

Early Learning: This Is Not a Test

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers
and **Nancy Carlsson-Paige**,
Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Education,
Lesley University

Early childhood education is “in” these days—from the bipartisan bill introduced in Congress this week modeled on President Obama’s proposal to expand high-quality early learning experiences, to Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio’s proposal to provide universal prekindergarten to every 4-year-old in New York City, to the Oklahoma model that provides access to high-quality preschool to all 4-year-olds in the state and extra support for younger children from low-income families. Democrats and Republicans, from retired generals to Hillary Rodham Clinton and her Too Small to Fail initiative, are touting the benefits.

It’s right and overdue to make early childhood education a priority in this country. The United States ranked 24th among 45 nations surveyed for availability and quality of early childhood education. But as we move toward the goal of universal access to pre-K, we have to do it right. Standards for early education, including the Common Core State Standards, must reflect the decades of research in cognitive and developmental psychology and neuroscience that tells us how young children learn. Young kids learn actively, through hands-on experiences in the real world. They develop skills over time through a process of building ideas. But this process is not always linear and is not quantifiable; expecting young children to know specific facts or skills at specified ages is not compatible with how they learn. It emphasizes right and wrong answers instead of the developmental progressions that typify their learning.

Young children need opportunities to engage in active, age-appropriate, play-based learning. They need to figure out how things work, explore, question and have fun.

Such experiences have been shown to have significant educational and social benefits for children. And studies show that early childhood education provides a high rate of return for society’s investment. But officials now risk snatching defeat from the jaws of victory by extending standards and the fixation on standardized testing to very young learners in the name of implementing the Common Core State Standards.

This fixation has caused incalculable harm by emphasizing testing above teaching and learning. And it has led many people to conflate the Common Core standards with the standardized tests meant to assess them. This reaches the height of absurdity when applied to students in the earliest grades. It defies both common sense and the evidence to backmap what students need to know for college and career to kindergarten and preschool. The standardized assessments being administered to first-graders and even kindergartners in New York and elsewhere have put this issue in sharp relief. What is being required of young children is unreasonable, inappropriate and developmentally unsound.

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Of course, we need to assess young children’s progress. Without appropriate assessments, teachers cannot alter their practice to further children’s learning. Years of research demonstrate that the best way to assess young children’s learning is through the expertise of teachers who know how to observe and interpret children’s activities and behavior. The assessments used should help teachers focus on children’s natural developmental progressions and variations, and should be used to help teachers better support children’s learning.

Accepting anything for our young learners other than an engaging and developmentally appropriate curriculum and teacher-driven assessments is a disservice to them, their parents and their teachers.

So what do we need to do?

- Address questions about the appropriateness and the implementation of the Common Core standards for young learners by convening a task force of early childhood and early elementary educators to review the standards and recommend developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive guidelines for supporting young children’s optimal learning.
- Implement a moratorium on stakes attached to the Common Core assessments.
- Reject the use of standardized tests in grades K-2, as a petition now circulating in New York urges.
- Devote resources to disseminating information more broadly about best practices in assessment of young children.
- Recognize and provide the appropriate preparation and ongoing supports for the educators of our youngest children.

We often hear about the need to prepare our children for the knowledge economy and for life as accomplished adults and productive citizens. This is a noble priority, but it is no more than empty rhetoric unless we take the tangible steps we know will prepare kids—and that starts with appropriate early learning grounded in the research and theory of child development.



Students at Lafayette Elementary School in Washington, D.C.

Photo: Michael Campbell

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