

My view: Obama, Romney need to know one thing about early childhood education – start over ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Here's what I would say to the presidential candidates (in case they ask me) about what we need to do to give the best education possible to our nation's youngest members.

I would start talking in a pretty loud voice to make sure they can hear: You are going in the wrong direction with policy-making for early childhood education! Please back up and start over.

And this time, put early childhood educators at the head of the policy-making table.

Most classrooms for young kids today are driven by a myriad of developmentally inappropriate standards-based tests and checklists. Policy mandates are causing a pushdown of academic skills to 3, 4 and 5 year olds that used to be associated with first-graders through third-graders. Young kids are expected to learn specific facts and skills at specified ages, such as naming the letters and counting by 2's, 5's and 10's.

This has led to more teacher-directed "lessons" and a lot more rote learning by kids who try to learn what's required but don't really understand.

Many early childhood teachers do not like these policies and how they are affecting their classrooms. They don't like them because the policies are not based on what teachers know about how young children learn - the decades of theory and research that form the knowledge base of early childhood education. Young children learn through activity, through direct play and hands-on experiences that promote creativity and thinking skills. They need to see facts within meaningful contexts, to invent their own ideas and problems to explore and solve.

If you go into a really great kindergarten classroom, you'll see blocks, easels, a science table, dramatic play, lots of books, building and art materials of all kinds and kids interacting with enthusiasm and visible joy. You've probably seen classrooms like this. Your own children probably went to them.

But I wonder if you have seen some of the kindergarten and pre-K classrooms like those I have visited this year - devoid of materials, eerily silent, where children sit as teachers drill them on facts from a prescribed curriculum. Classrooms where teachers spend long hours testing individual children at a computer while the rest of the class sit copying from the board - no talking.

Giving tests and assessments has become much too big a focus in early education. Teachers of children in pre-K, kindergarten and first and second grades are spending far too many hours administering and scoring tests instead of meeting the needs of the whole child. As teachers strive to get the scores up, they depend more and more on scripted curricula designed to teach what is on the tests.

Standardized tests of any type don't have a place in early childhood. Kids develop at individual rates, learn in unique ways and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. So it's not possible to mandate what any young child will understand at any particular time. It's much better to have well-prepared teachers who can assess a child's individual abilities, needs and interests and then design teaching and learning for each child from there.

Sadly, the worst of the restrictive, standardized, drill-based education is happening in our poorest communities. More often the teachers in these underfunded schools have less training. They are more dependent on the standardized tests and scripted curricula and more willing to impose them. These teachers haven't learned what they could do instead of the drills and tests, and they haven't learned how harmful these approaches are for kids.

I wish you could see the faces of kids in the low-income communities I visited this year. They are scared, sad and alienated. I see on them an expression that says, "School is not fun, and it is not for me. I want out of here."

Early childhood teachers whose professionalism is now hamstrung by current policies are leaving the field in great numbers. They can't teach using their professional expertise and many detest having to follow a prescribed curriculum with which they don't agree.

As one teacher said recently to Defending the Early Years (DEY), "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 they are not yet ready to do. I finally had to leave my classroom and retire early."

At the same time, teachers with less training are entering the field and are found in much greater numbers in low-income areas. But we need more highly qualified teachers of young kids, not fewer. We need to finance teachers' education and their professional development so we have the most qualified teachers working with our youngest learners, especially in poor communities.

Many people say we need to put more money into early childhood education. And we do. We need quality, affordable education for all of our nation's children. We are the richest country in the world! Surely you can figure out how to come up with the funds to provide great early education for all our nation's kids. Where there's a will there's a way.

But it has to be education built on the knowledge base of the early childhood field. It has to grow from children's ability to be learners - intellectuals and artists - and not on your top-down expectations.

Let's reverse direction with early childhood education policy and this time, let's get it right. Let's start with children and build from there - and please - start by putting early childhood educators at the helm.

-reprinted from CNN

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