

NEA

on

Prekindergarten

Kindergarten

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The National Education Association (NEA) is committed to providing great public schools for every child.

Our members have long been concerned about the growing number of children that enter kindergarten already behind their peers socially and academically. We know that many children cannot fully benefit from quality instruction and curriculum in the primary grades if they did not have quality early learning experiences before entering school. So, when asked to appoint a special committee to review NEA's policies, positions, and programs with regard to early childhood education, I saw this as a valuable opportunity to truly make a difference.

The Special Committee on Early Childhood included representation from NEA governance, state affiliates, local affiliates, and a broad base of NEA constituency and interest groups, many of whom were early childhood educators themselves. Based on numerous hours of dialogue and a comprehensive review of current research, the Committee report makes two seminal recommendations that were adopted as official NEA positions at the 2003 Representative Assembly:

- NEA believes that all three- and four-year old children should have access to high quality, publicly funded, universal prekindergarten programs.
- NEA believes that states should mandate full-day kindergarten attendance for every five-year-old child.

These statements coupled with robust programmatic activities implemented by NEA staff will go a long way toward improving the likelihood that children are ready to benefit from great public schools.



Reg Weaver
President

and



Michael Marks
Executive Committee Chair
Special Committee on Early Childhood



NEA Early Childhood

More than 10 years ago, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) “urged the nation to view education as an investment, not an expense, and develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategy of human investment. In the intervening years the evidence has grown even stronger that investments in early education can have long-term benefits for both children and society.” The patchwork system of prekindergarten and kindergarten as it is currently offered in the United States is out-of-date, inconsistent, and represents a tragically missed opportunity to improve children’s chances for success later in school. This conclusion is reinforced by an abundance of research conducted over a number of years. Teachers *know* that full-day, full-year kindergarten and prekindergarten would be best for students. Parents *want* full-day, full-year kindergarten and prekindergarten. The *need* is going to grow greater in coming years. Western countries such as France are already doing what the United States needs to do: offer high-quality, adequately staffed prekindergartens and kindergartens that are full-day and full-year.

Prekindergarten should be available to every child whose parents want him or her to enroll — in every school district in every state in the country. Full-day kindergarten should also be available everywhere and should be mandatory.



The National Education Association (NEA) and our nearly 2.7 million members are committed to bringing about these benefits of high quality, full-day, and full-year kindergarten and prekindergarten. We recognize this can improve student achievement and increase students' success in later grades and later in life.

At its 2003 Representative Assembly, NEA committed to work towards the following goals:

- That all three- and four-year-old children in the United States should have access to a full-day public school prekindergarten that is of the highest possible quality, universally offered, and funded with public money not taken from any other education program.
- That full-day kindergarten for all five-year-old children should be mandated in every public school in this country. These kindergartens should support the gains children made in prekindergarten, provide time for children to explore topics in depth, give teachers opportunities to individualize instruction, and offer parents opportunities to become involved in their children's classrooms.



Universal Prekindergarten

Why it's needed

There is no longer any debate about the value of prekindergarten. Children who attend good prekindergarten programs are better prepared for kindergarten, have better language and math skills, better cognitive and social skills, and better relationships with classmates. Children who attend prekindergarten are less likely to drop out of school, repeat grades, need special education, or, at an older age, get in trouble with the law. While these findings hold true for all children, those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to benefit even more from prekindergarten than do children who have access to experiences and resources outside of prekindergarten that ready them for school. Simply and undeniably: children who attend prekindergarten have greater success in later grades, in school generally, and at having a better life.

Gaps in current programs

In spite of the overwhelmingly obvious benefits of prekindergarten, especially for children from low-income families, a relatively small portion of eligible children is being served. Even in the 42 states (including the District of Columbia) that have some type of publicly funded, free prekindergarten, the programs are a patchwork of offerings, some supplementing Head Start, some targeting children from low-income families, some limiting a child's prekindergarten eligibility to one year, and some offering part-day or part-year programs.



Full-day prekindergarten

Full-day prekindergarten does not refer to a set number of hours but it does mean that prekindergarten should be linked to the regular school day.



Class size

Class size and low staff-child ratios have been found to contribute to the quality of pre-kindergarten programs by improving the frequency and quality of teacher-child interactions. Class sizes should be limited to no more than 20 children, for both three- and four-year olds with at least one teacher present for every 10 children attending.¹

Involving parents

Because prekindergarten is usually a child's first organized school experience, parental involvement — important at all grade levels — is especially critical for a child's success in prekindergarten.

Licensing and qualifications for teachers

Teachers, support professionals, and administrators working at the prekindergarten level should be considered qualified if they hold the license or certification that the state requires for their employment. These educators also should have access to high-quality, continuous, professional development that's required to gain and improve knowledge and skills and that is provided at school district expense.

Teacher Assistants

Because of their age, prekindergarten children need help performing various life skills and pose certain health and safety concerns that are not as critical with older children. Each prekindergarten teacher should have the assistance of a full-time teacher assistant.

Curriculum

In prekindergarten, all areas of a child's development should be addressed: fostering thinking, problem solving, developing social and physical skills, instilling basic academic skills.

¹ Barnett, S., et al. 2003. *The State of Preschool: 2003 State Preschool Yearbook*. Pg. 31

Assessment

Just as the curriculum in prekindergarten should address all areas of a child's development, so should assessment of the child's progress: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Multiple sources of information should be used; and children should be given opportunities to demonstrate their skills in different ways, allowing for variability in learning pace and for different cultural backgrounds. Obviously, then, large-scale standardized testing is inappropriate. The purpose of assessment should be to improve the quality of instruction by providing information to teachers, identifying children with special needs, and developing baseline data.

More earmarks of a successful prekindergarten program

A successful program should address children's health, nutrition, and family needs as part of a comprehensive service network. It also includes a well-designed transition plan that supports children (and their families) as they enter school and then move from grade to grade.





Mandatory Kindergarten

Why it's needed

The benefits of kindergarten are even more established than those of prekindergarten. Kindergarten is not simply preparatory, but is both the beginning and the bedrock of a child's education.



Gaps in current programs

A child's access to the best possible kindergarten experience depends, unfortunately, on where the child lives. In only 14 states are school districts required to offer full-day kindergarten. Twenty-six states require their districts to offer half-day kindergarten. In four states, districts must offer both full and half-day programs; in two states, districts can offer either full-day or half-day kindergarten. Ten states do not require kindergarten attendance at all, half day *or* full. There is a similar patchiness regarding state-by-state entrance ages and education offerings.

Full-day attendance

Full day in this sense does not designate a specific number of hours but means that kindergarten should be keyed to the regular school day. There's ample evidence that children derive greater benefits from attending full-day as opposed to half-day kindergarten. Academic performance improves in literacy, math, and general learning skills. Social skills also improve more in full-day kindergarten. Teachers in full-day kindergarten have more time to get to know the children and meet their needs. According to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL), "Students participating in full-day kindergarten consistently progress further academically during the kindergarten year, as assessed by achievement tests, than students in either half-day or alternate-day programs." The benefits for dis-

advantaged children can be especially dramatic. Again according to the NREL, “In general, lower-income children have fewer books, early learning experiences, and other resources that support emergent literacy than do upper-income children. For these less-prepared students, many teachers argue, half-day kindergarten simply does not provide enough time to meet kindergarten outcomes and prepare for first grade.”

Mandatory kindergarten

According to former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, “No matter how many risk factors they face, after a year of kindergarten, children’s reading and math scores rise dramatically. They’re better at basic skills like recognizing letters, shapes, and numbers...” Riley calls kindergarten a “no-brainer,” and NEA will work to make sure that universal, mandatory kindergarten becomes a reality.

Successful kindergarten programs echo those of successful prekindergarten programs

Successful program’s address children’s health, nutrition, and family needs as part of a comprehensive service network; and they include a well-designed transition plan that supports children (and their families) as they enter school and then move from grade to grade.

Class size

For other grades, NEA has supported an optimum class size of 15 students for regular programs and smaller class sizes for programs that include students with exceptional needs. As with prekindergarten, smaller classes generate the greater gains for younger children.

Involving parents

Because kindergarten is the bridge to the more structured school experience, training programs should be made available to help parents and guardians take an active role in the education of their kindergarten children. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to visit their children’s schools and maintain contact with teachers and other school personnel.

Licensing and qualifications for teachers

Kindergarten teachers, support professionals, and administrators should be considered qualified if they hold the license or certification that the state requires for their employment. These educators should have access to high-quality, continuous professional development that is required to gain and improve knowledge and skills and that is provided at school district expense.



Teacher Assistants

Adult supervision is vital. Each kindergarten teacher should have the assistance of a full-time teacher assistant.

Curriculum

In kindergarten, as with prekindergarten, all areas of a child's development should be addressed: fostering thinking, problem solving, developing social and physical skills, instilling basic academic skills.

Assessment

Assessment of the child's progress should also address all areas of a child's development: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Multiple sources of information should be used; and children should be given opportunities to demonstrate their skills in different ways, allowing for variability in learning pace and for different cultural backgrounds. As with prekindergarten, large-scale standardized testing is inappropriate. The purpose of assessment should be to improve the quality of education by providing information to teachers, identifying children with special needs, and developing baseline data.

Flexibility in setting age requirements

To give children the best possible chances to benefit from kindergarten, NEA recommends that five be the uniform entrance age for kindergarten. The minimum entrance age (of five) and the maximum allowed age (of six) should not be applied rigidly, however. In joint consultation with parents and teachers, a school district should be allowed to make case-by-case exceptions to age requirements.



Funding

Kindergarten should be funded in the same manner as the rest of the public school program, but the money should come from new funding sources. This does not necessarily mean that new taxes should be imposed. It does, however, mean that the necessary financing for mandatory, full-day, public school kindergarten, including the need to recruit and equitably pay qualified teacher and support professionals, should not be obtained at the expense of other public school programs.

Public funds should not be used to pay for children to attend private kindergarten. Any portion of public money, even “new” money, going to private kindergartens, which are open to some but not all children, will reduce resources available to public school kindergartens, which are available to all children.



NEA:
Doing What's Right and Doing It Now

NEA believes that states should provide mandatory, full-day, public school kindergarten and access to universal, nonmandatory, full-day prekindergarten.

NEA will support our state affiliates to enact the appropriate laws and obtain the appropriate funding to establish these programs.

NEA will work in partnership with other education groups to advance our prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten goals.

NEA will continue to assume a vigorous and visible role with regard to prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs are good for all children but especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs are therefore the smart thing to do, the right thing to do, and need to be provided now.