

Platform for Early Childhood Education
Save Our Schools People's Convention
August 3-5, 2012

There has been an increasing pushdown of the academic skills to 3, 4 and 5 year olds that used to be associated with 1st - 3rd graders. This results in fewer of the direct play and hands-on experiences that lay the foundations for later academic success. At the same time, there is an increasing over-focus on rote academic skills in the early elementary grades. This includes more and more teacher talk rather than child talk in early childhood classrooms and often involves teacher-led instruction focused largely on memorizing facts and information. Young children need to see facts within meaningful contexts, to invent their own ideas and problems to explore and solve, to share their own solutions. These practices reflect a loss of trust in the intellectual capacities of young children - and an institutionalized crushing of their insatiable love of learning.

We're forgetting that human beings are, from the moment they are born, experts at learning. Before they enter school, they have already discovered vast worlds of language and knowledge. Human beings are uniquely designed to be makers and creators – artists and craftsmen. And intellectuals.

The majority of early childhood classrooms today are driven by myriad of developmentally inappropriate standards-based tests and check lists that ignore children's needs, capacities and cultures, and do not honor their uniqueness as learners. This brings great harm to our nation's children by portraying them as deficient. The heaviest burden falls on those who live in poverty and with the fewest resources. As these trends take hold there has been a dumbing down of teaching and teacher knowledge, which is being increasingly replaced by commercial scripts that can be followed mindlessly. Less prepared teachers who are more willing to follow commercial scripts and manage data are entering the field of early childhood at the same time that increasingly frustrated experienced teachers are leaving. Older mentors who once wisely guided young teachers are fast disappearing.

If one purpose of public education, especially in a democracy, is to develop our capacity to exercise wise judgment when confronted with real world dilemmas, then we need to encourage young children to develop good judgment. They need adult models who demonstrate what exercising judgment is all about and who encourage children to ask questions, apply what they already know to new situations, use their imaginations, and think independently. In classrooms in which skills and knowledge are broken into small skill subsets and factlets and taught directly to kids, such judgment becomes suffocated from the start.

While many of the misguided practices we see in schools today took place in earlier times, especially in the education of poor children, they were not enforced by punitive state and federal policy or driven by frequent, costly, and inappropriate assessment tools, as is the case today—nor begun at such a young age.

What is the answer?

1. Eliminate labeling and ranking of children based on standardized tests. It's long been known to experts that tests for young children have very low reliability, are dependent on too many random factors, and are impacted by class, race and home culture.
2. Use assessments that are ongoing and evolving and connected closely to observations of children, their development and learning, and to a child-centered curriculum.
3. Provide classrooms where teachers engage in well-thought out and intentional extensions/expansions of children's play and learning in ways that demonstrate knowledge and respect for each child's uniqueness.
4. Provide children with literacy experiences that include storytelling, quality children's literature, and dramatic reenactments that grow out of their experiences rather than activities that isolate and drill discrete skills.
5. See and appreciate what children can do and understand without focusing on learning everything earlier. Offer classrooms where children are not praised, rewarded or criticized because they are slower or faster than others. Research tells us, earlier does not prove to be better.
6. Provide a school environment that respects the language and culture of children and their families, encourages families to take ownership, and insures that their history and experiences are included and valued.
7. Offer school schedules that provide ample time for families and school personnel to meet and work together. Including family members in meaningful ways in the school's governance structure so that they and children feel their voices are being heard.
8. Realize the critical role of early childhood teachers, whose work is as important as that of those who teach PhD candidates, and compensate them as such. We must reverse the assumption that the younger the children we teach, the less knowledgeable and competent teachers need to be.
9. Implement a school pedagogy that understands that children are intrinsically active learners from the time they are born and that learning happens in and out of a school building in unique ways. Adults don't need to get children "ready to learn"; they don't have to reinforce skills and facts stressed in school at home.
10. Provide children and families with access to high quality, affordable child care and after-school care.

What Can We Do?

Take this platform to your neighbor, children's teachers, parent groups, school board and legislative bodies. Ask them to support efforts to bring best practice back to the education of young children.

Stay informed and involved with the organizations that advocate for young children - such as Defending the Early Years (deyproject.org), Alliance for Childhood (allianceforchildhood.org), Save Our Schools (saveourschoolsmarch.org) and Parents Across America (parentsacrossamerica.org). (Also check out local organizations such as Citizens for Public Schools in Massachusetts citizensforpublicschools.org.)

Resist reinforcing the school's agenda - drilling for skills - and replace it with what centuries of wisdom and research has taught us: children learn when they are deeply engaged in self-selected, self-directed and playful activities. Provide young children with space and time to play at home and in the neighborhood. You don't need expensive toys or technology to support their development. They need the natural world, simple props, good friends and appreciative adults.

Notice and enjoy all the things the children you know CAN do.