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. Children need to be “ready” to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling, but schools also need to be prepared to meet the varied needs with which children enter school. Communities need to support children and families through providing access to high-quality early care and education programs, by supporting parents as children’s first teachers, and by ensuring that all children receive adequate preventive and ongoing health care.

The Purpose

6. How are the data used?

The data are used primarily for regional and state-wide planning. The Ready Kindergarteners Survey is *not* intended as a screening or diagnostic tool for individual children, but rather for creating an group-level picture of children’s readiness. Children’s readiness is reported for the state, AHS District, and school supervisory union.

Data from the readiness assessments (“Ready Kindergartners” and “Ready Schools”) are used to inform discussions about how to support families, schools, and communities as they prepare children to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling. The data may be catalysts for bringing people together to discuss both children’s and schools’ readiness. Early care and education providers, policy makers, kindergarten teachers, family members, and community leaders are all key players in this discussion.

For example, data from the Ready Kindergarteners Survey might lead a community to discuss how to improve children’s readiness in the domain of social-emotional development. Similarly, Ready Schools data might alert school personnel of the need to expand on community partnerships or might point a community to improvement in school readiness in that domain. This sort of

analysis and community discussion might highlight the need for changes in policies, curriculum, community development, and/or early childhood services.

7. Is this survey a way to assess the work of early care and education professionals (pre-K teachers)?

Because “readiness” is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities, the results of the Ready Kindergartners Survey reflect on the efforts of all these partners. The data do not single out children, schools, preschool programs, or parents; rather, they “hold a mirror up” to the community as a whole.

The Results

8. When will the results of the survey be available?

In general, a statewide summary of results will be available by March 1; supervisory-union-level reports will be available by May 1. However, these estimates are subject to change, depending on available staff resources. At this time, reports are sent to school superintendents, who are asked to distribute them to principals and teachers. Summary results also appear in the annual AHS Community Profiles (available on the web, and in hard copy).

9. Can I get data just for my school?

In general, we provide data at a supervisory union level, for several reasons. At present we do not have the resources to produce reports for each Vermont school (300+). Second, the survey results are intended to be valid at a group level, but when groups are small (as kindergarten enrollments in many schools are), results may be less valid. Third, we want to reinforce the idea that readiness is not an exclusive responsibility of schools, but is a *community* responsibility. However, there are some cases where there are compelling reasons for having school-level data, and in those cases we will try to accommodate that request.

10. How comparable are the results year to year?

It is important to keep in mind that a different group of children is assessed each year, so year-to-year variance should be expected. In addition, there may be changes from one year to the next in the participation rates of teachers, and in the fidelity with which teachers follow the instructions. Finally, over the years there have been minor changes in items, wording, and formatting, in order to reflect the latest understanding of how best to measure readiness. Thus, users should use caution in interpreting year-to-year changes.

Evaluating the Survey

11. Are the data "valid"?

Validity is a multidimensional concept, and thus there is no simple answer to this question. Simply put, validity refers to an instrument actually measuring what it purports to measure.

However, here are some facts that have a positive impact on validity:

- The survey was developed with input from recognized early childhood experts.
- The survey was pilot-tested, and revised to change or delete problematic items.
- There is broad consistency from year to year, at a statewide level, in the proportion of children rated at each competence level.
- Survey data are related in meaningful ways to other constructs. For example, children who have been in regulated child care prior to kindergarten are, in general, rated as more “ready.” Children from communities with higher poverty levels are, in general, rated as less “ready.”

Conversely, some things have a negative impact on validity:

- Early childhood is a time of rapid growth and change, and any point-in-time assessment may misrepresent a child’s readiness.
- Teachers may differ in their competence to assess children according to the instructions on the survey. Therefore, teachers’ ratings may have an element of subjectivity.
- Any composite summaries (“boiling down”) of teachers’ item ratings (e.g., into domain-scores, or “overall readiness” scores) involve assumptions which are open to debate.

There are no “perfect” measures. Given greater resources and time, we could improve upon our kindergarten readiness instrument; for now, it is the best we have.

12. Are the results of the survey reliable?

“Reliable” means that the results can be trusted. If two people rate the same child’s performance similarly, the results are said to be reliable. Because this is not a point-in-time “test,” but rather a reflective judgment, taking into consideration the teacher’s observations during the first few weeks of school, we would not expect perfect agreement between two different observers. One way we try to account for such differences is by collapsing, for reporting purposes, the ratings “practicing” and “performing independently” as indicating competence. Also, keep in mind that we recommend that results be used only to make judgments about *groups* of children, in part because for any individual child there may be less agreement about readiness. Also, see response to FAQ above.

13. What if a child “isn’t ready” based upon these items?

It is not appropriate to use this assessment to make any decisions at an individual child level. Rather, the data provide a group portrait for regional and statewide planning purposes.