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## Maryland State Education Association Report on the 2015-2016 Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

### Background

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) was administered for the first time across Maryland in the fall of 2014. Throughout the test's implementation—which involves a one-on-one administration by a certified kindergarten teacher for each student—MSEA and our local affiliates heard story after story about how much disruption was created in classrooms. Whether it was about the test taking an hour and a half for each student in a class of 20, or it was insufficient accommodations to help English language learners and students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) get through the test, the KRA was plagued by implementation problems. Last year, kindergarten students lost days—if not weeks—of critical time to learn and bond with their teacher in some of their first experiences in school. There was clear consensus among kindergarten teachers that this test was harmful to their instructional program.

Despite this cost, students did not see much benefit from the test's administration. In theory, the KRA should provide timely feedback to teachers so they can improve instruction for each of their students. However, the test results came back so late—in some cases, as much as seven months later—that teachers reported there was no valuable feedback from the time-consuming process of giving this test to every student. When MSEA surveyed kindergarten teachers about their experience last year, 91% said the KRA would not improve instruction for their students. One teacher wrote, "Very few of the assessment tasks provide any useful information to help guide instruction as many of the skills assessed by the tasks could be easily assessed during authentic classroom activities."

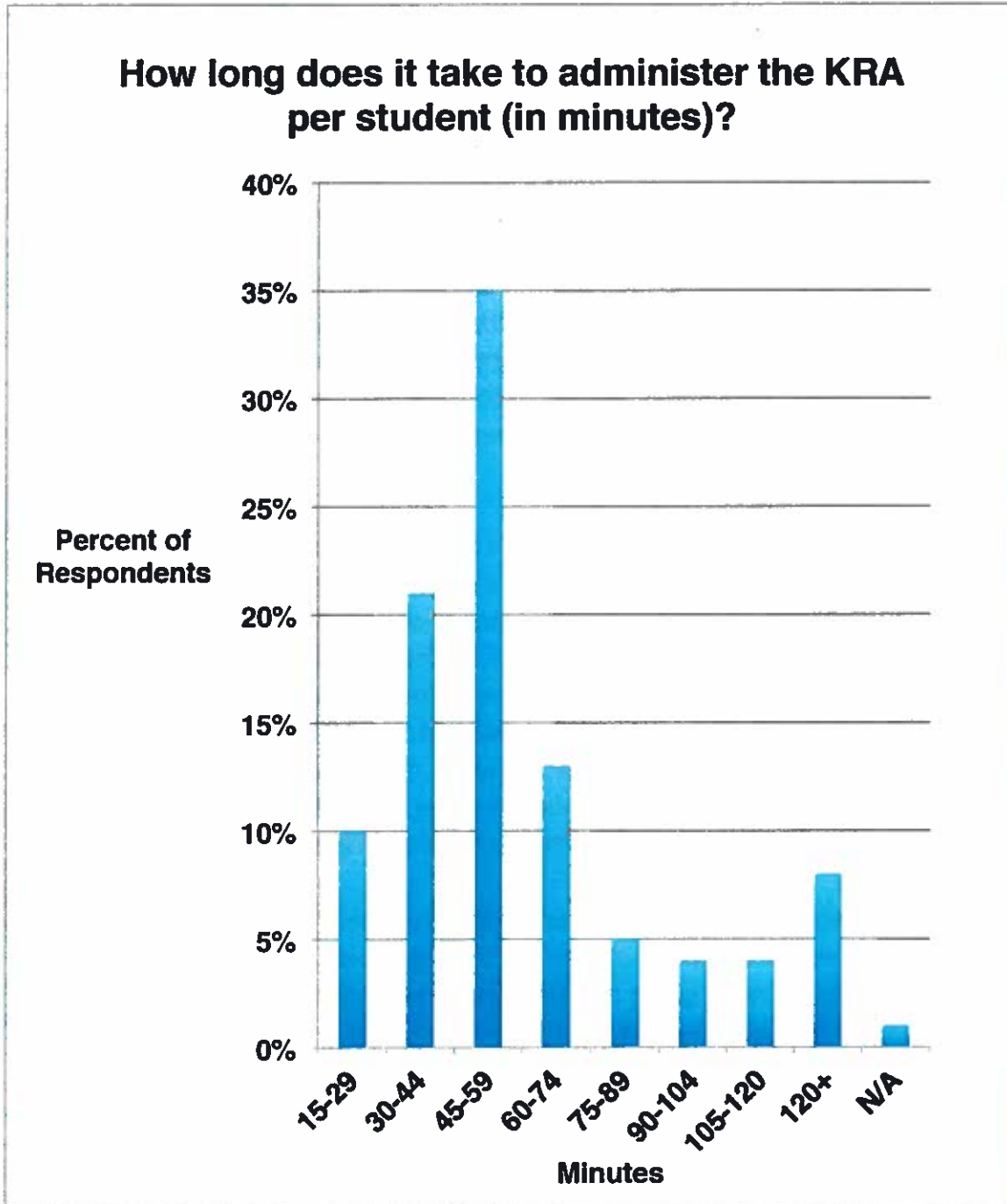
Upon receiving this feedback from kindergarten teachers across the state, MSEA called for the immediate suspension of the KRA until the test's problems could be fixed. While legislation to put a moratorium on giving the KRA did not pass during the 2015 General Assembly session, MSDE did make several changes to the test, including making it shorter. After the KRA was given again this fall with changes, MSEA sent out a survey to members to find out if the issues had truly been addressed.

### Survey Methodology

We sent out several emails to kindergarten teachers asking them to fill out the survey. We received a total of 105 responses from teachers in 15 of 24 school districts.

**How much time did the 2015 KRA take?**

After more than 80% of kindergarten teachers reported the 2014 KRA took an hour or more per student, this year's KRA was definitely shorter according to our survey results. This fall, 34% of teachers took more than an hour per student—with the majority saying it took between 30-59 minutes. Still, more than 10% say it took greater than an hour and a half to complete per student, suggesting the test can still greatly disrupt a kindergarten class in a significant number of instances.



It is also important to keep in mind that the majority of the KRA is administered one-on-one, meaning that even if it takes 45 minutes per administration for the typical teacher, that is 15 hours of lost instruction for the class. This does not include the time teachers have to put in entering information, running records, or other work related to giving the KRA. When asked how long those ancillary tasks take, 77% of teachers said it takes two hours or more, including 20% who said it takes six hours or more.

### **How do teachers feel about the 2015 KRA in comparison to the 2014 KRA?**

#### *Time*

When asked to compare the test length from 2014 to 2015, teacher responses indicated that the KRA had been slightly shortened. For 58% of teachers, the test took less time in 2015 than 2014, while only 4% said it took more time and 26% said it took the same amount of time. The rest either did not administer the KRA last year or did not answer. However, of those who said it took less time, 83% said it took slightly less time as opposed to the 17% who said it took significantly less time. Progress was definitely made, but it still seems indisputable that the test was disruptive to learning in classrooms during the first two months of kindergarten.

#### *Technology*

When asked if there were technology problems with the 2015 KRA, 37% of teachers said no, 60% said yes, and 3% said they weren't sure or didn't answer. The most common technology problems were issues with the KRA app, Wi-Fi connectivity, and use of the iPads. This is a slight improvement from last year, when 78% of teacher reported technology problems.

#### *Accommodations*

When asked whether the appropriate accommodations were provided for English language learners (ELL) and students with IEPs, 14% said no and 55% said yes—a big improvement from last year when a majority of teachers said there were problems with accommodations. However, 28% said they were not sure, suggesting there are significant communication breakdowns in getting information to kindergarten teachers about what accommodations need to be provided. For those who said accommodations were not provided, there was an especially strong focus on ELL students having no assistance in understanding the meaning of questions.

### **Despite Slight Improvements, KRA Continues to Lack Value to Teachers**

Even with improvements, the KRA takes significant instruction time away from kindergarteners during some of the most important moments of a child's education: in the first weeks of public education. Teachers report that the test also changes the way students begin to think of school—performing well becomes more important than playing with others

and learning important emotional, social, and academic habits. It makes it harder for students to develop a love of learning from the start.

Are the benefits of the KRA worth these costs? Our survey results suggest that is far from being the case.

**Does the KRA effectively measure readiness to learn?**

We asked teachers whether the test is valid—in other words, does it actually measure whether students are ready for kindergarten? Nearly three-quarters of teachers who responded to the survey said no, with just 12% saying yes and 14% saying they weren't sure. These results clearly indicate that there is misalignment between what kindergarteners need to know and what the test tries to measure.

One explanation for these results could be that teachers often do not give the test until October, well after they have taught certain skills to students that they may not have had when they started school. For example, Montgomery County asked their teachers to hold off on administering the test until October because they did not want to disrupt the beginning of school. Every single teacher surveyed said they were given until October 15 or later (more than 90% said October 30 or later) to administer the test.

This means that many—if not most—students were tested for whether they were ready for kindergarten after having six weeks of instruction in kindergarten. The wide ranges that teachers were given to administer the test is necessary because of how time-consuming it is, but it also means students were taking the test with the benefit of different levels of kindergarten-level instruction behind them. These issues make the results very questionable.

**Do teachers think the KRA helps them improve instruction?**

The primary purpose of any standardized test should be to provide data to teachers so they can then modify their instruction to better meet the needs of each student. However, when asked if they expect to receive meaningful data from the KRA, 76% of kindergarten teachers said no, just 13% said yes, and 11% were not sure. This is also related to how late the test was administered to students—teachers felt like they had already used alternative methods to identify areas for improvement before giving the test. It also speaks to how late the formal results come back, with some teachers just receiving the data in January. This certainly explains why so many teachers said that the KRA does not help them better tailor their instruction to individual students. An overwhelming 85% of teachers said that the KRA does not help them improve instruction.

We also sent out surveys to teachers through our local Time to Learn committees in our work to help the statewide Commission on Assessment identify which mandated assessments are valuable. Through this process, we received 110 survey responses on the

KRA's effect on instruction. When asked if the KRA informs instruction, 73% of those kindergarten teachers said no and 27% said yes. We also asked them to rate the test's instructional value on a scale of 1 (being the lowest value) to 5 (being the highest): 64% gave it a 1, 14% gave it a 2, 13% gave it a 3, and just 9% gave it a 4 or 5.

The costs in time and effect on instruction from giving the KRA far outweigh the very minimal benefits in better instruction.

### **Proposal for Reform: Change the KRA to a Sample During the Summer**

After MSEA called for the suspension of the KRA last year, we heard feedback from other public education advocates that the test could still be useful for identifying gaps in early-childhood education opportunities—and could provide data to support an expansion in public pre-kindergarten. This reasoning was even given by MSDE officials in support of administering the KRA in the first place. Educators feel strongly that public pre-k should be expanded (MSEA supports universal pre-k) and so we should be able to find a compromise that both collects data and is far less disruptive to thousands of kindergartners and their teachers. Additionally, the only way to actually measure readiness for kindergarten (not readiness for the sixth week of kindergarten) is to test students during the summer. This was done in Baltimore County this past year and seems to have worked smoothly. Based on these conclusions, we recommend that the State Board of Education change the KRA to a sample test—along the lines of the NAEP test—for incoming kindergartners to be administered during the summer.

