

The kindergarten lessons we never learned ^[1]

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Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment


Format: Report

Publication Date: 15 Sep 2022

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 Kindergarten-Story.pdf ^[4]	6.33 MB

Introduction

Today, free public kindergarten for five-year-old children is available in every state and community throughout the United States, and public education is routinely referred to as K-12. But kindergarten did not start out this way. Kindergartens in the United States once served children as young as three and four years old. In fact, today's movement for public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) is a consequence of the gradual exclusion of almost all three- and four-year-olds from public kindergarten.

A century ago, the U.S. kindergarten landscape looked similar to preschool today. Kindergarten had limited public funding and was predominantly composed of private programs paid for by families and charitable donations. It took more than a hundred years to establish kindergarten as a public good.

Today, every five-year-old can go to a half-day of kindergarten for free in every community in the country.

In the mid-1800s, when it was new, kindergarten was a radical educational reform. Kindergarten was about children learning through play; it was about story time, building with blocks, and children drawing, singing, and playing together. Today, kindergarten is associated with homework, worksheets, and learning to read. Yet, in contrast to first- through twelfth-grade students, the children in kindergarten remain second-class citizens in the public education system. In most states, attendance is not mandatory and the kindergarten school day is shorter (Education Commission of the States, 2020b, 2020c). To make matters worse, kindergarten teachers are frequently paid less per hour than educators teaching older children (Kilander et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2021).

How did kindergarten become a public good? Why were children under age five excluded from public kindergartens? And how did that impact the evolution of services for younger children? How can the kindergarten story inform the establishment of free early care and education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers today?

Kindergarten: A Cautionary Tale for Public Pre-K

The kindergarten story demonstrates that it is possible to transform a private system into a public good, but it also offers a warning. St. Louis, Missouri, was the first city to include kindergarten in a public school, which inspired advocates across the country. However, conflicts arose in St. Louis over funding, decision-making authority, and the age children were eligible for kindergarten, foreshadowing problems other communities would face. These issues continue to challenge today's early childhood education system.

While kindergarten secured educational opportunities for five-year-olds, in most cases the needs of three- and four-year-olds, their families, and their teachers were sacrificed in the process. We're still dealing with the consequences.

In the early days of kindergarten, three- and four- year-olds attended kindergarten, and the term "early childhood" referred to three-, four-, and five- year-olds. Today, most people assume early childhood refers to children younger than five. Younger children's needs for care and education, although acknowledged, were (and still are) treated as the private responsibility of most families. While services for children eligible for public kindergarten gradually increased, "day nurseries" serving children of working mothers, private kindergartens, and "nursery schools" serving younger children struggled to survive because they remained primarily privately operated programs that were funded by family fees. Most importantly, the incorporation of kindergarten into the public schools has left the equally necessary early care and education for younger children as an unfulfilled need.

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