

What educators know about teaching young children — but policymakers ignore ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A new survey of early childhood educators found that they are highly concerned about how corporate school reform mandates are hurting children, especially those from low-income families, and how their own voices have been ignored about what young kids really need to learn.

The survey was conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Public Policy Forum and the results presented at its recent policy forum. Here's a piece on the survey and the problems it exposes, written by Nancy Carlsson-Paige, an early childhood development expert who has been at the forefront of the debate on how best to educate — and not educate — the youngest students.

Carlsson-Paige is a professor emerita of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Ma., where she taught teachers for more than 30 years and was a founder of the university's Center for Peaceable Schools. She is also a founding member of a nonprofit called Defending the Early Years, which commissions research about early childhood education and advocates for sane policies for young children.

She is also the author of "Taking Back Childhood." The mother of two artist sons, Matt and Kyle Damon, she is also the recipient of numerous awards, including the Legacy Award from the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps for work over several decades on behalf of children and families.

A recent survey of teachers by Defending the Early Years found similar issues, with responses from several states revealing the disconnect between reform policies and what they know to be healthy for children. The responses to that survey include:

What's the research? How can the same teaching benchmarks for every child be appropriate when you have children in the same kindergarten classroom who are 12 months apart, who have such different needs, who vary so enormously in the experiences they've had?

There may be uncertainty about what early childhood education will look like under the leadership of new Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, but early education professionals have great clarity about what matters most when it comes to the education of young children.

A recent survey of more than 1,000 of the nation's educators of young children found that 80 percent of the respondents said that early childhood educators had not been included in the decision-making processes and policies that affect their work. This explains why in recent years policies affecting early childhood education have become disconnected from what is known about young children and how they learn.

Results of the survey were just presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Public Policy Forum, and should be used to guide policies and programs in early childhood education from this point forward.

For years now, starting with former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind law and continuing with former President Obama's Race to the Top program, policy makers have pushed an agenda that disregarded the knowledge base of the field of early childhood education. Teachers and other professionals, concerned about poorly designed standards and an over focus on academic skills, have been shouting into deaf ears for years.

Educators know that young children learn through active, direct experiences and play and not from teacher-directed, drill-based instruction. They know that children learn skills and concepts on very different paths and timetables in the early years; one size does not fit all with young kids. The standards promoted by corporate education reform policies pushed requirements onto young kids that they were not developmentally ready to meet. This resulted in increased confusion and stress among young children, symptoms of anxiety and fears about going to school.

As the new survey shows, most early childhood educators want to see a diminished emphasis on academic rigor in kindergarten and first grade, and more respect for the developmental range of knowledge and skills in young children. They want less emphasis on testing in

grades K-2 and an elimination of high-stakes testing in Grade 3. They want to see less data collection, fewer mounds of paperwork and more time to focus on the needs of children.

Sixty percent of the respondents in the survey said they are being held accountable for achieving outcomes that are influenced by things that are beyond their control. These educators understand that the achievement gap begins at birth. Teachers see children come to their programs already disadvantaged by poor nutrition and healthcare, and the stress from poverty. Almost one quarter of our nation's children live in poverty, a shameful fact. And teachers know they can't "fix" problems that originate in the wider society and have to be addressed there.

As the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act goes into effect (ESSA is the successor law to the federal No Child Left Behind) and decisions are made about early education by states and communities, policymakers must start by listening to educators. Research shows that early childhood education enhances the life prospects of children and has a high benefit-cost ratio for society's investment. But it has to be done right. Early childhood professionals know how to do it and they should lead the way.

-reprinted from The Washington Post

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