

NextEd

TRANSFORMING CONNECTICUT'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Continuous Improvement Plan from The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents

The CAPSS Educational Transformation Project

Project Partners

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The Core Group

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START WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD

**A Chapter in the
Background Paper for the Report**

**NEXTED:
Transforming Connecticut's Education System**

**Developed By
Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents
(CAPSS)**



November, 2011



Transforming Public Education in Connecticut

The Challenge of Creating a Learner-Centered School System

Purpose

Connecticut's public school superintendents believe that each child should come to school well fed, adequately clothed, and without fear. Every child should be inspired and challenged by a relevant and important curriculum that tackles real world problems. Every child should be taught by highly trained, professional educators in schools equipped with the technology necessary to enhance teaching and learning. Each child should graduate as a young adult, fully prepared to study at a high level, able to compete on the global stage, and committed to being a contributing member of our society.

Yet the current educational system is not working for all Connecticut students. It is not designed to meet the expectation of universal student success. A strong public school system is essential to maintaining our democratic heritage to create a climate of justice for all our citizens and contribute to the economic stability of our state. Our state must operate its schools understanding that the success of all of us is built on the success of each of us.

Tinkering with Connecticut's system of schooling will not help the state recapture its competitive advantage. The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents calls upon all of our citizens to enter into a spirited and thoughtful dialogue about what is required of a successful school in the 21st Century, what skills will be demanded of our graduates, and what accountability standards must be in place to make this educational transformation a reality.

With this call, it is necessary to revise our own vision of schooling and the social, economic, and political systems that support it. That cannot be done unless Connecticut decision-makers challenge the status quo, setting the cornerstone for a stronger, more equitable, and more vibrant Connecticut. The conversation will not be an easy one. But let us begin.

The Genesis of this Document

This report is the product of research, soul-searching, and debate among Connecticut's public school leaders, and their philanthropic and social service partners. We are grateful to Project Partners and their representatives including the H.A. Vance Foundation, The Nellie Mae Education Foundation, The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, and Dell whose contributions clarified our thinking and strengthened our message. The Educational Transformation Group examined Connecticut's current educational practices, policies, and student results.

Connecticut's educational, political, and social structures present a maze of challenges that cannot be fixed with one single strategy. The current system of public education must evolve in order to meet the dynamic needs of our children. Poverty, ethnicity, neighborhood instability, and individual disability cause inequities that imperil our economic and social fabric as a state.

As we drafted this report, we worked to define our core values, fundamental beliefs, and shared commitments as Connecticut's educational stewards. In our conversations, we shared moments of great pride and equally great despair. We saw notable achievement and insightful decision-making as well as evidence of failure and short-sighted thinking. Throughout our study, the Educational Transformation Group heard from internationally-noted experts. Some provided an ominous glimpse of the future, others advised restructuring of our economic and political supports, still others argued for dissolving most existing educational structures. Many of those ideas earned a place in shaping this report.

We present this vision of an educational transformation to the citizens of Connecticut in the hope that it will provoke statewide conversations about the nature of schooling and what we should expect of our pre-K-16 system. Examining our system of schooling will not be easy. Yet the people of Connecticut will never undertake a more important task.

The Core Principles Supporting the Transformation of our Schools

- Our citizens deserve schools that are second to none.
- No child in Connecticut should be deprived of the opportunity to reach his/her potential due to circumstances of geography, financial inequity, quality of teachers or the school support system.
- Each child's advancement through school should be based upon the mastery of a clearly-defined and sequenced series of skills and a base of knowledge in all disciplines. Each child should have access to instructional technologies, thought-provoking academic activities, and extra-curricular programs that promote the development of a fully functioning adult capable of asking difficult questions and solving sophisticated problems.
- Each child in Connecticut should daily enter a school environment that is designed for and committed to meeting individual academic needs and interests, while also respecting individuality and ensuring personal safety.
- Each educator in Connecticut must be well-educated in a chosen field of study, highly trained in pedagogy, capable of adjusting instruction to meet the needs of every child, and subject to valid accountability standards.
- Those charged with the governance of education K-16, those elected in local communities, our state's legislators, and the executive branch must act with efficiency, harmony, and wisdom to make Connecticut's education second to none. There is no higher responsibility for our state's leaders than to provide a world-class school system.

Connecticut's citizens must challenge the status quo to bring about transformational changes in educational outcomes.

CORE BELIEFS STATEMENT

- The Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) holds to the following core beliefs.
- Every child is precious. Each child, regardless of any racial, ethnic, economic, physical, mental or cognitive condition, can and must learn to the same high standard
- Each child has sufficient ability to learn to high standards.
- There must be a strong, vibrant, and flexible public education system in order to meet the goal of every child learning to the same high standard.
- The public education system, as it is designed and functioning today, is not designed to achieve the goal of every child learning to high standards.
- Transformative change in public education cannot take place in isolation from the public.
- The family structure is vital to the growth of every child. It must be reinforced and fostered on an equitable and consistent basis.
- The public education system must integrate services to children and raise community expectations both for the education system and for the other systems that offer services to children and their families.
- In order to achieve the result of every child learning to high standards, the system of public education must be transformed.
- Effective leadership is essential for building the capacity for transformative change resulting, in every child learning to high standards.

Education Policy Direction

Policy making for education at federal and state levels are based on bureaucratic assumptions of hierarchy, centralized decision making, standardization, regulation, inspection. These characteristics are designed to limit unit and individual discretion, provide only one point or source of legitimacy, and depress creativity. The chief outcome of bureaucratic assumptions and thinking is stability, not change.

For local school administrators the model has produced ever increasing explicit formal legal and regulative constraints, less decision- making authority and flexibility, greater goal ambiguity and conflict about directions, more intensive external political influences, fewer incentive structures, and greater involvement of external authorities in the leadership of schools. Complicating the situation are the public organization constraints related to the lack of incentives for conserving resources and improving performance.

Virtually all the state and federal solutions of the “educational reform movement” have been bureaucratic: increase centralization, power and direction for the “top”; increase standardization through testing; increase regulations and mandates to limit school district and school discretion. None of this has resulted in any substantial improvement. The US is just as far behind or further behind the foreign competition as before the “reform movement” started. The agenda of expanding centralized controls, raising standards, top down change model, prescriptive policy, and incremental change has failed and will continue to fail.

Two major forces shaping organizations are the centralization of information due to technology and the decentralization of capability to the operational level. A balance of centralization and decentralization is needed to guide activity and encourage initiative and innovation. At government levels this means that activities should be directed more toward defining overall directions, providing capacity-building resources, and analyzing results using meaningful indicators. State Education Departments, for example, should be organized around “problems to be solved”, rather than regulative or narrow programmatic functions. Decentralized to the school district or school level should be responsibilities for the focus and content of the educational program, design of the instructional organization, determining staffing patterns, determination of expenditure priorities, and the development and evaluation of programs and priorities to address problems and priorities. The intent is to avoid separation of decision-making and implementation.

What is needed is the flexibility of operating units to invent, adapt and change to local conditions. If local schools are to be held accountable for outcomes they must have real authority for policymaking and implementing local decisions. Talking about holding schools accountable is useless until schools have the authority structures to be accountable.



Start With Early Childhood

Goal: Increase the quality of children's social, language, reading and numeracy development from birth to age 9.

There are many purposes of early childhood education, but the primary purpose – as viewed from the perspective of educational transformation - is supporting social emotional competence and improving the child's language, numeracy, and literacy development.

To ensure that all children in Connecticut benefit from their educational experience:

- The state should provide or reallocate sufficient funding so that all children, birth through age 8, receive appropriate early education.
- The state legislature should create a simplified, coordinated system for supporting early childhood education.
- School systems should expand and strengthen partnerships with families to emphasize language development in young children.
- The state should require all early childhood service providers to assess children's reading and language skills as part of developmental screening to identify children in need.
- The state should strengthen professional development for all early educators and caregivers so they can support children's language acquisition.
- Schools should bring challenging, engaging, and developmentally appropriate reading and mathematics curricula into early education and child care settings.

***"Experts tell us that 90% of all brain development occurs by the age of five. If we don't begin thinking about education in the early years, our children are at risk of falling behind by the time they start Kindergarten."
- Robert. L. Ehrlich***



Importance of Early Childhood experiences to academic and life outcomes:

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University summarizes the science of early childhood development as follows:

- A balanced approach to emotional, social, cognitive and language development will best prepare all children for success in school and later in the workplace and community.
- The basic principles of neuroscience indicate that early preventive intervention will be more efficient and produce more favorable outcomes than remediation later in life.
- Supportive relationships and positive learning experiences begin at home but can also be provided through a range of services and by a variety of adults. Babies' brains require stable, caring, interactive relationships with adults. Any way or any place they can be provided will benefit healthy brain development.
- Science clearly demonstrates that, in situations where toxic stress is likely, intervening as early as possible is critical to achieving the best outcomes. For children experiencing toxic stress, specialized early interventions are needed to target the cause of the stress and protect the child from its consequences.

Brain research has validated the lasting imprint early learning has on future development. Therefore, attending to the three dimensions of executive function – working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive or mental flexibility - is critical for the development of children cognitively and socially.



Dr. Nonie Lesaux, Associate Professor on Human Development and Urban Education Advancement at Harvard University, asserts that “we should direct our efforts toward improving the quality of infants’ and children’s language and reading environments across the many settings in which they are growing up, playing and studying. “ Why focus on quality? A decade into the 21st century, science has never been as clear and convincing about the long-term effects of the quality of a child’s early environment and experiences on his brain architecture (Skonkoff and Phillips, 2000). These lay the foundation for important outcomes, including children’s reading and academic achievement, and are also related to how well a child will be able to think.

Every new competency is built upon competencies that came before. (Fox, Levitt and Nelson, 2010) Similarly, science has established how dependent reading skill is upon high-quality environments and experiences.

Becoming a skilled reader-one with strong language skills, well-developed knowledge about the world, and critical thinking skills-is a process that begins at birth and continues through to adulthood.” (Lesaux et al, 2010)

Learning to read is a complex set of skills which relies on a foundation of exposure to language, a working vocabulary, and background knowledge and experiences to help make meaning from written words. Reading comprehension is a very complex process that draws mainly upon one’s oral language skills, asserts Dr. Lesaux. (“Turning the Page”, PP.1-2)

In order to understand the role of the early childhood subsystem in educational transformation, it is necessary to have an overview of the learning-to-read process.

Social Skills

Research has also indicated a large gap in social problem solving skills correlated to family income (Barnett, et al, 2004). The gap in social problem solving skills has a major impact on children’s readiness to learn.

“We aren’t born with the skills that enable us to control impulses, make plans, and stay focused. We are born with the potential to develop these capacities.”

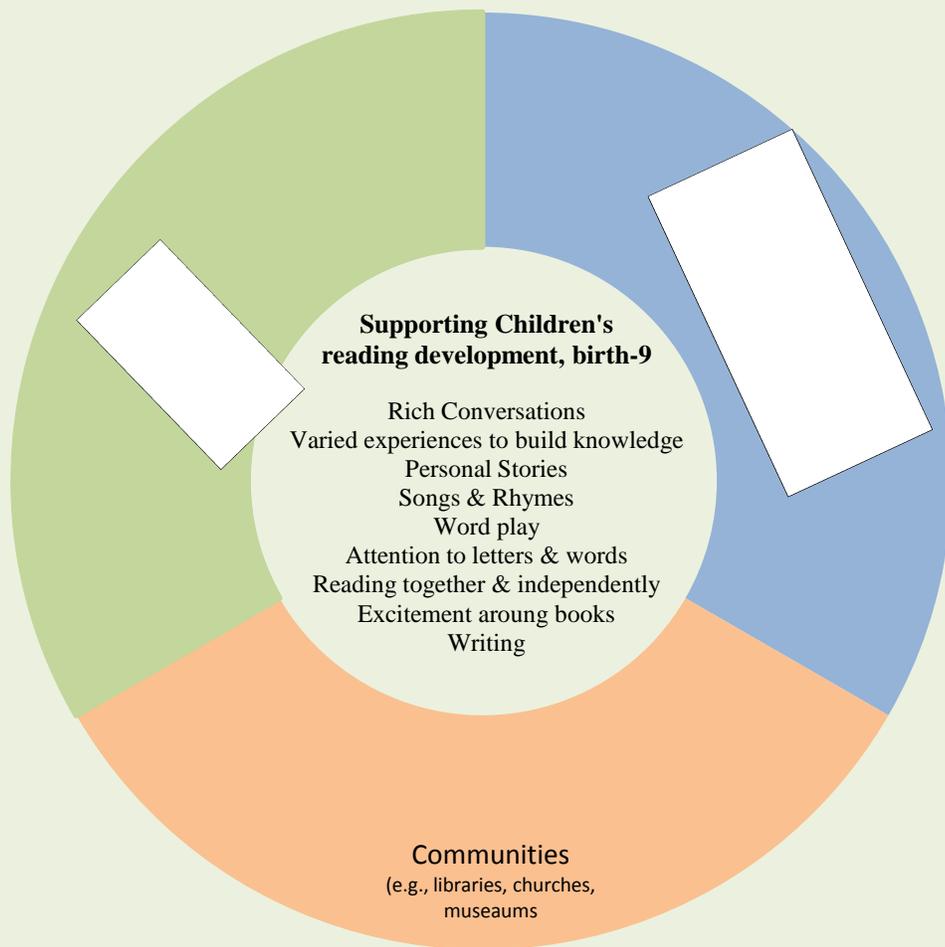
What is Reading?

Reading for success in the 21st century means much more than deciphering words in a text. It means accessing, evaluating, and synthesizing information, and it therefore creates a foundation for learning across all academic domains, including math, science, and social studies. It is inextricably linked to overall academic success. Effective reading is at the heart of being an engaged, global citizen who is able to grapple with complex issues. The skilled reader works in shades of gray, confronts problems that can only be solved by integrating ideas from multiple resources; he understands a wide range of concepts, and he has interdisciplinary knowledge to access and apply. (Graves, *Teaching Reading in the 21st Century*) When we read successfully we absorb literature and nonfiction for pleasure, to acquire information, and to broaden our horizons. Skilled readers also have the sophisticated oral and written communication skills needed to respond to ideas—whether presented on screen, in print, or via audio—and to generate new thinking.

Reading words, then, is necessary but not sufficient to support text comprehension. To read effectively and make meaning from text, one has to bring much to each reading experience. (Snow, *Reading for Understanding*) A reader must be engaged in the process and motivated to work through each sentence, paragraph and page. But interest alone will not ensure comprehension. She must have knowledge of the code—the way sounds are associated with letters and blended together to make words—coupled with the ability to read them quickly enough to retain what is read from the beginning of the passage to the end. (Chall, *Stages of Reading Development*) As she reads these words, she must also successfully recognize the concepts they represent to make meaning of the text. (Scarborough, *Connecting Early Language and Literacy*) To do this, the reader draws on her background knowledge, constantly applying what she already knows about the reading process and the text’s topic while making her way through the word-covered pages. Ultimately, she is advancing her knowledge. (Kintsch, *Text Comprehension*) But if the words and/or the topic are completely unfamiliar or just too difficult to grasp independently, then sounding out the words may look like “reading,” but it is simply an exercise, unproductive of learning.

The process of becoming an effective reader is a dynamic and complex one that must begin at birth and continue into adulthood. “Reading” at age 3 is not the same as reading for a 5-year-old, which is not the same as skilled reading for a 9-year-old, and none looks similar to skilled reading for a college student. (Chall, *Stages of Reading Development*) A reader’s ability has to keep pace with the changing demands of the context and the purpose for reading—and that demands continual growth. This growth depends upon strong and supportive interactions among adults and children, to build up children’s language and knowledge, and to increase the amount of time their eyes spend on print. Throughout the day and throughout the early years especially (birth to 9), that means asking questions, starting conversations, telling stories, and singing songs. It means listening to stories via audio, drawing letters, writing names as well as writing stories, letters and essays. It means visits to local parks, libraries, and museums. It means teaching children to read independently and it also means everyone reading together. It is these interactions and everyday activities—in our homes and communities, our early education and care settings, and our schools—that foster an orientation toward learning and inspire children’s sense of curiosity about the world and greater understanding of it, while simultaneously promoting their language abilities and their thinking. (Dickinson, *Beginning Literacy* of Individuals..)





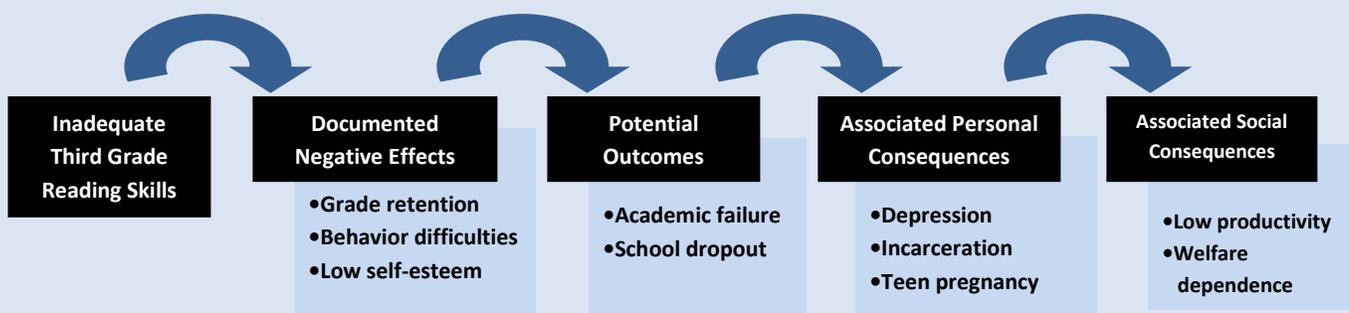
Opportunities to promote our children’s reading skills are abundant in all settings, including our kitchens, backyards, community centers, churches, clinics, grocery stores, local businesses, and, of course, our early learning settings and school classrooms. High-quality experiences and relationships provide babies and children with ongoing opportunities to talk and to learn. Over time, quality interactions will help children build their language skills and the essential background and conceptual knowledge that they will need not only to read high school and college texts, but to compete successfully in this knowledge-based economy.

Only through a comprehensive effort will we ensure that our children’s reading skills are sophisticated enough to match what it means to be literate at each stage of development. By doing so, we will support the health and well-being of our children and society.

The High Costs of Childhood Reading Failure

Reading is the cornerstone of academic success and also central to a child's overall health. There is a limited window of time in which to prevent reading difficulties and promote reading achievement; for most children what happens (or doesn't happen) from infancy through age 9 is critical. By third grade, reading struggles are strongly linked to later school difficulties, as well as behavioral problems, depression, and dysfunctional and/or negative peer relationships.(Gregg, et al, Profile of Individuals) What's more, research indicates that 74 percent of children whose reading skills are less than sufficient by third grade have a drastically reduced likelihood of graduating from high school.(Fletcher, Reading: A Research Based Approach) As a result, these children are unlikely to develop the skills essential for participating fully in this knowledge-based economy and for experiencing life success.(Fletcher)

While dropping out of high school is detrimental to life outcomes, even students who do graduate from high school are at a significant disadvantage if they do not earn a college degree. Yet, it has never been as clear as it is today that a high school diploma does not necessarily translate into college eligibility or readiness. Nationally, nearly half of students who graduate from high school are not academically prepared for college and are considerably less likely than their well-equipped peers to earn a degree or certificate.¹² Once enrolled in college, a large proportion of students are assigned to remedial reading classes; 70 percent of this group of struggling readers does not earn a degree or certificate. When children are not given the appropriate opportunities to learn, both the individual and society suffer. As compared to the full-time worker with a high school diploma, the individual with a four-year college degree is much more likely to report being in excellent or very good health, is more likely to vote, is less likely to smoke and engage in other harmful behaviors, and earns 62 percent more income.¹³ Thus, the costs of childhood reading failure include increased public expenditures coupled with decreased revenue and human capital. Undoubtedly, low reading starkly reduces our potential both as individuals and as a society.



Endnotes

- 1 Graves, M., Juel, C., Graves, C. (1998). Teaching Reading in the 21st Century. Des Moines, IA: Allyn & Bacon.; Paris, S. G., & S. A. Stahl (Eds.), *Children's reading comprehension and assessment*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
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- 4 Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neumann & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for Research in Early Literacy* (pp. 97-110). New York: Guilford Press.
- 5 Kintsch, W. (1994). Text comprehension, memory, and learning. *American Psychologist*, 49(4), 294-303.
- 6 Chall, J. S. (1996). *Stages of Reading Development*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- 7 Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (Eds.) (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and at school*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing; Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing; Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21(4), 360-406.
- 8 Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (Eds.) (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and at school*. Baltimore:Brookes Publishing; Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing; Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21(4), 360-406.
- 9 Gregg, N., Hoy, C., King, W. M., Moreland, C. M., & Jagota, M. (1992). The MMPI-2 profile of individuals with learning disabilities at a rehabilitation setting. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 23, 52-59.; Snow, C., Burns, M.S. & Griffin, P. (1998) Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington, D.C.: National Research Council.; Waldie, K., & Spreen, O. (1993). The relationship between learning disabilities and persisting delinquency. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 26, 417-423.
- 10 Fletcher, J. M., & Lyon, G. R. (1998). Reading: A research-based approach. In W. M. Evers (Ed.), *What's gone wrong in America's classrooms* (49-90). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.
- 11 Fletcher, J. M., & Lyon, G. R. (1998). Reading: A research-based approach. In W. M. Evers (Ed.), *What's gone wrong in America's classrooms* (49-90). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

The Secrets of Reading Success

Colorado Trust Fund's Start bumper sticker states, *"If you can read this, thank a teacher."* But the latest research indicates the situation is more complex.

Who plays the critical roles in preparing a successful reader?

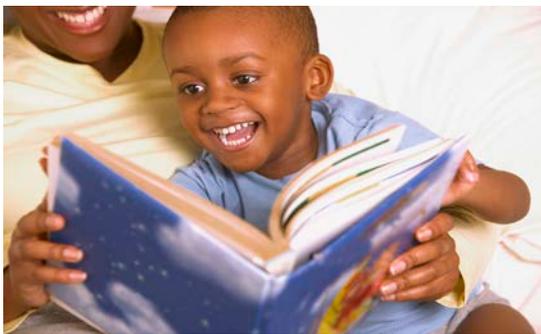
First, as an essential starting point, families can maximize the benefits of parent-child communication from birth.

Second, caregivers and preschool teachers can be given training and resources to stimulate emergent literacy.

Third, children deserve well-trained teachers who understand reading development, who can pinpoint problems, and who can address them effectively (National Research Council, 1998).

But the consequential task of ensuring that children learn to read should not be left to families, providers, and teachers alone. Entire communities can rally around their children for literacy success. This means more partnerships between schools and communities. It means greater engagement of private enterprises, colleges, universities, and cultural groups. It means more volunteers and more opportunities for legions of mentors and tutors.

Unlike children who are struggling to decode words, we as a nation have already unlocked the secrets to better reading. If we start early and finish strong, we can help every child become a good reader.



The momentum is with us for a breakthrough in student reading achievement. The only question that remains is whether we are committed to literacy for every American child."

For a list of studies showing both short term and long term benefits of preschool see:

<http://www.promisingpractices.net>

Mathematics Education

Given the United States' lagging performance relative to international benchmarks and flat performance on the 2009 NEAP in mathematics it is imperative that attention be paid to mathematics development in early education. Therefore, if we are to transform public education, we must put an emphasis on improving mathematics in early education.



In the ordinary environment, young children develop a sense of everyday mathematics including space, shape and pattern, as well as number and operations. Everyday mathematics encompasses more than "numeracy"; it is both concrete and abstract; it involves both skills and concepts; and it may be learned spontaneously as well as with adult assistance. Low-SES children show less proficient mathematical performance than do their middle-SES peers, particularly when metacognition is required, but they do not lack basic concepts and skills. The question of whether young children are "ready" to learn mathematics is beside the point: without much direct adult assistance, they are already learning some real mathematical skills and ideas. Learning mathematics is a "natural" and developmentally appropriate activity for young children. (Ginsburg, Sun Lee, Stevenson Boyd 2008)

"Mathematical knowledge adds vigour to the mind, frees it from prejudice, credulity, and superstition."
- John Arbuthnot

The Price of Inattention to Mathematics in Early Childhood Education is too Great **Deborah Stipek, Stanford University**

Looking across international comparative studies, American students' performance in mathematics is in the bottom third (Ginsburg, Cooke, Leinwand, Noell, & Pollock, 2005). This is not news. We have known that American students perform poorly in math and science on international comparisons for many years. More recently, longitudinal studies have shown that math concepts, such as knowledge of numbers and ordinality, at school entry are the strongest predictors of later achievement, even stronger than early literacy skills (Duncan et al., 2007). It is curious that so little attention is paid to the mathematical learning of young children, which serves as the foundation for future math understanding and school achievement.

Ginsburg, Lee, and Boyd remind us that young children can and do learn mathematical concepts, and they could learn much more if we supported their learning. But, as they explain, preschool teachers are given almost no preparation to teach mathematics. The consequence, apparent to me in visits to hundreds of preschool and kindergarten classrooms, is that mathematics is simply not taught. When we planned to assess instructional strategies in math we often had to go back to a program day after day to see anything that looked like an effort to facilitate children's math learning. When we did see it, variations on two approaches predominated. The first involves sheets of paper with numbers on one side and groups of objects on the other. Children draw a line from, for example three stars on the left to the number 3 on the right, or from four balloons to the number 4. The other common activity involves painting macaroni and pasting them in boxes on colored paper in groups that reflected the number written in each box. Children seemed to enjoy both tasks, to be sure. And they may develop some eye-hand coordination or artistic talent in the macaroni painting and pasting activity. But it is hard to imagine a more inefficient way to promote an understanding of number.

We cannot blame the teachers. Until recently we have not expected instruction in mathematics in early childhood education programs. And in addition to not being trained, many are not comfortable with their own mathematical skill. Furthermore, the difficulty of teaching young children mathematics is typically underestimated. I once observed a group of highly qualified preschool teachers receive intense training in assessing young children's mathematical understandings. They became adept at diagnosing children's misunderstandings. But after many months of weekly meetings they all confessed that they were not at all sure what to do after they had identified a problem. We realized that they needed much more than training in assessment.

Ginsburg et al. describe the many different strands of mathematical thinking and skills young children need to learn, as well as the many ways we can facilitate their mathematical learning -- with materials, opportunities to play, taking advantage of teachable moments, guiding children's explorations, and using math curriculum as a guide for instruction. The teacher is key to all of these strategies for promoting math understanding. Even children's play needs to be guided to focus their attention on math concepts (e.g., providing props for a post office or store, and modeling buying and selling). Until we make mathematics learning a priority, and until we invest in preparing early childhood educators to be effective math teachers, we can expect avoidance and ineffective practices to continue, and we will continue to be embarrassed by the poor performance of children in the country that has been the world leader in innovation.

I am deeply grateful to Ginsburg, Lee, and Boyd for calling our attention to a serious national problem.

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The Early Childhood System



A system is a set of interrelated parts that interact and function together to produce a common outcome or product. Systems are everywhere – they can be ecological, mechanical, organizational, political, cultural, and so on. To get the best possible results from a system, its individual parts have to work effectively as a whole. The term “systems building” refers to creating a new system or working to improve an existing system that is fragmented, informal, or missing key pieces.

An *early childhood system* encompasses an array of separate, more targeted systems, including health, education and human services, which have the common goal of achieving better outcomes for children, youth or families. These systems have multiple programs, policies, agencies or institutions at the national, state or local level. The goal of early childhood system building is to help families get the care and support they need for their children in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The myriad of regulations, providers and resources make it very difficult for families in need to access the services. This is one of the reasons the governor has proposed a different kind of structure for the department of education. Right now, The Department of Social Services, Dept of Education and a plethora of other state agencies are trying to do the same thing. There needs to be a reorganization and simplification to restore order. The key issues a system building needs to address are 1) governance, 2) access, and 3) program and staff quality. Right now people in the early care field are so poorly paid that putting additional kids into low-quality

programs would be wasteful. A fourth issue, then, is the need to develop a system for rating the quality of early childhood programs.

In addition, even if the early care system is fixed, the transition to kindergarten is a huge policy issue. Subjecting children who have experienced a high quality, developmentally appropriate pre-K experience to an overly academic kindergarten setting can only create problems. We must find a better way to address this transition.

System building in early childhood needs to focus on a minimum five areas:

1. **Context: Changing the political environment that surrounds the system and affects its success.**
2. **Components: Establishing high performing and quality programs and services.**
3. **Connections: Creating strong and effective linkages across the system.**
4. **Infrastructure: Developing the supports the system needs to function effectively and with quality.**
5. **Scale: Ensuring the system is comprehensive and works for all children.**

(Issue Brief: Early Childhood Systems Building from a Community Perspective, Colorado Trust, April 2010)

“To ensure that all children fulfill their potential as individuals and citizens, we must re-imagine public education as a system that begins not with Kindergarten, but with quality pre-K, and builds on that foundation to raise performance in later grades.”

The PEW Center on the States, 2011

Early Childhood

Guiding Principles:

- Responsibility for children’s readiness lies not with the children, but with the adults who care for them and the systems that support them.
- The family plays the most important role in a young child’s life.
- The first five years are a critical development period.
- The achievement gap will not be reduced significantly unless the literacy gap during the first five years is seriously addressed.

Major Recommendations:

1. *The state should provide or reallocate funds and alter policy to ensure that programs are delivered with sufficient intensity to produce measurable success in children’s language, reading and numeracy.*

The availability of preschools and the quality of the preschool experience is a critical factor in reducing the achievement gap and ensuring that all children benefit from their educational experience.

- A) Assure fiscal support for high quality preschools for all 3 and 4 year olds.
- B) Provide a challenging all day Kindergarten program to all children.
- C) Support local communities in developing Birth-Through Eight local councils for planning and monitoring early childhood services.

Supporting Recommendations:

2. *The state legislature should ensure a simplified, coordinated system for supporting Early Childhood Development and Education.*

- A) Eliminate overlapping oversight and support of early childhood education at state and local levels.
- B) Provide to parents and the community transparent and understandable information about the quality of services and programs.
- C) Provide models and training to local communities on effective transitions to kindergarten.
- D) Provide guidance and support to local communities in raising the quality of early childhood programs and services.

3. *The school system should expand and strengthen partnerships with families to focus on children’s learning with an emphasis on language development.*

- A) Childcare settings, pre-schools, and public schools should support family efforts to improve children’s language, emergent literacy, reading and numeracy.
- B) Schools should capitalize on and strengthen the role of the community library in promoting family literacy practices.
- C) Schools should provide continuing education to parents to support their child’s language, literacy, numeracy and executive function skill development.
- D) Schools should use community leaders as conduits for helping families build children’s language, literacy and numeracy skills.

4. *The state should require programs, providers and medical professionals serving babies, preschoolers, and school age children to assess language and reading development as part of developmental screening to identify children in need.*

- A) Healthcare clinics and practices, and early education programs should implement initial screening and ongoing assessment of language and reading skills.
- B) School districts must have a pre-k-3 early literacy (including language), numeracy, and executive function skills assessment system.
- C) The state should create a database to track children’s history of development including their program enrollment. The limitations of HEPA should be modified or addressed to allow this sharing of information in a single database.

5. *The state should strengthen professional education to increase adults’ capacity to assess and support children’s language development.*

- A) Provide early education and care providers and health care professionals with training focused on supporting children’s language, reading, numeracy and executive function skill development. Training should require mastery of information and skills.
- B) Provide a multiyear early childhood workforce professional development plan to assure compliance with state law and selected national certification programs.
- C) Provide health, mental health and education consultation to preschool programs to enhance the skills of directors and teachers for meeting the comprehensive needs of children.

6. *Bring language-rich, challenging, developmentally appropriate and engaging reading and mathematics curricula into early education and care settings, as well as pre-k-3 classrooms.*

- A) The state should provide ongoing guidance on curriculum selection and implementation in early education and care settings, as well as in pre-K through 3 classrooms.
- B) The state should require principals and program administrators to increase their knowledge of children’s language, reading, numeracy and executive function skills.
- C) The state should develop a system of accountability for providing language-rich, challenging, developmentally appropriate and engaging reading and mathematics curricula. Accountability systems should require evidence that schools are child ready and should be linked to licensure and program-rating.
- D) The state must see to it that school districts provide supplemental instruction that matches the curriculum for children who are not demonstrating sufficient progress.
- E) The state should require that districts align programs and strategies to strengthen literacy, numeracy and academics.

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