A Call for a Kinder Kindergarten

Children learn best through authentic, integrated learning experiences, many of which come through play during early childhood. This does not mean that children play all day without the teacher facilitating learning. It does mean, however, that children get to make choices, follow through with their decisions, and take on various roles and tasks in the play area based on the teacher’s thoughtful planning. I’m suggesting that while flashcards and rote learning may result in high test scores, such rote and isolated practices do not lead to long-term understanding and retention.

Too-High Expectations
The pressure is on to raise scores in the core content areas and to have all children perform well on college- and career-ready assessments. To this end, many call for full-day kindergarten so children will be ready for first grade and read on a higher level. The pressure on the upper-grade teachers and staff results in pressure on students and teachers of the prior grades to raise the bar. As a result, children who are not academically at the appointed level are considered behind when they enter first grade. Intervention and referral services start earlier each year.

For at least the past five years, we have been pushing kindergarten standards higher and higher. This approach has not resulted in more academically successful first graders. Instead, what we are seeing is more children in the lower grades with behavior problems and more children referred for either basic skills or for child-study consideration.

If only we could rely on what research has told us about early childhood: Children develop at differing paces and along different paths. While there are certainly developmental markers, there is not one path or one pace that is correct for all children.

We do not have the expectation of uniform progression in other areas of life, just in school. None of us as adults is expected to be identical in our achievements or strengths, and each of us has areas of weakness or areas that we never developed. We learn how to use our strengths and compensate in other areas.

Developmentally Appropriate Education
The impact of full-day kindergarten can be momentous if children can have the time to be children. A longer day might include play, recess, rest time, and time to expand and enrich experiences without feeling rushed.

For example, scaffolded writing is a powerful tool in early childhood. Children write on their own level—their writing begins with pictures to capture the story and scribbles to represent the letters and words—and then are prompted to the next level by a skilled teacher. Teachers model conventional writing, both to capture the child’s thoughts over time and to display standard writing for the child.

Praising the areas that are standard and nudging the areas that are not is a delicate balance that leads to tremendous growth. When children write about something they value, their writing is less stilted than writing only to prompts. Full-day kindergarten would allow for more time for authentic writing, more time to share the writing with each other, and a chance to build common experiences about which to write.

Not convinced? Think about how you learned to ride a bike. Most likely you did not start on a full-size bicycle. You probably started out on a tricycle and worked your way up to training wheels—similar to scaffolded learning. An attentive adult raised the training wheels a little and guided your practice. Eventually the training wheels came off and the adult held on and ran beside you, letting go when you were ready and standing by in case you needed help. This was scaffolded riding.
Scaffolded writing is based on the same principle. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky would call it the “zone of proximal development.” Somehow our parents and grandparents knew it was just good practice not to put us on the two-wheeler before we were ready and then go back and provide remedial bike riding and assessment until we could succeed. We never felt like a failure. Instead, we felt like we were making progress and were proud of our accomplishments toward the goal. This, in a nutshell, is developmentally appropriate early childhood learning.

Calling for more developmentally appropriate education and more time to spend with children to achieve this is not a call for lowering standards. It is a plea to have appropriate standards. Children who come to kindergarten reading should continue to read and be nurtured in this area. Children who come to kindergarten not yet knowing their letters and sounds should be instructed in such. Early childhood is about meeting your learners where they are, accepting who they are, and providing opportunities and appropriate instruction for them to grow. This is done while appreciating the fact that they are new to formal schooling, may be new to being away from home, are new to being part of a large group, and are, after all, children.

When we allow children to be children and teachers of young children to do what they know is best practice, only then will we see the long-term benefits of instruction. I believe in the long haul that our achievement will increase and that our behavior problems will decrease. I also believe that we will make better decisions about identifying children who may have a true learning disability and need special education.

I guess you would say that I believe in a kinder kindergarten. I do. It just makes sense.

Wendy Crawford is principal of the Grenloch Terrace Early Childhood Center in Washington Township, New Jersey.

About the Panel
The National Panel of New Principals is the only initiative of its kind that is dedicated to principals in the first or second year of their principalship. By participating, new principals will contribute to a dynamic knowledge base about what it’s really like to be a new principal today. And they’ll gain insights into how their experience as a new principal compares to theirs peers throughout the nation.

Here’s How It Works
New principals can enroll directly online at newprincipal.org and can remain on the panel until the end of the second year of their principalship. Six times during the school year, participants are invited via email to answer a few brief online questions. The total time commitment per survey is less than 10 minutes.

What Participants Get
Each time a principal participates, he or she receives a $10 gift certificate to shop in the National Principal Resource Center or a special gift from one of our sponsors. Plus, we’ll send our panelists the Rise & Shine brief, summarizing their peers’ best thinking on the topic of each survey.

Who Qualifies
- Participants must be first- or second-year principals.
- NAESP members and non-members are welcome.

How New Principals Join the Panel
Go to newprincipal.org and fill out the brief enrollment form. It’s that easy! Enrollments are accepted year-round. Administrators are encouraged to share this opportunity with new principals to ensure that your district and state are well represented.

To enroll, visit newprincipal.org

Questions? Email us at npnp@naesp.org.