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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-343](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In September 2003, the Head Start Bureau, in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF), implemented the National Reporting System (NRS), the first nationwide skills test of over 400,000 4- and 5-year-old children. The NRS is intended to provide information on how well Head Start grantees are helping children progress.

Given the importance of the NRS, this report examines: what information the NRS is designed to provide; how the Head Start Bureau has responded to concerns raised by grantees and experts during the first year of implementation; and whether the NRS provides the Head Start Bureau with quality information.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends the HHS Assistant Secretary for ACF, in collaboration with the Head Start Bureau, determine how NRS data will be used for accountability and targeting technical assistance; monitor the effects of the NRS on local Head Start practices; use first year NRS results to conduct further study of the reliability and validity of the NRS; compile a detailed, well-organized document on the technical quality of the NRS; improve management of its data on NRS participation; and study the costs and benefits of sampling in administering the NRS. ACF generally agreed with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-343.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Marnie S. Shaull at (202) 512-7215 or shaullm@gao.gov.

HEAD START

Further Development Could Allow Results of New Test To Be Used for Decision Making

What GAO Found

The Head Start Bureau developed the NRS to gauge the extent to which Head Start grantees help children progress in specific skill areas, including understanding spoken English, recognizing letters, vocabulary, and early math. Due to time constraints and technical matters, the Head Start Bureau adapted portions of other assessments for use in the NRS.

Head Start Bureau officials have responded to some concerns raised during the first year of NRS implementation, but other issues remain. For example, the Head Start Bureau has modified training materials and is exploring the feasibility of sampling. However, it is not monitoring whether grantees are inappropriately changing instruction to emphasize areas covered in the NRS.

Head Start Bureau officials have said NRS results will eventually be used for program improvement, targeting training and technical assistance, and program accountability; however, the Head Start Bureau has not stated how NRS results will be used to realize these purposes. Currently, results from the first year of the NRS are of limited value for accountability purposes because the Head Start Bureau has not shown that the NRS meets professional standards for such uses, namely that (1) the NRS provides reliable information on children's progress during the Head Start program year, especially for Spanish-speaking children, and (2) its results are valid measures of the learning that takes place. The NRS also may not provide sufficient information to target technical assistance to the Head Start centers and classrooms that need it most.

An Assessor and Head Start Student Demonstrate the NRS Assessment.



Source: GAO.