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Using the new Kindergarten Readiness Assessment: What do teachers and principals think?

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A young child with dark hair, wearing a white shirt and a colorful backpack, is holding a red apple. The child is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

USING THE NEW KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT

What Do Teachers and Principals Think?

Rachel E. Schachter, Ph.D., Tara M. Strang, M.S., & Shayne B. Piasta, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

This white paper presents the results of a survey completed by teachers and principals in central Ohio concerning their perceptions of Ohio's new Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) during its inaugural implementation year. All kindergarten teachers and principals in Franklin County public elementary schools were invited to complete the survey; 150 responded. Although teachers and principals generally reported using assessments, including the previous state-mandated KRA-L screening tool, to guide their instructional decisions, the majority of participants did not perceive that the KRA, in particular, was useful for guiding instruction. Moreover, teachers reported that administering the KRA took away valuable time needed to help students adjust to learning in a formal school setting and create a classroom community. Administration issues, lack of access to the data, redundancy or incompleteness of KRA data, and misconceptions about the purpose of the KRA all seemed to contribute to participants' dissatisfaction with the KRA. Overall, it seems that teachers are not using the KRA as intended. Our findings do not indicate an adversity to assessment in general. Rather, negative perceptions and/or lack of use seem to be tied to a misunderstanding of the purpose of the KRA and administration issues.



Recommendations

For Policymakers

- Consider ways of streamlining and shortening the KRA to decrease administration issues so that teachers have more time to spend in their beginning-of-the-year activities. Such revisions should involve measurement experts to ensure that usability and adequate psychometric properties are preserved.
- Clarify the purpose of the KRA, including the connection with early learning standards, and provide additional support to help teachers understand how the KRA can inform instruction.
- Continue to use technology as a means of alleviating administration issues, but be sure to provide adequate support for technology use.

For Practitioners

- Gain a better understanding of what “kindergarten readiness” means and how kindergarten readiness data can be used to inform instruction.
- Develop ways to integrate the KRA into beginning-of-the-year routines and with other assessment practices.

For Researchers

- Consider partnerships with policymakers and practitioners to develop brief kindergarten readiness assessments that are psychometrically valid, align with intended purposes, and are easy to use.
- Evaluate subsequent versions of the KRA to determine the extent to which the assessment serves its purpose in helping put students on the path to success.





Introduction

Evidence suggests that data-based decision-making can improve teaching practice and students' learning (Connor et al., 2009). This includes the use of kindergarten readiness data. Kindergarten readiness data provide information about individual students' strengths and learning needs as they enter formal schooling and can be used by teachers to plan instruction to support students' learning (Meisels, 1998). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education announced that its Race to the Top initiative would allocate \$250,000,000 to support preschool or early education programming, provided that states implement some sort of kindergarten readiness assessment. Currently, at least 25 states, including Ohio, use kindergarten readiness assessments as a means of providing teachers with a snapshot of students' skills and abilities at kindergarten entry (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

Kindergarten readiness encompasses skills and abilities in a variety of domains that are important for ongoing school success.

Kindergarten readiness encompasses skills and abilities in a variety of domains that are important for ongoing school success. The U.S. Department of Education has identified the domains of language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge (including early mathematics and early scientific development), approaches toward learning, physical well-being and motor development (including adaptive skills), and social and emotional development as “essential” for readiness (Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). This is based on research evidence that early skills in these domains predict students’ long-term outcomes (Claessens, Duncan, & Engel, 2009; Duncan et al., 2007). Students who demonstrate age-appropriate skills and abilities in these domains tend to continue developing on track throughout their academic career (Davoudzadeh, McTernan, & Grimm, 2015). Alternatively, students who do not enter with age-appropriate abilities can be supported by teachers to develop these essential skills so that they do not lag behind their peers. In general, assessing students’ skills and abilities as they enter kindergarten helps teachers plan instruction to best target whole class and individual child learning needs (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Research suggests that using data to inform practice early on can have lasting effects on school success (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter, 2007).

The use of kindergarten readiness assessments is not new in Ohio. Since 2004, the state has implemented screening tools to help teachers understand kindergarteners’ language and literacy skills via the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-Literacy (KRA-L). In 2014, however, Ohio launched a new, more comprehensive Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) as part of its Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge requirements. The new KRA is aligned

with recommendations from the National Research Council (2008) report on early childhood and endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education (Ohio Department of Education, 2015a). Based on those recommendations, in addition to the language and literacy domains previously targeted by the KRA-L, the KRA also focuses on math, science, social studies, social skills, and physical well-being/motor development (see Figure 1). In contrast to the KRA-L which elicited oral responses, the KRA uses observation items, selected responses, and performance tasks. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) states that the new assessment “gives teachers a complete picture of a child’s learning and development” (Ohio Department of Education, 2015b, p. 1). The KRA rollout included plans for Ohio teachers to receive

Domain	Sample Skill
Language and Literacy	Identifies letter names
Cognition and General Knowledge	Recognizes basic shapes
Approaches Toward Learning	Persists in and completes difficult tasks
Physical and Gross Motor	Cuts with scissors
Social and Emotional	Engages in and maintains positive peer relationships

Figure 1. *Examples of kindergarten readiness skills by domains targeted in the KRA.*

training on the KRA in the summer of 2014 and begin assessing students in the fall of 2014. An electronic system for teachers to enter and track students' data was also launched.

Ohio's rollout of the KRA provides an opportunity to better understand educators' experiences in implementing new state-level policies. Although the concept of kindergarten readiness assessments is supported by research evidence concerning data-based instructional decision-making, it is important to understand how these assessments are perceived and used within actual school contexts. As schools are where state-level policies must be put into action, principals and teachers are important stakeholders in such policies (Desimone, 2006). In particular, teachers must integrate new assessments into their existing practice. This includes both administering the assessments and using data to make decisions about instruction. At the administrative level, principals must support teachers in engaging in these practices. Presumably, implementation will be affected by teachers' and principals' experiences and perceptions as they shift from the KRA-L to the new KRA.



Study Aim

In the present study, we sought to understand teachers' and principals' perspectives on the first year of KRA implementation during the 2014-2015 school year. Specifically, the goal was to learn about the views of teachers and principals in central Ohio (i.e., Franklin County) regarding the implementation of the KRA and its usability for informing practice. We asked – *What were teachers' and principals' experiences with and perceptions of the new KRA?* We focused on three areas related to the KRA: administration, use, and purpose.

Method

Participants

All kindergarten teachers ($N = 438$) and their principals ($N = 175$) working in public elementary schools in Franklin County were invited to participate in the study. The only requirement for participation was involvement in the administration of the KRA in the 2014-2015 school year. Within the six-week study period, 125 kindergarten teachers (29%) and 25 principals (13%) responded to the survey. On average, teachers had 14.60 years of teaching experience, and 79% had previously administered the KRA-L. Principals averaged 7.08 years of experience, and 64% had previous experience with the KRA-L.

Data Collection and Analysis

Teachers and principals were invited via email and recruitment flyers to complete an online survey about their experiences with the KRA. Fixed-response survey questions asked about training opportunities (3 items), the administration process (5 items), and how data were used in instructional decision-making (9 items). Similar questions were asked about the KRA-L for comparison purposes (9 items). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses to these questions. In addition, the survey included three open-ended questions about participants' experiences with the KRA. Over 90% of participants responded to the open-ended questions. Responses to these questions were reviewed for emerging themes and double coded by the first two authors. For a full list of survey questions and a description of participants' responses, please see the online supplement [https://ccec.ehe.osu.edu/files/2014/05/KRA_supplemental_file.pdf].

Administration

Teachers reported a range for required administration time. Half of all teachers (50%) reported spending over 30 hours administering the KRA to all of their students, 43% of teachers reported spending between 15 and 30 hours, and 7% reported spending less than 15 hours. For one third of participants (30%), this meant spending up to 1 hour per student. Part of the reason for this might have been a complicated administration and data entry process. As shown in Figure 2, teachers tended to disagree with the statement that the KRA data entry was easy and only somewhat agree that the KRA was simple to use. Moreover, over two thirds of participants (72%) noted in their responses to open-ended questions that they had problems administering the KRA. Although teachers also tended to find the technology difficult to use, some teachers (8%) specifically reported liking the “app” for administration and scoring.

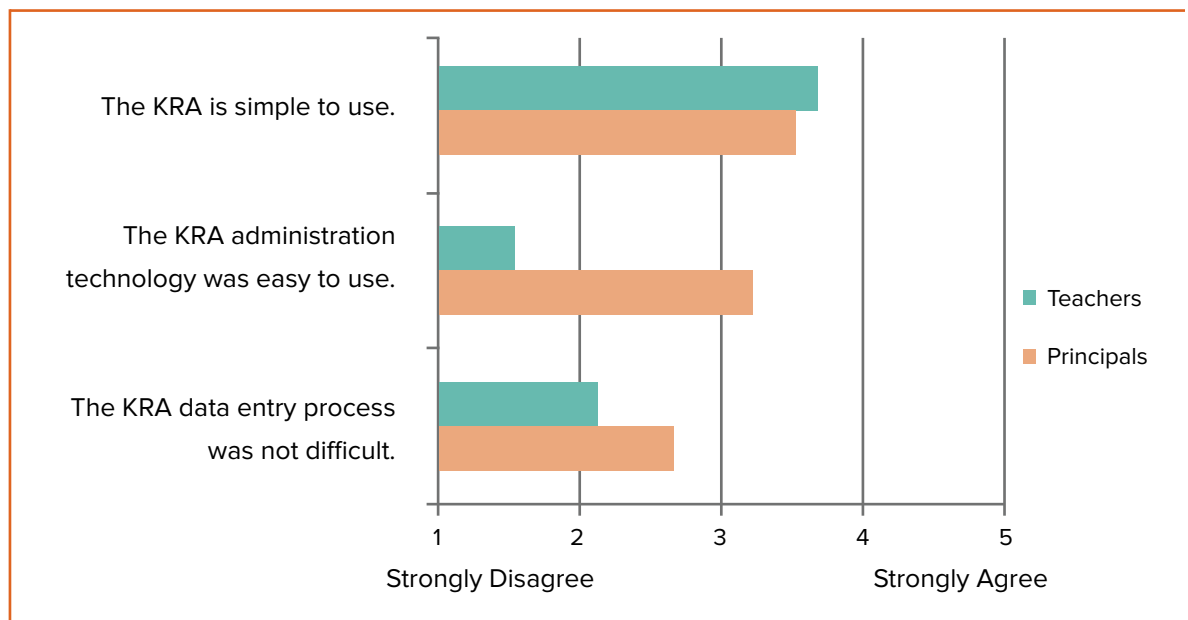


Figure 2. Teachers' and principals' responses to whether they agreed or disagreed with statements about the administration of the KRA.

Participants' open-ended responses indicated multiple problems with the administration of the KRA. Many reported that the complexity and length of the assessment (72% of respondents) combined with having students who were new to formal schooling made the process particularly difficult (43% of respondents). As one teacher wrote, “The time it took to administer the test was lengthy. Giving the test took all of my guided reading time for a month (that could have been spent practicing letter sounds and sight words, as well as beginning reading for those ready). It also came at a time when my students were not yet functioning independently and with appropriate behaviors.”

Participants reported problems with administering the KRA, including the time it took away from valuable beginning-of-the-year instruction.

Notably, 43% of participants reported that administering the KRA took away valuable time needed at the beginning of the year to develop a learning community and help students transition into formal schooling routines. As one teacher wrote, “I wasn’t able to start the year teaching like I normally do.” Another commented, “It was very difficult to administer at the beginning of the school year as you are trying to establish routines.” Some teachers (10%) reported that the KRA actually hindered their instruction. One commented, “It took away from critical instructional time needed, especially for K, at that time of year.”

In summary, participants reported many problems with administering the KRA, including its length and complexity and the time it took away from valuable beginning-of-the-year instruction.

Use

Teachers and principals did not seem to view the KRA as particularly beneficial for practice. As Figure 3 demonstrates, participants tended to disagree with statements about the usefulness or benefits of the KRA for improving instruction. This may be due, in part, to the finding that only 26% of teachers and principals wrote that the KRA informed their instruction by providing snapshot or baseline information about students.

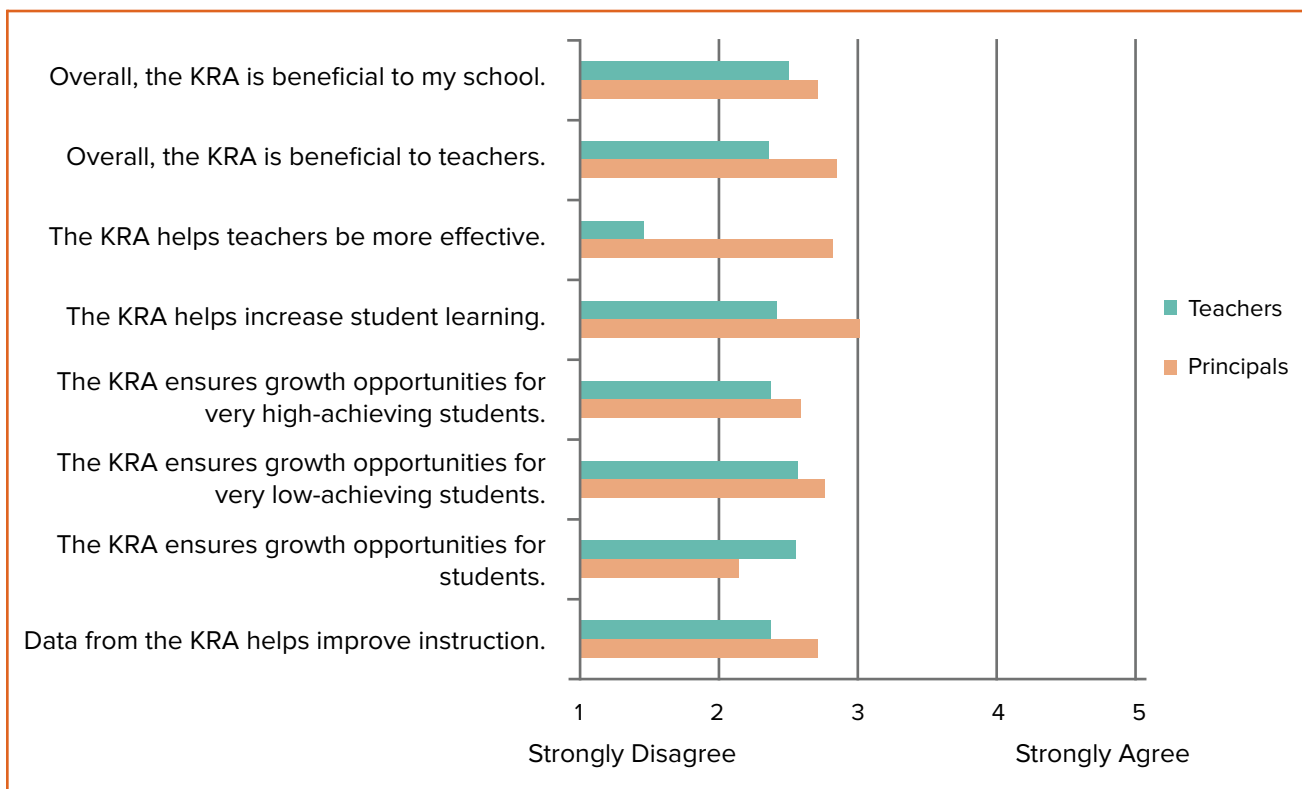


Figure 3. Teachers’ and principals’ alignment with statements about the KRA.

When asked directly about how they used the KRA to inform their practice, participants reported using KRA data for a variety of purposes across a variety of domains, as indicated in Table 1. Interestingly, however, the percentage of teachers who reported using the KRA to inform planning and instruction in any given domain was rather low (ranging from 3% to 40%). When teachers reported using KRA data to inform planning and instruction, this tended to be in the domain of language and literacy rather than other domains. This may be related to teachers' prior experiences with using KRA-L data.

Table 1

Percent of Teachers Who Reported Using Data from the Different Domains of the KRA to Inform Instruction

USE OF KRA DATA	PHYSICAL/ MOTOR	LANGUAGE AND LITERACY	MATH	SCIENCE	SOCIAL STUDIES	SOCIAL SKILLS
Planning	8%	31%	23%	3%	3%	16%
During teaching	6%	40%	6%	5%	6%	14%
Working with individual students	4%	33%	4%	5%	4%	21%

Problems with administration and access to KRA data limited participants' ability to use the assessment to inform instruction.

Some participants had positive things to say about potential uses of the KRA; however, these comments were often qualified by concerns about the administration of the assessment or access to the data. These problems limited their ability to use the KRA to inform instruction. For example, one teacher wrote, "The KRA helped me gain an understanding of the whole child and the skill set they have coming into kindergarten. I liked the observation pieces but the one-on-one parts of the assessment were long and not very beneficial. I think the length of the assessment along with the timing (when I should be trying to build rapport and community) decreased its effectiveness."

Other themes in participants' comments further underscored the link between administration problems and the use of KRA data to inform practice. These included the following concerns: participants had limited or no access to the data once they were entered (12%), the data were already outdated by the end of the administration period (4%), and participants could not interpret the data (2%). By and large, teachers did not seem to be using the KRA to inform instruction in its inaugural year of implementation.

Purpose

The KRA was not necessarily seen as a planning tool to better meet student learning needs.

Another reason teachers and principals may not have reported high use or great benefits of the KRA may have been limited understanding or misunderstanding of the purpose of the KRA. When asked the purpose, teachers and principals reported some purposes that aligned with the stated intents of the KRA (per ODE) as well as other purposes that were not stated intents.

Approximately one third of participants (34%) responded that the purpose was to obtain baseline data about students, and less than 10% said the purpose was to inform instruction. Both of these are stated purposes of the KRA. Importantly, many participants noted that these purposes were difficult to accomplish as they did not have the data available to them. This is exemplified in comments such as “...I believe the KRA was developed to determine the pre-K skills an incoming kindergartener already has and those that he does not. Without an easy way to input/access/analyze this data, however, the purpose is not being achieved.” Thirty-three percent of participants also noted that the purpose was to assess “readiness,” another stated intent of the KRA.

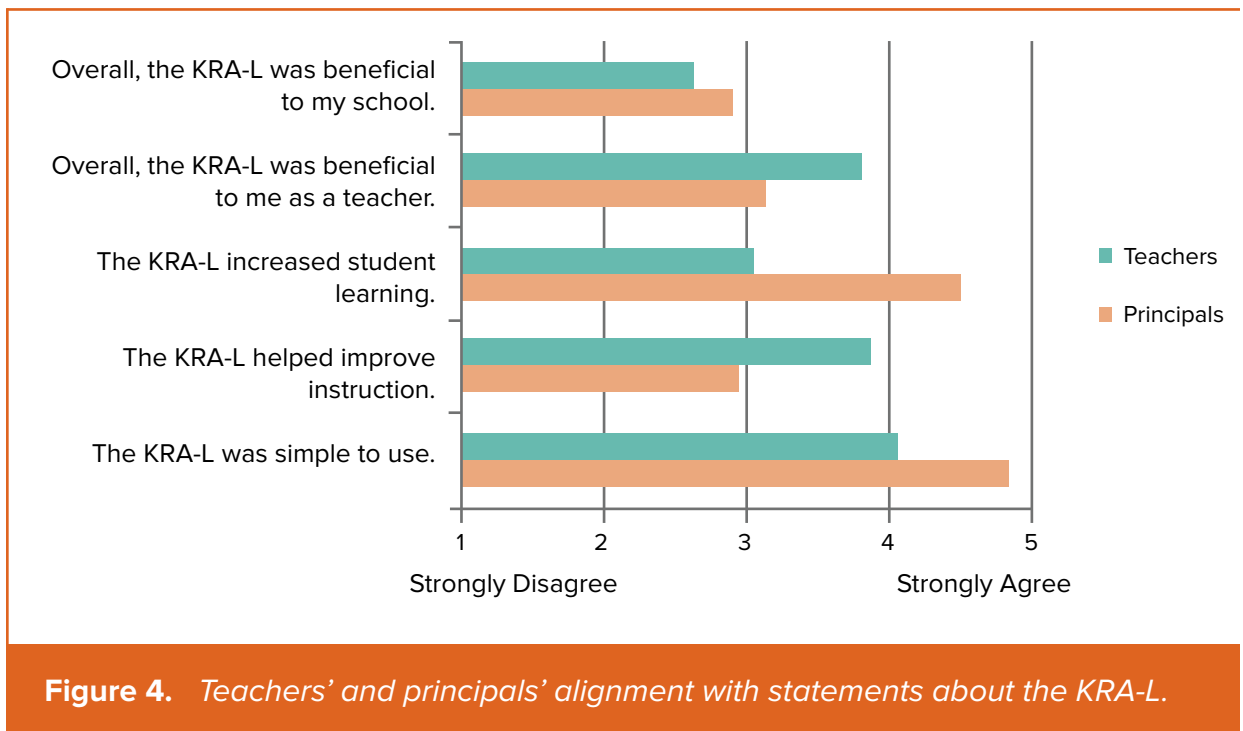
Interestingly, participants noted several purposes that were not aligned with stated goals for the KRA. Over a third (37%) of teachers and principals said that the KRA was meant to assess learning in preschool and/or preschool programs. For example, one teacher wrote, “To discover if preschool is making a difference in early childhood and which preschools are doing well at the preschool level.” This pattern was particularly notable as 15% of participants suggested that a more appropriate time or place to administer these assessments would be in preschool just prior to students’ entry into kindergarten. Another important finding was that many participants expressed concerns that the readiness measure did not prevent low-performing children from entering kindergarten (9%). Comments such as, “They are already in K and it is too late to tell their parents that they should wait,” suggested that teachers held a different view of “readiness” and the purpose of readiness assessments. Finally, 5% of participants were concerned that the KRA did not provide posttest data, reflecting an expectation that the KRA would be used to measure student growth.



Overall, it seems that teachers and principals need a better understanding of the purpose of the KRA, specifically as it relates to “readiness” and informing instructional decision-making. The KRA was not necessarily seen as a planning tool to better meet student learning needs. A better understanding of kindergarten readiness and how the KRA relates to kindergarten learning goals may help teachers use the data for planning.

Other Assessments

Given participants’ overall negative response to the KRA, it is important to consider if they hold similar views toward assessment in general. This does not seem to be the case. Unlike the KRA, on average teachers and principals agreed that the KRA-L increased student learning and was beneficial for teaching. Figure 4 shows more information about participants’ perspectives on the KRA-L.



In addition, many participants seemed to be already using multiple assessments to inform their practice, many of which seemed to be more highly valued than the KRA. In fact, 15% of participants commented that their current assessments (including the KRA-L) were more beneficial for informing practice than the KRA, and 11% of participants reported that the data provided by the KRA were redundant with these pre-existing assessments. Moreover, participants (19%) expressed concerns that the data provided by the KRA were incomplete and noted that they needed to use their additional assessments to fully understand children's skills and abilities. This might explain teachers' reports that they sometimes used KRA data integrated with other assessment systems, especially in the areas of language and literacy and socio-emotional development (44% and 12%, respectively).

To summarize, it does not appear that teachers and principals hold negative views towards assessment. Rather, participants expressed concerns with the nature and availability of data provided by the KRA. This may, in part, explain why they did not find the KRA useful for informing practice.



Conclusions

The voluntary nature of the study and the number of teachers and principals who chose to participate must be noted as an important limitation. Although our response rate is fairly typical for online surveys (Fan & Yan, 2010; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004), we cannot generalize our findings to all teachers or principals. We especially cannot generalize to teachers or principals outside of Franklin County. Another limitation of this study is that the KRA is currently being revised for academic year 2015-2016, and our results cannot speak to how that revised version will be perceived by teachers and principals. However, given the nature of those revisions, it is unclear the extent to which they will address the concerns noted in this study. Specifically, although there was a reduction in the number of items on the KRA, no practical, theoretical, or empirical rationale for retained/removed items was offered. Thus, the tradeoffs between administration time and available information to facilitate instructional planning are unclear. Moreover, the changes do not seem to help resolve issues related to teachers' and principals' misconceptions of the purpose of the KRA or unrealized use of KRA data to inform instructional practice.

Overall, it seems that teachers are not using the KRA as intended. Our findings do not indicate an adversity to assessment in general. Rather, negative perceptions and/or lack of use seem to be tied to a misunderstanding of the purpose of the KRA and administration issues.

We make the following recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers regarding the continued use of the KRA.

Policymakers should consider streamlining and shortening the KRA to decrease administration issues to allow teachers more time to spend in their beginning-of-the-year activities. More efforts to clarify the purpose of the KRA, including the connection with early learning standards, and provision of additional support to help teachers understand how the KRA can inform instruction are needed. Technology should continue to be used as a means of alleviating administration issues with the provision of adequate support for technology use.

Practitioners need a better understanding of what "kindergarten readiness" means and how KRA data can be used to inform instruction. They should develop ways to integrate the KRA into beginning-of-the-year routines and with other assessment practices.

Researchers should create partnerships with policymakers and practitioners to develop brief, easily administered, and well-aligned kindergarten readiness assessments as well as to evaluate subsequent versions of the KRA to determine the extent to which the assessment serves its purpose in helping put students on the path to success.

In conclusion, many teachers do not seem to be using the KRA as intended to inform practice in a meaningful way. We believe, however, with attention to the above recommendations and open conversations between policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, we can improve the KRA and its use such that important impacts on teachers' practice and students' learning are realized.



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About the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy (CCEC)

The Schoenbaum Family Center and Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy are partnering centers in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University, located in the Weinland Park neighborhood. This partnership is composed of three entities including the A. Sophie Rogers School for Early Learning, Schoenbaum Family Center Community Programs, and the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy. The shared vision is to be a driving force in improving children's well-being through research, practice, and policy.

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