

THE STUDY GROUP

MEASURES OF EARLY SUCCESS

Better evidence for early learning.
Better-informed decisions.

Research and solution profiles for school systems



The meaning of quality is expanding

Better measures can help school systems recognize children's strengths and choose support that helps them learn.

Researchers, educators, families and developers are broadening what assessments can reveal, testing new ways to gather evidence, and designing information that is easier to interpret and use.

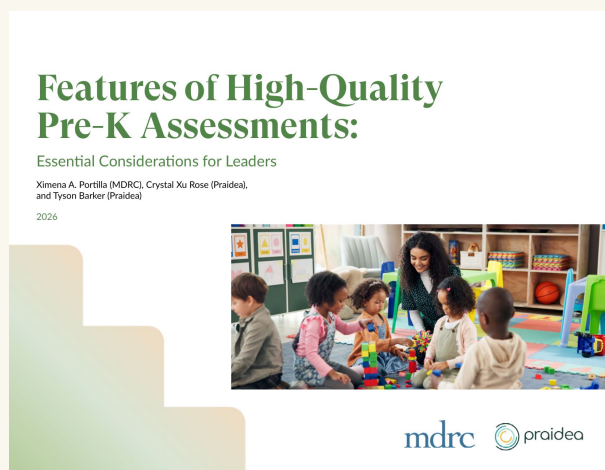
Scientific soundness remains essential. Quality also depends on children's opportunities to show their strengths, educators' ability to use a tool during a busy day, and whether the result supports a useful response.

This report connects research with seven profiles for superintendents, school boards and instructional leaders. Some tools assess children's skills. Others help adults improve learning interactions. Together, they show what is advancing, what the evidence supports and what to ask before adopting a tool.

Five dimensions of quality

Features of High-Quality Pre-K Assessments

Portilla, Rose & Barker / MDRC / September 2026



Use this toolkit to compare assessments across five dimensions and weigh local trade-offs. Each dimension includes considerations for multilingual learners.

[Open the full toolkit PDF](#)

Content

The skills and developmental domains the measure captures.

Psychometrics

The accuracy and consistency of results across children and settings.

Experience

How children and educators experience participation and administration.

Usefulness

Whether information helps people choose support, instruction or policy.

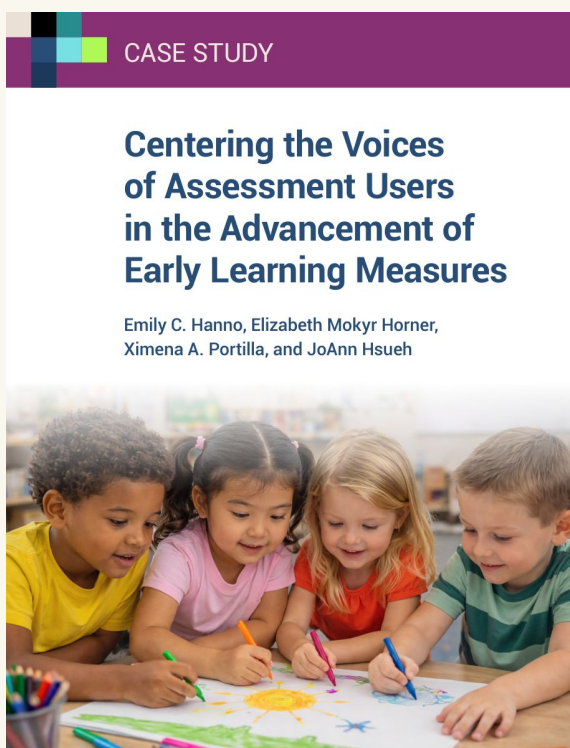
Scalability

The cost, support and infrastructure needed for sustained use.

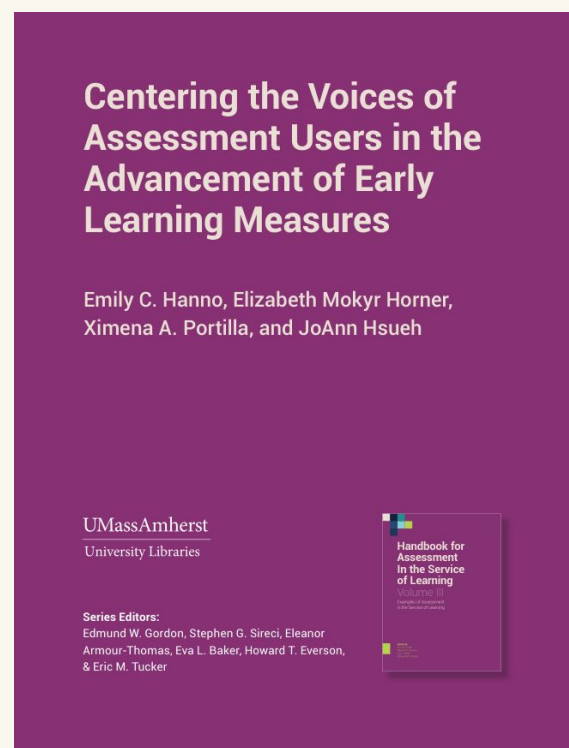
A selection framework, not a product ranking. The toolkit identifies features and trade-offs rather than setting universal thresholds.

Quality designed with users

Hanno and colleagues show how children, families and educators can help design assessments alongside content experts and measurement researchers.



[Read the designed case study](#)



[Read the handbook chapter](#)

Iterative testing changed concrete features such as navigation prompts and pause/resume options. It also surfaced trade-offs between assessment length and score precision.

Seven tools, different roles

The profiles connect evidence about children with evidence about their opportunities to learn. Each approach supports a different decision.

Profile	Principal role in this report	Child screen
Kibeam · p. 7	Book-based skill responses	No
I-SPEAK · p. 8	Skills within digital stories	Yes
Khan Kids · p. 9	Brief direct skill activities	Yes
Amira · p. 10	Reading assessment and practice	Yes
TeachFX · p. 12	Instructional feedback for adults	No
FIND-C · p. 13	Responsive-interaction coaching	No
LENA Grow · p. 14	Conversation and language context	No

“No” describes the child’s activity. Adults still use digital systems to record, interpret or manage the information.

A PUBLIC STARTING POINT

Preschool Assessments Reimagined

The April 2024 showcase includes demonstrations of Kibeam, I-SPEAK, Khan Academy Kids and the preschool TeachFX concept.

[Watch the showcase and individual demonstrations](#)

More of learning can become visible



Emily Hanno's August 2026 essay explores what digital activity, spoken explanations and peer exchanges might reveal about developing skills.

The companion [flipbook](#) we prepared offers a short reading of the essay. The article provides the research context and links to the projects.

[Read Hanno's original article](#)

A CONCRETE RESEARCH PATHWAY

A July 2026 MDRC study explores whether Kibeam and Khan Academy Kids activity data can indicate executive functioning. The pilot included 428 children. Direct comparisons with executive-function measures involved 59 children.

The findings are preliminary. Richer activity data still need evidence that the signal measures the intended skill and supports a useful decision.

[Read the underlying MDRC study PDF](#)



Kibeam

A paper book can make learning visible



Children using the wand and books in the public 2024 demonstration.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

Children respond to prompts using a handheld wand and physical books. The format gathers language and literacy evidence within a familiar reading activity and creates openings for follow-up conversation.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

MDRC's July 2026 report explores whether response patterns can also indicate executive functioning. The Kibeam pilot included 149 children in nine classrooms, with direct executive-function comparisons for 28. The signals remain exploratory. The product has changed since the 2024 pilot, so the findings do not validate every current feature.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

What does the current school report show, and which teaching decisions does its evidence support? Examine a real report before choosing a local use.

[Watch the 2024 demonstration](#)

[Read the MDRC study PDF](#)

I-SPEAK

Familiar stories invite children’s knowledge



I-SPEAK’s branded storybook platform, from the developer’s public materials.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

I-SPEAK embeds assessment in culturally grounded stories in English and Spanish. Children show skills within the story. Educator reports aim to connect responses with strengths, developing skills and possible instructional support.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

A fall 2024 pilot reached 304 children in 19 classrooms. MDRC reported sustained engagement for 85% of observed children. A 2026 brief also shows reports that use plants and flower petals to communicate development. These are advances in experience and interpretation. Engagement alone cannot establish score accuracy or improved learning.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

What evidence supports each domain and language? Can educators and families interpret the report and identify a useful next step?

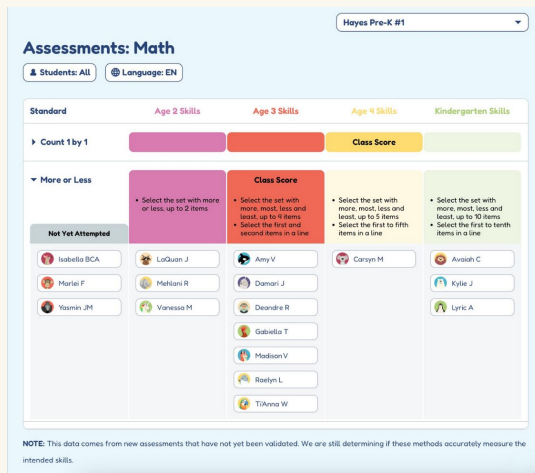
[Explore the storybook platform](#)

[Read the public pilot findings](#)



Khan Academy Kids

Brief activities connected to teaching decisions



WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

Brief bilingual activities gather evidence of emerging skills. Reports organize results by child or classroom, while linked activities can help educators move from a response to grouping, instruction and practice.

Illustrative assessment report. Ask the provider for a current sample.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Khan's 2026 update reports pilot testing with more than 1,000 children in 67 classrooms. Eligible publicly funded Pre-K/TK programs can join a pilot with fees waived through 2027–28. The update says a technical manual is expected in 2026. Evidence about the older learning app does not by itself validate the newer assessment.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

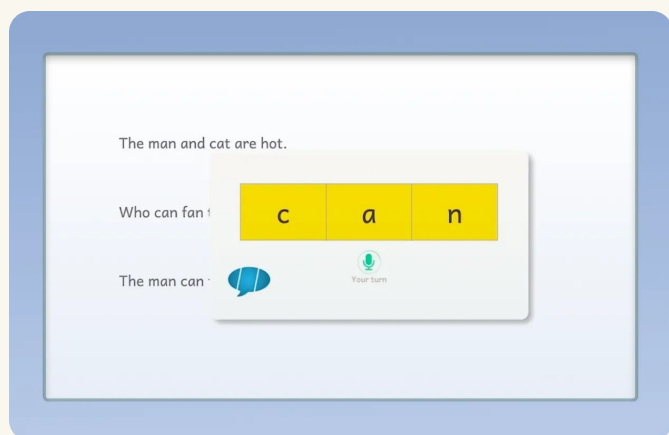
What does the current technical manual establish for each score and language? Does reporting save time and improve the support children receive?

[Explore the current assessment](#)

[Read the provider's 2026 update](#)

Amira Learning

Listening links reading evidence with practice



Example of a spoken-response intervention during Amira reading practice.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

A child reads aloud to a device. Amira provides feedback during practice, while educators can review recordings, scored transcripts and skill reports. Those records help teachers examine surprising results and choose reading support.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

A June 2026 What Works Clearinghouse review examined a Louisiana study of 79,084 K–5 students. It found moderate evidence in literacy and rated the study as meeting standards with reservations. The study used a matched comparison. Only 5%–19% met recommended weekly use. The findings do not establish preschool effects or validate every current assessment component.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

Which assessment or tutoring component would we use? Does its evidence match our grades and learners, and how will teachers check unexpected speech-recognition results?

[Explore assessment and reporting](#)

[Read the independent WWC review](#)

TeachFX

Classroom talk becomes something to revisit



Official TeachFX classroom image. The research below concerns K–12 use.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

Teachers record a lesson and revisit patterns in participation and questioning. Feedback can prompt a change, such as a question that invites children to explain. The preschool Snapshot concept appeared in the 2024 showcase.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

A 2024 randomized study of 224 Utah K–12 math and science teachers found 20% more focusing questions with targeted feedback. Other practices did not change. This supports a specific adult-learning mechanism, with a different age range from preschool. Current availability of the original preschool Snapshot offer remains unverified.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

Which preschool offering is available today? Ask to see a current report and evidence about young voices, overlapping talk and local languages.

[Watch the 2024 preschool demo](#)

[Read the university study summary](#)

FIND-C

A moment that worked becomes a model



Stanford FIND classroom filming illustration. Logo identifies the broader FIND program.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

Filming Interactions to Nurture Development in the Classroom helps educators revisit successful adult–child interactions. Selected video moments make responsive practice visible and provide a starting point for reflection and coaching.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Stanford FIND now offers pathways from self-paced foundations to coaching and coach training. Its Colorado report documents 3,399 unique people completing at least one FIND-PD course by April 2025. That shows course reach, not the effects of FIND-C coaching. Evidence needs to match the service a district chooses and the support it provides.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

What will educators do, who will support them, and which research applies to that exact pathway? Clarify coaching time, video review and consent.

[Explore current FIND pathways](#)

[Read the Colorado report PDF](#)

LENA Grow

Everyday talk can guide adult practice



LENA recorders in their charging and upload dock.

WHAT IT HELPS US NOTICE

Children wear a small recorder during familiar routines. LENA estimates features of the language environment, including conversational turns. Educators use reports and professional learning to create more opportunities for responsive talk.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

A 2025 study compared 18 LENA Grow Early Head Start classrooms with 10 control classrooms and reported gains in language-environment and early literacy outcomes. A separate independent validation found weaker accuracy for turn counts than for word counts. These estimates can focus observation and coaching, but do not capture the whole quality of an interaction.

A SCHOOL-SYSTEM QUESTION

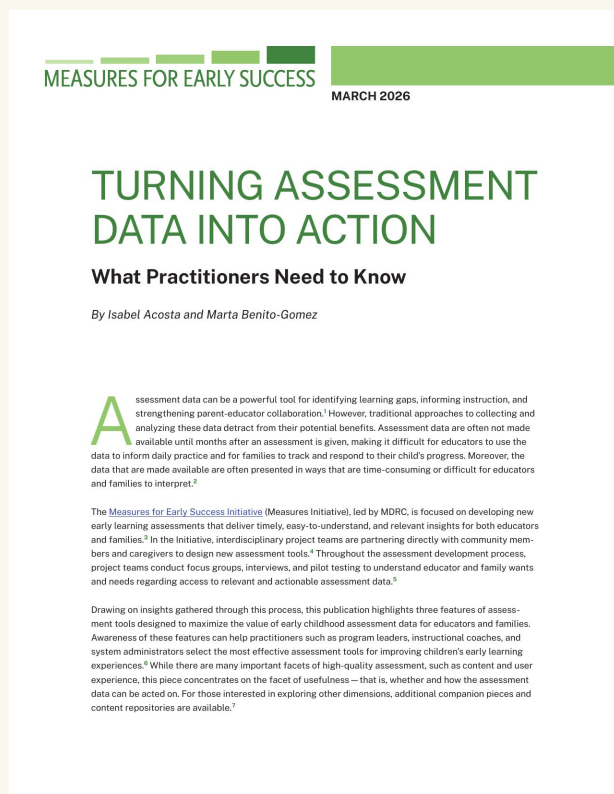
Which routine could create more back-and-forth talk? Pair the report with observation, clear recording agreements and time for coaching.

[Explore LENA Grow](#)

[2025 study abstract](#)

[Count validation](#)

A result needs a next step



Turning Assessment Data into Action

Acosta & Benito-Gomez
MDRC / March 2026

This brief shows how timely, understandable reports can guide action. Examples from I-SPEAK and Khan Academy Kids show what that looks like in practice.

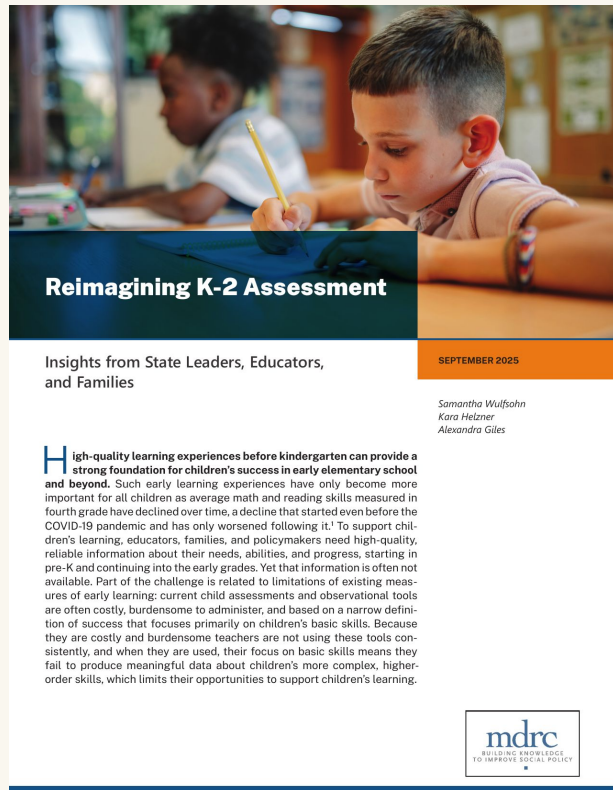
[Read the complete brief PDF](#)

WHAT A DISTRICT CAN TRY

Put a sample report in front of educators and families. Ask what it says about a child's strengths, which decision it enables, and what support should follow.

Children's skills are part of the picture. The next profiles examine conversations and adult responses that shape opportunities to learn.

The story continues through K–2



Reimagining K–2 Assessment

Wulfsohn, Helzner & Giles
MDRC / September 2025

State leaders, educators and families call for a fuller picture of children, less time spent administering assessments, and information they can use.

[Read the full report PDF](#)

CONTINUITY IS A DESIGN QUESTION

As children move into elementary school, educators still need meaningful evidence and time to interpret it. Families need timely explanations and guidance. Districts can plan those supports across the transition.

What counts as progress

These approaches are advancing on different fronts. Each kind of progress is worth recognizing, and each answers a different question.

Development and reach

Can people use it in real settings?

Classroom pilots, revised workflows and growing participation can show feasibility. They do not establish learning gains.

Measurement

Does the information mean what we think it means?

Reliability, validity and fairness evidence must fit the current scores, intended decisions and learners.

Practice and outcomes

Does using it make a useful difference?

Claims about changes in teaching or child outcomes need evidence from a study whose design, comparison and setting support that conclusion.

Five questions for leaders

The five dimensions of quality become concrete when a district names the decision it hopes to improve.

Content	Which skill or interaction matters here? Check that the measure covers the skill or interaction and developmental range you need.
Score quality	Does the evidence fit our learners? Review evidence of reliability, validity and fairness for the intended use, languages and children served.
Experience	Can children participate meaningfully? Observe comfort, accessibility, engagement and the demands on educators.
Usefulness	Can someone interpret it and act? Try a real report with educators and families. Name the support that follows.
Scalability	Can we sustain it? Examine total cost, staff time, training, technical fit and responsible data use.

[Return to the full MDRC quality toolkit](#)

A district learning cycle

01 Name a decision

Choose a question that matters locally, such as which children need more opportunities for conversation or what reading support comes next.

02 Run a supported trial

Include educators and families in the trial. Give them time to learn the tool and interpret results. Include learners the system has often underserved.

03 Compare with practice

Compare the signal with human observation and other evidence. Track what adults change, the effort it takes and any unintended consequences.

04 Decide what comes next

Review usefulness, implementation demands and the quality of the experience. Expand only when the evidence supports the intended use.

Research to read and use

[Features of High-Quality Pre-K Assessments](#)

Portilla, Rose & Barker · 2026 · Selection toolkit

[Centering the Voices of Assessment Users](#)

Hanno, Horner, Portilla & Hsueh · 2025 · Handbook chapter

[Centering Voices: designed case-study edition](#)

Hanno, Horner, Portilla & Hsueh · 2026 · The Study Group

[Using Technology to Measure Future-Readiness Skills](#)

Emily Hanno · 2026 · Original article

[Using Metadata to Measure Executive Functioning](#)

Hanno and colleagues · 2026 · Exploratory empirical report

[Turning Assessment Data into Action](#)

Acosta & Benito-Gomez · 2026 · Reporting and use

[Reimagining K–2 Assessment](#)

Wulfsohn, Helzner & Giles · 2025 · Stakeholder perspectives

Tools and their evidence

Kibeam

[2024 demonstration](#)

[MDRC study PDF](#)

I-SPEAK

[Current platform](#)

[Classroom pilot findings](#)

Khan Academy Kids

[Assessment and pilot](#)

[Provider's 2026 update](#)

Amira Learning

[Current assessment](#)

[WWC evidence review](#)

TeachFX

[Current platform](#)

[University study summary](#)

Stanford FIND

[Current pathways](#)

[Research and implementation](#)

LENA Grow

[Current program](#)

[2025 study abstract](#)

Stronger evidence. More possibilities for children.

The advances deserve attention.

Books, conversations, classroom interactions and digital activities offer different windows onto children's strengths and the conditions that help them grow. Research is also making the design requirements clearer: trustworthy information, meaningful participation and results people can use.

Bring one question from this guide to a cabinet or board learning session. Ask the instructional team to examine a sample report with educators and families, check the evidence for local learners, and identify the support needed to act on the results.

Progress matters when it helps adults make better decisions and gives children more opportunities to learn, participate and succeed.