

How ed policy is hurting early childhood education ^[1]

Author: Strauss, Valerie

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EXCERPTS:

A coalition of national leaders in the field of early childhood education are becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of recent federal education policy reforms on early childhood education and care around the country. The coalition, called Defending the Early Years, believes that children develop best — socially, emotionally and cognitively — when they have educational experiences that promote creativity, thinking and problem solving skills, and engage in meaningful activities geared to their developmental levels and needs.

The educational leaders met recently to discuss growing concerns that federal Race to the Top policy mandates on early childhood education are undermining education practice that research tells us is in the best interest of young children's optimal development and learning. Their concerns fell into three major categories.

1. Current standards are not based on knowledge of child development — both how children learn and what they learn.

The standards require that children learn specific facts and skills — such as naming the letters — at specified ages. This has led to more teacher-directed “lessons,” less play-based activity and curriculum, and more rote teaching and learning as children try to learn what is required.

Yet decades of research and theory tell us that young children learn best through active learning experiences within a meaningful context. Children develop at individual rates, learn in unique ways, and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. It is not possible to teach skills in isolation or to mandate what any young child will understand at any particular time.

2. Current policies support an over-emphasis on testing and assessment at the expense of all other aspects of early childhood education.

Already strapped for time and money, schools turn valuable attention and resources toward preparing teachers to administer and score tests and assessments rather than meet the needs of the whole child. As teachers strive to raise test scores, they increasingly depend on scripted curricula designed to teach what is on the tests. We know, however, that children learn best when skilled and responsive teachers observe them closely and provide curriculum tailored to meet each child's needs. Standardized tests of any type do not have a place in early childhood education, and should not be used for making decisions about young children or their programs. Individualized assessments of each child's abilities, interests and needs provide teachers with the information they require to individualize teaching and learning.

3. Cumulatively, current policies are promoting a de-professionalization of teachers.

The growing focus on standards and testing disregards the strong knowledge base early childhood teachers have. It undermines teachers' ability to teach using their professional expertise, to provide the optimal, individualized learning opportunities they know how to offer. Instead, teachers are often required to follow prescribed curricula taught in lock step to all children. At the same time, more teachers without strong backgrounds in early childhood education are being hired, increasing the dependence of teachers on standardized tests and scripted curricula.

As one of their first initiatives, Defending the Early Years (DEY) is conducting a national survey of early childhood professionals — teachers, child care workers, program and school directors — on the ways their work is currently affected by federal, state, and local policies, such as standards for learning and mandated tests. Responses are anonymous. The data are being collected and tabulated by an independent opinion research firm. The results of this research will be used to inform the efforts of the DEY group to advocate for more child-centered, humane, and effective policies in the education and care of young children.

Early respondents to the survey have shared stories highlighting DEY's concerns:

“I just decided yesterday that what I am doing has little to do with my intent when I became a teacher. I will work one more year and then retire. Not because I want to, but because I hate the teacher I have had to become.”

“It concerns me that policies are being written by people who are not knowledgeable about young children and how they develop. While their intentions may be good, they are setting us up for an epic failure that we have not seen before. Our public education system is at risk and unfortunately, the ‘fixes’ are steering us toward disaster at a rapid rate. It is sad and I am currently exploring my options to leave the profession.”

“I feel disrespected as a professional, my students feel the pressure and the parents are confused. I see kids with eyes glazed who are

simply overwhelmed by being constantly asked to perform tasks for which they are not yet ready to do. I finally had to leave my classroom and retire early. Now I volunteer in my grandson's first grade classroom and cringe every time I see what the teacher has to do. She is testing every time I enter the room. I have not seen her sit with a small group of children and actually support them."

"Rhyming, reading in kindergarten, recognizing numbers to 30, counting by 2's, 5's and 10's. SOME children can do these things. The problem is they want ALL children to reach the standards and children do not come 'standard'."

"Very simply – much of the joy has been taken away from education for both children and the adults providing it."

Early childhood is a critically important stage when the foundations for later learning are established. DEY is committed to honoring the value of childhood and to protecting children from educational practices that are detrimental to their well-being and that prevent them from reaching their full potential. To help in this endeavor, please participate in DEY's current survey at deyproject.org.

Results from the survey will be released in mid-September.

- reprinted from *Washington Post*

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