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Lauren's Dilemma



My granddaughter has a problem. Lauren is four years old and her birthday is in November. She missed the cutoff date for kindergarten last year and will be an “old” kindergartner—two months shy of her sixth birthday—when she is enrolled this year.

Here's the problem. Both of Lauren's parents work and she has been attending full-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes at a day care center for the past two years. She knows her colors, numbers, and letters; can write her name; draws shapes and figures; and plays well with other children. She is not only ready for kindergarten, she has already been there! So what can she look forward to? A half-day public school kindergarten.

Her parents are concerned that Lauren will be bored and unhappy being taught what she already knows, and they are hopeful that her kindergarten teacher may be able to provide some challenging activities. But while Lauren's dilemma may not be typical of most of this year's new kindergartners, it illustrates the advantages that young children enjoy when they attend quality preschool programs before kindergarten—and are ready for full-day activity.

In this issue, we address what may be the most critical needs for public education in the 21st century: universal preschool followed by rigorous, full-day kindergarten. W. Steven Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research foresees a day when four-year-olds are as common a sight in public schools as five-year-olds are today. Dick Clifford and his associates at the National Center for Early Development and Learning report on a study of 240 state-funded pre-kindergarten programs. Polly Greenberg, a specialist in early childhood education for almost a half-century, has some practical suggestions for principals in responding to the nature and needs of young children.

These and other authors put forward the need to begin children's education a year or more before kindergarten, a position that NAESP has made one of its major advocacy objectives this year. In a few weeks, all members will receive free copies of *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. You will find it to be an invaluable guide to creating and supporting quality programs. It presents six standards, with the leadership qualities and strategies needed to meet them, and examples of schools practicing them.

In his foreword, NAESP Executive Director Vincent Ferrandino points out that “high-quality early childhood education is not just an ideal; it's an essential investment.” Kids have to hit the ground running when they enter kindergarten—and keep running all the way through high school—if they are to reap the full harvest of what public education has to offer. Those who aren't ready for the race will probably never catch up.

Commenting on NAESP's efforts, Ed Zigler, director of Yale's Center in Child Development and Social Policy—and a founder of Head Start—notes: “For the bulk of my 50 years in the field, there has been a divide between K–12 education and children's programs from birth to school entry. This guide makes clear that if educators are to be successful...they must begin their work prior to school entry during the preschool period.”

As a child who has enjoyed the benefits of quality preschool, my granddaughter is very ready for kindergarten. But is a half-day kindergarten ready for her?