

# Balancing Preschool, Academic Rigor

Principals know that very young children learn differently from their elementary school counterparts. They also know there is ample research showing that a year in preschool can effectively prepare students for school success. However, when conversations with teachers or parents turn to preschool academics, these discussions can quickly become contentious.



Nonetheless, policymakers' recent reforms have placed a premium on principals and their school personnel preparing students for a range of academic achievement tests. As such, these conversations over academic rigor in preschool must occur.

To do this effectively, principals need to know both the developmentally appropriate best practices for preschoolers and the knowledge and skills needed for their academic success. Knowing what such teaching looks like and how they can support their preschool teachers in implementing it can ensure that preschoolers are ready to achieve in the later grades.

## A Deeper Examination

On the surface, the terms “academically rigorous” and “developmentally appropriate” seem to be diametrically opposed. However, these two terms complement each other. Barbara

Blackburn notes in her book, *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word*, that an academically rigorous learning environment is one in which each child is expected to learn at high levels through the support of his or her teachers so that the child can attain those high levels of achievement. More important, each child is given the opportunity to achieve at high levels and does so.

In *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp state that developmentally appropriate practices use developmental theory to promote instruction that focuses on the growth and development of individual children across all of their developmental domains in a manner that addresses the social and cultural contexts in which they live. Combined, academically rigorous, developmentally appro-

priate learning environments are those in which teachers understand how to teach the knowledge and skills they expect all of their students to attain and demonstrate on a regular basis. This is accomplished through instruction that reflects an understanding of child development and their students' individual and socio-cultural needs.

## How Principals Can Help

What follows are three ways school leaders can achieve these goals.

**Set appropriate expectations for what you want to see in preschool classrooms.** Young children grow and develop differently from their older schoolmates. They have limited attention spans and are just beginning to develop the skills of an intentional learner. As such, principals should expect to walk into preschool classrooms that are active and multimodal sites of learning designed to address all developmental domains (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical).

These classrooms demonstrate that teachers recognize their important role in motivating students to learn, as well as the need for them to experience new knowledge and skills in multiple ways through a range of instructional formats. The National Research Council, in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, has shown that when children fail to grasp a particular lesson or topic of study, it is more than likely due to the task or a lack of background knowledge rather than the concept itself. To foster such learning, principals should encourage teachers to engage with their students in such

### HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

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activities as whole-group, small-group, and center-based instruction; indoor and outdoor play; loud and quiet learning activities; and, depending on the length of the school day, eating snacks and possibly taking a rest.

### Expect preschool teachers to teach students academic content.

Each state across the nation has a set of early learning standards, and preschool teachers should be teaching students this set of knowledge and skills so that they will be ready to succeed in elementary school. Again, these early learning standards need to be taught in multiple ways, through a range of experiences, and at numerous times across the school day, week, and year.

The focus should be on providing firsthand experiences that will help children develop the background knowledge needed to engage in more complex thinking activities. Such lessons should also incorporate a range of content areas that require children to engage in multiple academic skills at once.


Research by the National Institute for Literacy has shown that growth

in one academic or developmental domain can positively affect growth in another domain. Furthermore, principals need to recognize that learning new content is not a seamless process. Children will be inconsistent in demonstrating their newfound skills and will need multiple opportunities to internalize new information into their thinking.

**Talk with preschool teachers about instructional expectations.** Preschool classrooms need to be a complex hub of activity where teachers and children are engaged in a range of learning activities, and focused on multiple content areas that touch on children's developmental, individual, and socio-cultural knowledge. Thus, principals and teachers must discuss what should be occurring with their students in the classroom on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis.

These conversations should cover: topics, skills, and knowledge with which they would like their preschoolers to enter kindergarten; how best to teach their students so that they learn that content as well as develop the disposition of a lifelong learner; strate-

gies for monitoring such learning; and methods for collaborating with their students' families to ensure they are all working toward the same goals.

Academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practices can coexist in public, preschool classrooms. Principals can support their preschool teachers in achieving this goal by encouraging instructional practices that foster for learners meaningful choices, opportunities to experiment with new ideas in a safe and comfortable setting, and time to revisit the new knowledge and skills. Doing so will help preschool teachers offer their students learning experiences that become a part of who they are as learners, while at the same time provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in elementary school. 

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