

Boston schools shift to more play-based, kid-led curriculum in early grades ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In Kelly Stevens' kindergarten classroom, each day begins with circle time for what sounds like a menu of lesson options.

"Miss Stevens is calling friends to read at the green table," Stevens says. "We're constructing boats. We're also constructing out of clay."

Students Marco Carias Castellanos and Holden Free chose a writing activity on this day. But there's no worksheet in front of them. Instead, they're standing in front of wolf statues they made out of blocks. Their assignment is to write labels for each of its parts.

"I'm making an ear!" says Marco.

"Ear! E! E! E!" adds Holden.

These play-based learning activities at the Curtis Guild Elementary School in East Boston are an example of a new type of curriculum that Boston Public Schools has been rolling out over the last five years. For Stevens, the switch was a tough sell at first.

"I used to be very regimented and structured," she said. "I didn't like the blocks. Because it was messy and it was loud."

But Stevens explained that now — rather than telling all of her students where to go and what activities to do as one big group — she creates learning stations with small group activities that pull kids into learning through themes.

The school district is trying to push learning tactics that they know work well in preschool up into kindergarten, first and second grades.

"What we've done in Boston is really think about how do you rewrite a curriculum that will support what we know about young children," said Jason Sachs, BPS's director of early childhood education. "But also get them to a place they can be ready in third grade for the MCAS test and other learning in general."

These small group and station-based lessons also allow kids to learn at their own pace. That's important, because while Boston's goal is to make preschool available to everyone, the city still has a wait list of about 1,000 4-year-olds this year.

"Who do you have to teach to? You have to teach to the children that didn't have the [preschool] experience," said Sachs.

The challenge Sachs describes is what many researchers believe might be behind what's known as the fade out effect. While a lot of research does back up the social and emotional benefits of going to a high quality preschool, there's also a lot of data suggesting that, when it comes to standardized test performance, kids who went to preschool are performing about the same as those who didn't by the time they hit third grade.

"And that, of course, gets legislators or other funders concerned when you don't see children maintaining gains that they might have made in preschool," said Lori Connors-Tadros, a senior project director at the National Institute for Early Education Research.

While just focusing on academic outcomes when measuring the impact of preschool doesn't paint the whole picture, Connors-Tadros said it's still a significant factor, especially when a return on investment can be important politically.

Which is why more districts across the country are also beginning to shift their education investment focus beyond just that preschool year.

"Boston, in particular, is leading the way because of their investment in high-quality preschool and their attention to what needs to happen in kindergarten through third grade to sustain those effects," Connors-Tadros said.

So are these changes in Boston actually making a difference? We don't know yet, but a group of researchers from the University of Michigan, Harvard and MDRC are looking into that now with a new study following a class of kindergartners for the next three years.

But until that wraps up, Stevens says, she's already seeing an impact.

"I see significant changes in their oral language development at the kindergarten level," said Stevens.

Undergoing what felt like a seismic shift in how she teaches, she said, was totally worth it.

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