

Collaborating
Organizations:
AFT and
CCW/AFTEF,
CCSSO, ECS,
NAESP, NEA,
and NAEYC

Why We Care about the **K** in K-12

The kindergarten year is an important time of transition for young children. It represents the first year of formal schooling for 98 percent of the children in the United States, and it marks the bridge between early childhood education and the primary grades of school.

Although the public perceives kindergarten as a fully integrated part of the K-12 education system, this often is not the reality. Kindergarten shares components of the K-12 education system in terms of infrastructure—for example, teacher licensing, including teacher certification requirements and compensation. Yet kindergarten also shares policies and practices with child care and other early learning programs—for example, kindergarten policies and practices vary widely by state in whether kindergarten is compulsory or voluntary for all children, in the mechanisms by which kindergarten is funded, and in the varying lengths of the program day.

Despite the opportunities and advantages in better aligning the K-12 and early care and education systems, these systems have sometimes been reluctant to work as partners to realize shared purposes that would benefit young children. Child development experts worry about the risks of extending testing and highly structured upper level academic learning into programs for younger children. Similarly, K-12 educators—particularly kindergarten teachers—are concerned that too many children, especially those from families with low incomes, enter first grade unfairly disadvantaged because their language, cognitive, emotional, and social skills are not yet adequately developed to ensure school success.

Because of the shared objective of success for the children served in their systems, 0-5 and K-12 communities would mutually benefit from increased



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communication about their expectations, knowledge, expertise, and data. Fortunately, a growing body of research shows that investments made in early childhood education, including a highly qualified and appropriately compensated workforce, will help children enter formal schooling more eager to learn and ready to succeed (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 1999; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001; Schweinhart et al. in press). In part because of the increased value being placed on high-quality early education, kindergarten is now in a unique position to serve as a bridge linking the needs and interests of the early care and education community with those of the K–12 education community.

In capitalizing on this opportunity to support their mutual interests in ensuring that young children are ready for school and schools are ready for children, early childhood specialists from K–12 organizations and their collaborating partners at NAEYC will take new steps to promote early childhood education. Because kindergarten is a point of transition and straddles both early care and education and the K–12 education system, our collaborating group begins its work by affirming the following set of research-based principles for identifying the components of excellent kindergarten programs.

Research-based principles

At their best, kindergarten programs

- partner with community early childhood programs to create smooth and effective transitions for kindergarten children and their families
- prepare to support the learning of all children, whatever their earlier experiences, environments, cultures, languages, abilities, or disabilities
- are staffed by degreed, certified educators who have high-quality professional preparation and relevant training or experience in the developmental and educational needs of young children
- are guided by early learning standards that emphasize the concepts and skills appropriate to and important for the kindergarten year
- maintain class sizes sufficient to facilitate high-quality teaching
- implement a coherent, research-based curriculum delivered through evidence-based teaching practices that incorporate adult-guided and child-initiated experiences, play, physical activity, and social interaction
- foster the nurturing relationships and interactions between children and teachers that build the foundations for children's later learning
- systematically assess children's strengths, needs, and progress with multiple tools that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate; analyze results, and use those data to inform teaching
- create respectful relationships with families to support children's learning as well as work with families to help identify comprehensive services needed to promote kindergartners' positive development and learning
- promote children's enthusiasm, initiative, persistence, and engagement in learning
- respond to the unique interests, learning styles, and developmental characteristics of children in their kindergarten year

Collaborators at the national level

Leaders in K–12 organizations, along with NAEYC, are engaged in a broad range of activities that influence policy makers, promote best practices, and improve the teaching profession.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) represents 1.3 million pre-K through 12th grade teachers, paraprofessionals, school-related personnel, higher education faculty, nurses, other health care workers, and state and local government employees.



The AFT and its affiliate organization the **Center for the Child Care Workforce/American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation (CCW/AFTEF)** support universal, voluntary access to full-day kindergarten for all children. Kindergarten is a critical juncture in children's development. Preparing children with a solid educational foundation even before kindergarten can help improve their chances of success later in school. To provide a jump start, especially to poor children, many of whom may not have had the benefit of an enriching early childhood education program, the AFT has proposed Kindergarten Plus. This initiative encourages states to provide children with the opportunity for increased instructional time during the summer before kindergarten formally begins and during the summer between the end of kindergarten and first grade.

AFT believes that providing children additional learning time immediately before and after kindergarten may help ensure their increased academic achievement. A pilot program under way in New Mexico is implementing Kindergarten Plus in 11 schools. In 2004 Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) introduced a federal bill to advance states' participation. For more information, contact Dori Mornan at dmornan@aft.org and Darion Griffin at dgriffin@aft.org or Marci Young, ccw@aft.org.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head the state departments of elementary and secondary education. CCSSO's projects in early childhood and family education are founded on the council's long-standing policy statement marking the age range for early childhood as 0–8 and including the kindergarten year. Each state-based project focuses on building capacity in K–12 systems to support proven transition practices for children as they move to kindergarten from early childhood settings and on assuring alignment of early learning standards, curriculum, and instructional practice between prekindergarten, kindergarten, and grades 1–3. For more information, contact Jana Martella after visiting the online Web site <http://www.ccsso.org/earlychildhood>.

Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a national nonpartisan organization that brings together key leaders—governors, legislators, chief state school officers, higher education officials, business leaders, and others—to work side by side to improve education from the early childhood years through postsecondary education.

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ECS maintains a Web site (<http://www.ecs.org/kindergarten>) devoted to kindergarten issues. The site houses research and readings on kindergarten as well as an up-to-date database of kindergarten policies across the United States. Users can review and compare issues such as access, quality, and funding of kindergarten in the states.

In addition to the Web site, ECS works with state and local policy makers through its Early Learning Initiative to expand and enrich the national dialogue on the importance of early care and education and to develop, track, and disseminate the best information available on early care and education policy and programs. The initiative also helps to provide technical assistance to states in defining and acting on an early childhood agenda; to define how federal K–12 policy initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind, impact early learning policy; and to explore the implications and possibilities of a “preschool–3 education,” linking early childhood education with early elementary education. For further information, contact Kristie Kauerz at kkauerz@ecs.org.

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) represents more than 29,000 elementary and middle school principals.

In April 2005 NAESP will release its new publication *Standards for Leaders in Early Childhood Education*. A committee of distinguished principals is developing the work, which will conduct a rigorous examination of current research, the diverse environments in which principals operate, and the successful practices of principals across the country. The guide will include examples of practices and policies that work in schools with comprehensive preschool and kindergarten programs. For more information, contact Cheryl Riggins at criggins@naesp.org.

National Education Association (NEA) is a national association representing 2.7 million members who work at every level of education from preschool to university graduate programs. The NEA is committed to creating great public schools for every child.

The NEA believes that every child should attend kindergarten and encourages states to make kindergarten attendance mandatory for all five-year-olds. Full-day kindergarten programs with licensed, certified teachers, small class sizes, and a rich curriculum can provide optimal learning experiences in NEA’s view. The NEA works with national partners to advance policies that support positive and productive kindergarten programs. In January the organization began a two-year study funded by the Foundation for Child Development to identify provisions in teacher contracts that are linked to positive outcomes for preK–3 children. For more information, contact Shyrelle Eubanks online: www.nea.org/earlychildhood.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is dedicated to improving the well-being of all young children, with particular focus on the quality of educational and developmental services for children from birth through age eight.

NAEYC is the world’s largest organization working on behalf of young children, with more than 100,000 members and a national network of more than 350 local, state, and regional Affiliates. Its national system for early childhood program accreditation is developing revised criteria, including a strand specific to kindergarten programs. NAEYC sponsors networking opportunities through Kindergarten and Primary Grades Interest Forums and includes a Kindergarten/Primary track of sessions at its Annual Conference.

The NAEYC professional journal *Young Children* (March 2005 issue) features a cluster of articles on kindergarten and the primary grades. In 2005 NAEYC also plans to publish a book focusing on the kindergarten year—a collection from multiple authors edited by Dominic F. Gullo. For further information, contact Marilou Hyson at mhyson@naeyc.org and Adele Robinson at arobinson@naeyc.org.

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