

Delaware Kindergarten Readiness Pilot Study:  
An Analysis of Kindergarten Report Cards  
Used by Districts and Charter Schools

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## INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

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As part of the Kindergarten Readiness Pilot Study, researchers at the University of Delaware's Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) collected and analyzed kindergarten report cards from school districts and charter schools across the State of Delaware. This component of the study had two goals: (1.) to identify common elements across the report cards and (2.) to recommend ways to integrate elements from Delaware's new statewide kindergarten assessment into the kindergarten benchmarking process.

In June 2012, we contacted all school districts and charter schools by phone and requested copies of kindergarten report cards currently in use. In response to this request, districts and charter schools electronically submitted blank or redacted copies of the forms.

## RESULTS

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### **Response Rate**

We contacted 25 school districts and charter schools in Delaware to participate in this component of the pilot study. This number represents all school districts and charter schools that had operated kindergarten classrooms during the 2011-2012 school year. Of the districts and charter schools contacted, 20 were included in the analyses; two school districts and three charter schools did not supply sample report cards. Therefore, the overall response rate was 80%.

### **Emphasis and Organization of Report Cards**

Similar to report cards at other grade levels, kindergarten report cards are intended to provide an assessment of children's skills. However, it is important to note that in kindergarten, report cards are often viewed as early progress reports on skills that are currently developing, rather than an opportunity to grade children's skills or content knowledge at a single point in time.

In general, kindergarten report cards used in Delaware charter schools and school districts are broadly organized into several domains; for example, Language Arts/English and Mathematics serve as common domains. Within those domains, some report cards further divide items into subdomains; for example, under the heading of Language Arts, subdomains include Reading Comprehension and Writing Skills. Most report cards include additional items within the subdomains, such as "identifies and produces individual sounds."

### **Data Analyses**

We analyzed content in the report cards by examining the frequency with which charter schools and districts include particular items and domains in their benchmarking process. Schools were counted as including a subject on their report card as long as they evaluated children on at least one skill in the relevant domain or provided an overall assessment on a subject as a whole. For

example, a school district that assesses the subject of mathematics as a whole and does not evaluate individual items within that domain is shown to assess children's math skills but that district is not included in the item breakdown within any subdomains.

In an effort to identify comparable components of the benchmarking process across charter schools and districts, we reclassified items into domains that most commonly included each item. For example, if a school placed the item "names letter sounds" under Language Arts, but placed "prints name" under a separate Writing heading, we integrated the Writing items into the domain of Language Arts. We also assigned domain titles based on item content and/or wording most frequently used to describe the area in our sample of kindergarten report cards.

The section below describes the domains commonly addressed in report cards, as well as the associated subdomains.

### *Language Arts*

We grouped items that describe children's skills in Language Arts into four subdomains: Writing Skills, Reading Comprehension, Phonological Awareness and Word Recognition.

### *Mathematics*

Mathematics skills were grouped into subdomains of Number Sense, Geometry, Measurement, Math Reasoning and Patterns.

### *Other Academic Areas*

Beyond Language Arts and Mathematics assessments, some charter schools and districts evaluate children's skills and knowledge in additional academic areas. For Science and Social Studies, children are assessed on the basis of their participation and their basic understanding of specific concepts.

Some report cards also include evaluation of participation and competencies in Physical Education, Library, Music, Visual Arts, and Computer/Technology. For these special academic areas, children receive feedback on their behavior and their demonstration of basic skills in each area. Therefore, these areas do not have subdomains or item breakdowns.

### *Physical and Academic Readiness Skills*

Charter schools and districts also evaluate children's physical and academic readiness. This domain includes learned skills that are components of readiness for success in a kindergarten classroom. The items refer to large and small motor skills, self-help skills, and a variety of competencies that range from handwriting skills to recognizing colors.

## *Social and Behavioral Competencies*

Social and Behavioral Competencies include work habits and traits that are important for success in a kindergarten classroom. Approaches to Learning, Interactions with Others, Self-Concept and Self-Control are subdomains within the Social and Behavioral Competencies domain. Across the report cards we examined, sixteen items were classified into the subdomain of Approaches to Learning. Several examples are: shows eagerness and interest, works independently and asks and answers questions. Four items were classified into the subdomain of Interactions with Others: cooperates with others, interacts easily with familiar adults, takes part in group activities and shows empathy and caring for others. The Self-Concept subdomain refers to the child's positive self-image and initiative. Finally, five items were classified into the Self-Control subdomain, as they refer to the child's behaviors such as accepting responsibility, following rules and respecting property.

Report cards across Delaware varied greatly in terms of the number of individual items assessed on kindergarten report cards. Table 1 outlines the range and average number of items for districts and charter schools.

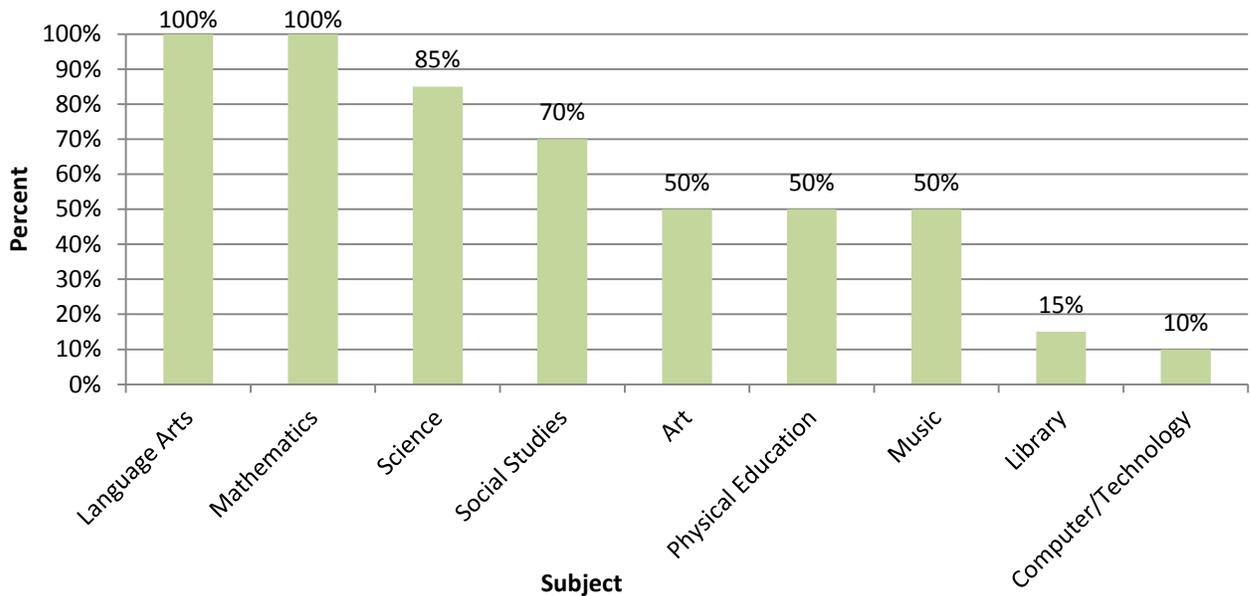
Table 1. Total Number of Items on Report Cards

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>District</b>	36.3	18.1	33-87
<b>Charter</b>	48.1	15.7	9-66

## **Academics**

Figure 1 shows the percentage of districts and charter schools that evaluate children's skills in each academic domain. All twenty districts and charter schools evaluate children's skills in both Language Arts and Mathematics. Fewer districts and charter schools assess children's skills in Science, Social Studies and specials such as Art and Music. Only two school districts include Computer/Technology skills in their benchmarking process.

Figure 1. *Academic Domains*



On most report cards, Language Arts and Mathematics contain the highest number of individual items, with an overall average of 15 items in Language Arts and 9 items in Mathematics. However, there was a wide range in the number of items on report cards. The report card with the fewest items included two items each for Language Arts and Mathematics. The report card with the most items in Language Arts contains 29 items in that area; the report card with the most items in Mathematics has 21 items.

Tables 2 and 3 provide more information about numbers of items on report cards representing the Language Arts and Mathematics domains, respectively.

Table 2. *Language Arts*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>District</b>	14.7	6.8	2-29
<b>Charter</b>	15.1	4.8	7-20

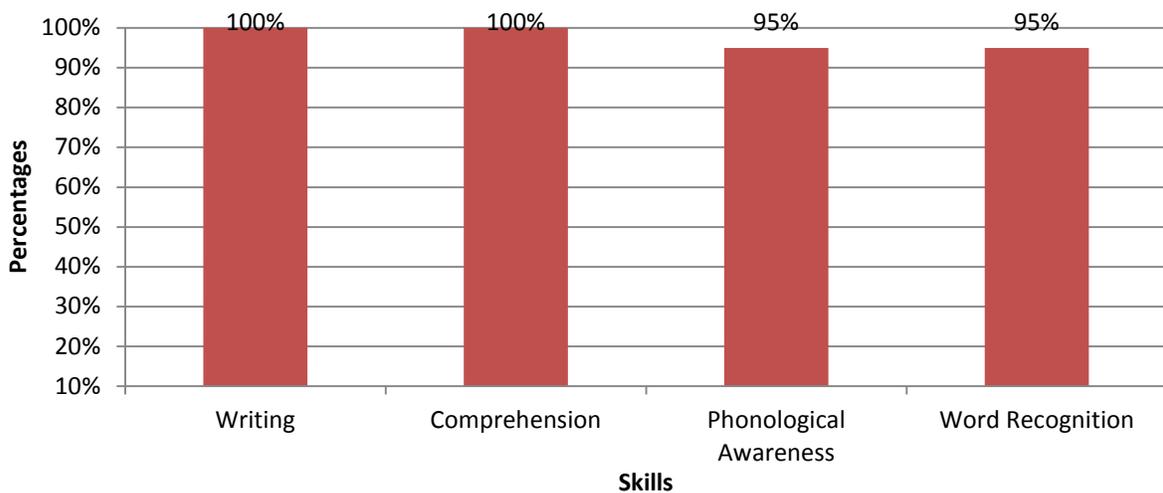
Table 3. *Mathematics*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>District</b>	8.6	4.7	2-18
<b>Charter</b>	10.4	5.5	7-21

## Language Arts

Although all districts evaluate writing skills, one district does so by using a writing assignment where the individual items assessed are not described on the report card. The Writing subdomain includes this approach as well as the approach where the targeted skills are more explicitly specified. Similarly, several schools and districts include a table of common sight words for teachers to check off the words that the child correctly recognizes. Others include a single item that refers to the child's ability to read common sight words but do not include a count of how many, or which, words. Both ways of evaluating recognition of sight words are represented as Word Recognition. Figure 2 displays the predominance of Language Arts subdomains.

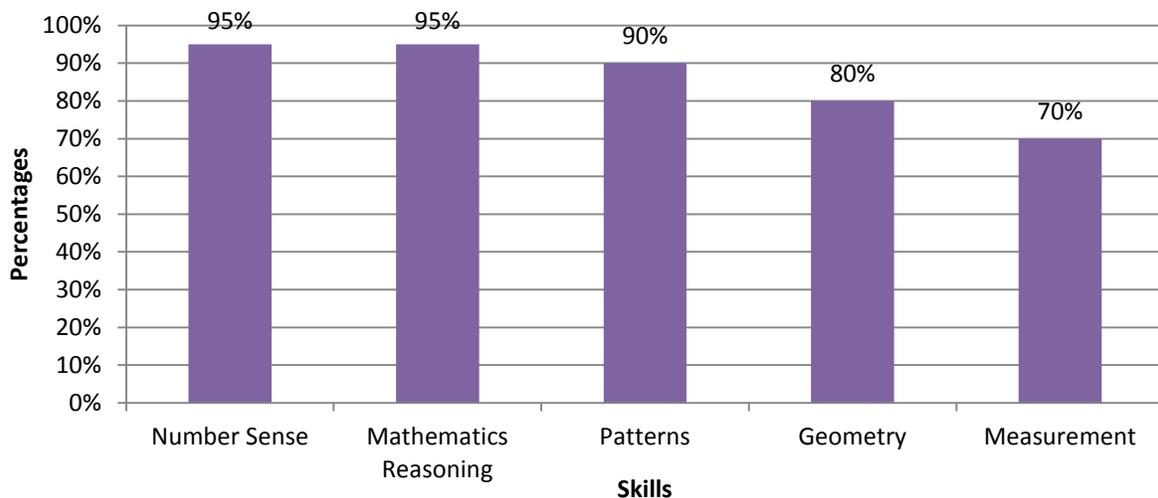
Figure 2. *Language Arts*



## Mathematics

Figure 3 contains a listing of the common subdomains found in Mathematics assessments on the report cards.

Figure 3. *Mathematics*



## Physical and Academic Readiness

Items from the Physical and Academic Readiness and the Social and Behavioral Competencies domains were more difficult to aggregate, because these items were distributed across a variety of subdomains. Therefore, for the remaining domains discussed in this report, we focus on the individual items that compose each domain rather than further aggregating the items. It is also important to note that we have classified items on the basis of how they are typically grouped on kindergarten report cards in Delaware. Thus, while an item such as self-help skills may reasonably span multiple domains, it is classified here under the domain of Physical and Academic Readiness in the interest of consistency with the report cards currently in use.

The Physical and Academic Readiness domain includes skills important for success at various tasks in the classroom. Figure 4 shows the percentage of charter schools and districts that assess children for each skill. Table 4 provides more information about the average number of items on report cards. In general, while these additional types of skills may be important, they are typically addressed in a fairly limited way through the benchmarking process.

Figure 4. *Physical and Academic Readiness*

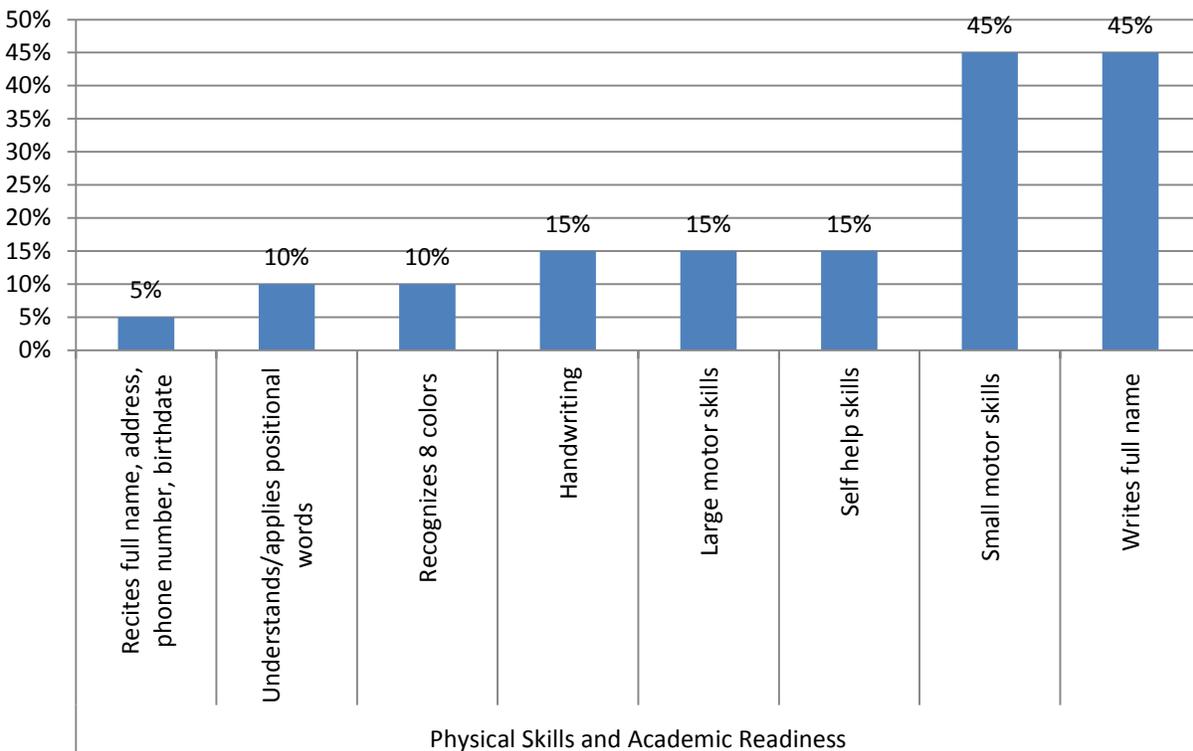


Table 4. *Physical and Academic Readiness*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>District</b>	2.1	2.5	0-8
<b>Charter</b>	2.0	1.5	0-5

## Social and Behavioral Competencies

The Social and Behavioral Competencies domain includes work habits and traits that are further divided into four subdomains. Those subdomains are: Approaches to Learning, Interaction with Others, Self-Concept and Self-Control. Figure 5 depicts only the Approaches to Learning items, due to the large number of unique items found across the kindergarten report cards.

Figure 5. *Approaches to Learning*

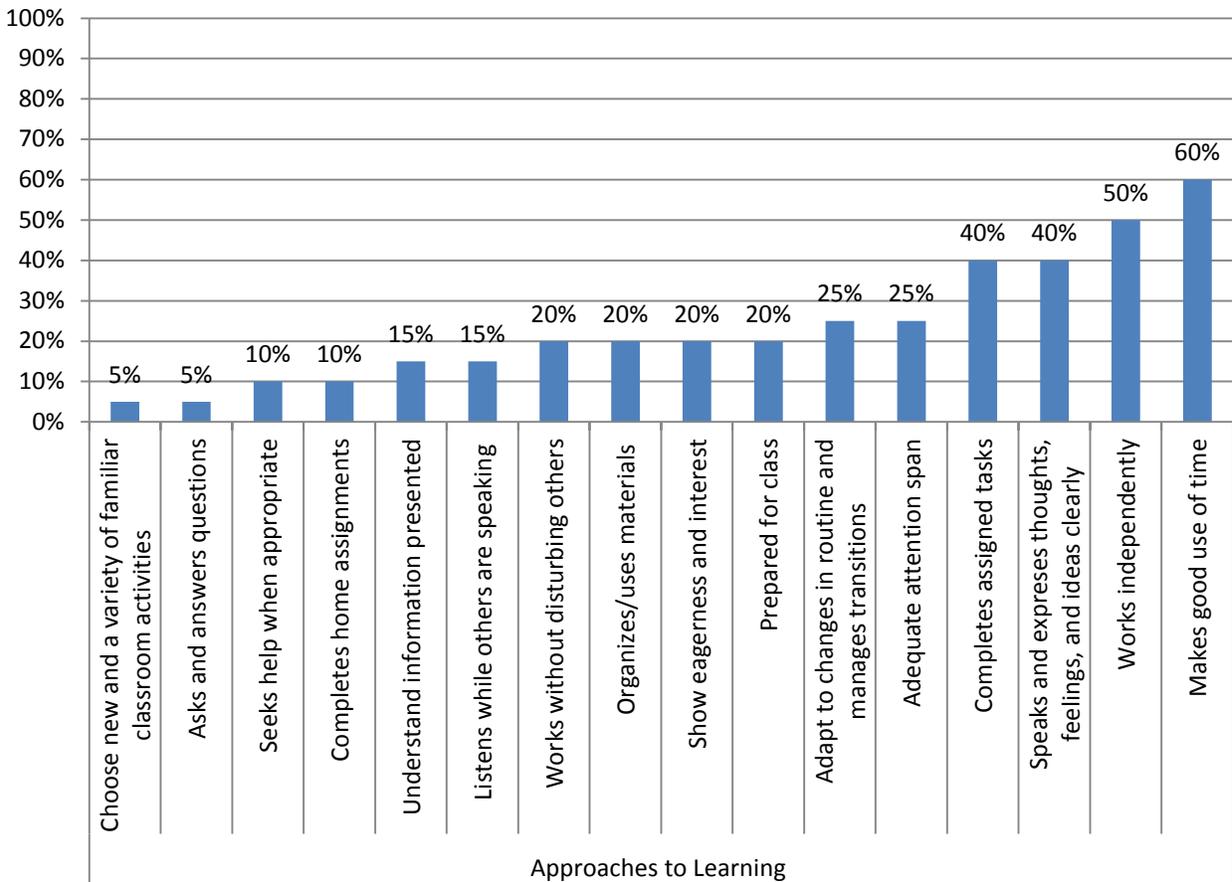


Figure 6 depicts the percentage of charter schools and districts that include each skill or behavior within the Interaction with Others, Self-Concept and Self-Control subdomains. The data show that working cooperatively with others is a widely recognized expectation in the benchmarking process, as is the ability to follow rules and directions in the classroom. Fewer charter schools and districts include items on displaying positive self-concept. Table 5 shows the average number of all items in the Social and Behavioral Competencies domain. The wide range for this domain is notable, indicating that some schools do not include social skills in the benchmarking process at all, while others evaluate those skills extensively.

Figure 6. *Social and Behavioral Competencies*

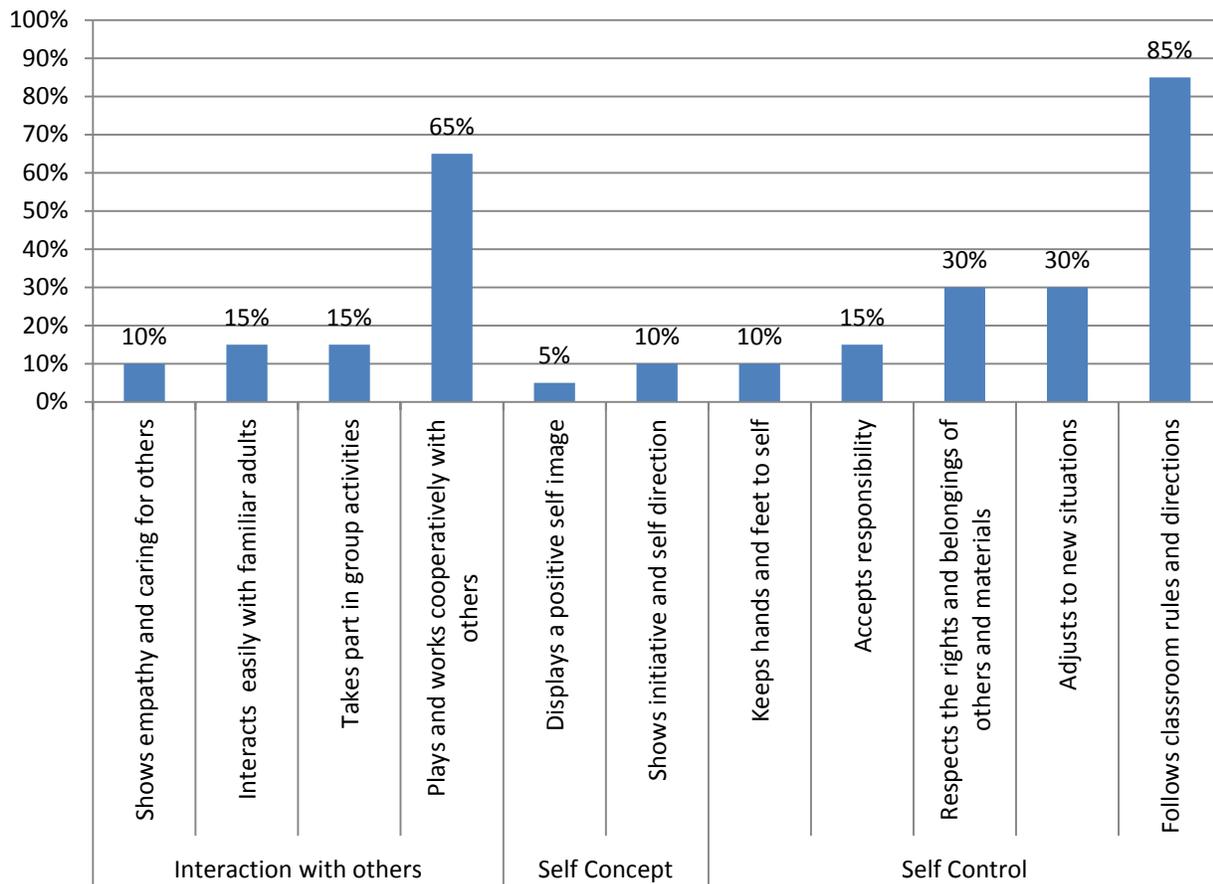


Table 5. *Social and Behavioral Competencies*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<b>District</b>	7.5	6.3	0-25
<b>Charter</b>	8.7	7.5	0-20

In addition to examining the domains addressed in school district and charter school report cards, we also compiled information about the evaluation scales used to indicate progress. All scales used on the report cards are composed of three to five levels that describe a child's level of achievement. Some report cards use more than one scale. For example, one district uses three independent scales to demonstrate different components of the child's progress: one scale describes the child's progress toward standards, another describes growth, and the final scale describes effort. Another district applies a single scale for Math and Reading, another for Science and Social Studies, and yet another for Fine Arts performance. The type of language used to explain the meaning of different points on the scales varies considerably. On various report cards, terms such as "beginning to develop," "exploring," "inconsistent," "not progressing," and "well below the standard" are all used to indicate the initial skill level on a rating scale.

School districts and charter schools also vary in the frequency with which report cards are distributed to parents. Ten (50%) evaluate children at four marking periods. Another 40% distribute report cards three times per year and the final 10% either use a two-semester system or do not specify their grading cycles on the report card. Some school districts and charter schools do not evaluate children on particular items until the second grading period. Also, at the end of the year, some provide a final grade in addition to period or trimester evaluations.

Finally, some school districts and charter schools include additional sections in their report cards to address issues of home communication and attendance. Nine (45%) include space to write if a parent conference was requested, or if one was held. About two-thirds (65%) have a space for additional written comments to explain the child's progress or competencies. Nearly all of the report cards (95%) include a section for tracking attendance.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENATIONS

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Kindergarten report cards in the State of Delaware share many common elements, particularly with respect to the academic content areas represented. There is strong agreement that mathematics and language arts are expected components of the kindergarten benchmarking process, across all school districts and charter schools in the state. There are also some commonalities in the evidence of assessments of children's social skills and behavior management, as well as their approaches to learning. In other areas, there is greater variability. Few of the report cards evaluate similar skills within domains such as physical and academic readiness.

In addition to describing the content of kindergarten report cards, a goal of this report is to suggest ways to integrate elements from Delaware's newly adopted kindergarten assessment process into kindergarten benchmarking for all schools in Delaware. As part of Delaware's Race

to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant, the state has recently adopted the Delaware Early Learner Survey (DE-ELS)<sup>1</sup>. This observational assessment tool is used by teachers during the first 30 days of the school year to gauge children’s skills upon entering kindergarten. The DE-ELS is an adaptation of the widely used Teaching Strategies GOLD<sup>2</sup>. The state-developed modification of the GOLD includes items in the following areas: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics. As all kindergarten teachers and their students will participate in the DE-ELS no later than fall 2015, the statewide use of this tool represents a significant investment of time in describing the skills of entering kindergartners.

Given that the benchmarking process is also aimed at describing kindergartners’ entry-level skills, it may be possible to capitalize on the investment in DE-ELS data collection by using the results to inform teachers’ ratings for kindergarten report cards. Indeed, our analysis of content from kindergarten report cards shows a number of commonalities between skills evaluated via the current report card benchmarking process and skills prioritized in the DE-ELS. These overarching areas largely map onto those already included in a variety of ways (and to greater and lesser degrees) on the report cards.

Similarities between content assessed in the DE-ELS and content included in kindergarten report cards are not limited to general domains such as Mathematics and Language Arts. Individual items on report cards also match specific items included in the DE-ELS. For example, the most common item in the domain of Social and Behavioral Skills on report cards concerns *following rules in the classroom*. This item aligns with the DE-ELS social-emotional item of *following limits and expectations*. Thus, teacher observations of a child’s rule-following behaviors for the DE-ELS assessment process could effectively inform the benchmarking process later in the year. Likewise, phonological awareness is an item found on nearly all current kindergarten report cards in Delaware. A phonological awareness item is also incorporated in the DE-ELS. Similar relationships exist in many other domains. Therefore, using the DE-ELS would help to inform the teacher’s evaluation of items already used in benchmarking. Further, the use of the DE-ELS could also enhance current kindergarten report cards by ensuring that all learning areas are addressed across districts and charter schools. At this time, only Mathematics and Language Arts are consistently reported across all schools, albeit not in uniform ways.

Delaware’s school districts and charter schools take similar approaches to the benchmarking process; however, kindergarten report cards used across the state do not employ standardized content areas. Comparison is difficult when some report cards divide language arts into 20 items and others evaluate a single writing assessment but do not include criteria describing the expectations for that assignment. It is recommended that standard content areas be used across

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<sup>1</sup> An Act to Amend Title 14 of the Delaware Code Relating to Kindergarten Readiness. 2012. DE Bill 317. June 19, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Heroman, C., Burts, D. C., Berke, K., & Bickart, T. (2010). *Teaching Strategies GOLD® objectives for development & learning: Birth through kindergarten*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

the state. To the extent that those content areas match the organization of the DE-ELS, or can at least be mapped to the DE-ELS, this would better facilitate utilization of kindergarten entry data in the benchmarking process.

While the Teaching Strategies GOLD is intended for use multiple times across the school year to inform ongoing instruction, the only legislative requirement for the DE-ELS is that it be administered within the first 30 days of the school year, in what is essentially an entrance assessment. It is not currently used throughout the school year. Given that children develop skills in many of the measured content areas at a rapid pace during kindergarten, DE-ELS data are likely to be most informative as teachers compile the initial report cards of the new school year. However, if the DE-ELS was used periodically throughout the school year, and benchmarking expectations were aligned with the DE-ELS content areas, teachers' investment of time in DE-ELS data gathering would likely be accompanied by reductions in time needed to compile report cards. As a result, many possibilities exist to integrate data collection for the new Early Learner Survey into the kindergarten benchmarking process.