

The Power of K

North Carolina Position Statement on Kindergartens of the 21st Century

The Mandate *The guiding mission of the North Carolina State Board of Education is that every public school student will graduate from high school, globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st Century” (N.C. State Board of Education, 2006)*

Kindergarten professionals are charged with the responsibility of leading the journey of learning and growth for N.C. students by providing the social and educational foundations necessary to prepare students for life in the 21st Century. While fostering collaborative connections with families and communities, these educators also must develop positive relationships with each child; provide safe, supportive, and inviting environments; offer differentiated and rigorous curriculum and instruction; and deliver meaningful and authentic assessments of a child’s potential. In order to ensure the success of this charge, kindergarten professionals must be empowered by a supportive and knowledgeable administration that provides the necessary infrastructure, essential resources, and on-going, high quality professional development.

The Power of K The early childhood years, birth through age 8, are the most powerful years for learning, growth and development in the life of a child (Jensen, 1998). Currently, kindergarten holds a position in education as one of the starting points for attitudes about learning, teachers and schools that children and families will carry throughout the years of schooling and beyond.

It is critical that kindergarten programs:

- Utilize evidence-based practices.
- Help children achieve the knowledge, skills and dispositions that promote ongoing success.
- Provide indoor and outdoor environments and experiences that reflect appropriate practices for children of varying abilities.
- Represent a community of learners.
- Include families in meaningful ways.
- Value diverse cultures.

Kindergarten Today In the 21st Century, educators must meet multiple demands from national, state and local levels. These expectations are based on federal No Child Left Behind regulations, guidelines from state and local boards of education and district mandates and expectations. Teachers at all grade levels feel the pressure of this increased accountability and stringent expectations for their students.

Kindergarten teachers are caught between what research supports as effective environments and experiences based on knowledge of how young children learn and develop, and the promotion of scripted programs and practices that typically do not respond to children’s individual needs nor take into account the view of the whole child as a learner. Based on kindergarten’s unique position in education, this critical grade level “suffers from the middle-child syndrome [and]

straddles the worlds of preschool and elementary school” (Graue, 2006). Because of this precarious place in education, many kindergarten teachers struggle with implementing federal, state and local standards while attempting to remain true to the learning styles and developmental needs of their increasingly diverse 5 year olds...a delicate balancing act for these dedicated educators.

Kindergarten Children Today

Kindergarten programs of the 21st Century must reflect both the experiences of 5 year olds and changes to society. Many young children today:

- Live in a fast-paced world.
- Are technologically savvy.
- Use television and the Internet as a primary means of communication.
- Are exposed to more dangers and threats than their parents were at their age.
- Spend more time inside than outside.
- Are more overweight than the generation before.
- Spend less time with their families than they do in child-care.
- Live in increasingly diverse communities.

Although the 21st Century brings many new experiences for young children in a technologically based world, their developmental patterns, rates and ways of learning have not changed. Recent brain research shows that children in their kindergarten year are still in a very sensitive period for brain development. As young children actively interact with the environment, “the synaptic connections of stimulated neurons become increasingly elaborate” and “the brain is especially responsive to stimulation” (Berk, 2006). Experts in neuroscience and child development agree that “young children need a wide variety of ordinary experiences during this phase” with opportunities to explore their world through their senses (Gullo, 2006; Jensen, 1998). Kindergarten children must be appropriately challenged to progress academically and socially; however, “when classroom experiences are not attuned to children’s developmental needs and individual characteristics, they undermine rather than foster children’s learning” (Berk, 2006).

Kindergarten classrooms of the 21st century must be places where children of all circumstances and all learning abilities can thrive. North Carolina must continue to prepare students for the future while honoring the original kindergarten program objectives of providing both “a garden *for* children, a location where they can observe and interact with nature, and also a garden *of* children, where they themselves can grow and develop” (www.froebelweb.org, 2006). Educators of young children must ask, How do the kindergartens of the 21st Century support the developmental needs of all children while providing challenging and meaningful educational experiences?

Kindergarten Programs of the 21st Century: Intentional Teaching and Learning

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the N.C. Birth Through Kindergarten Higher Education Consortium support kindergarten programs in our state that respond to the complex needs of children by linking instructional practices, the physical environment, and learning opportunities to the unique characteristics of 5 year olds. In this age of accountability, kindergartens must be designed to address the academic, physical and social/

emotional domains of education for young children. According to Elizabeth Graue, former kindergarten teacher and professor of early childhood education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “It is absolutely reasonable to expect that kindergarten is about playful learning and learningful play, and about academic socialization and social academics. To make the most of the kindergarten experience, a teacher must be a master of knowledge about specific curriculum content, about children in general, and about her students in particular” (Graue, 2006).

Kindergarten classrooms in North Carolina must be appropriate places for young children to learn through engaging and interactive experiences guided by trusted and nurturing adults. These adults also must provide challenging, yet achievable learning experiences for each individual child. This is no easy task. It requires:

- A dedicated and knowledgeable teacher.
- A dedicated and knowledgeable full-time teacher’s assistant.
- Support of the school administrator, who is knowledgeable about the education of young children.
- Purposeful planning based on the N.C. Standard Course of Study and children’s interests and needs, all of which build upon a child’s previous knowledge and experiences.
- Support for children with special needs.
- Intentional child and teacher interactions.
- A broad repertoire of instructional practices that strike a delicate balance across a continuum of child-initiated experiences and teacher-directed instruction;
- Child-initiated and teacher-supported play.
- A variety of learning contexts within an integrated day, including whole group, small groups, learning centers, outdoor experiences and daily routines.
- Partnerships with families and the community.
- Culturally relevant curriculum that is designed with learners’ cultural values, knowledge, and ways of learning taken into account (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005).
- Ongoing, authentic assessments that drive instruction.
- An inquiry approach to ongoing professional development for teachers.

The debate around the definition of play and its benefit to a young child’s education remains ongoing and unresolved. Some say that play is compatible with and necessary to the young child’s education. Others believe play is at odds with education. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction believes that play is at the core of a kindergartner’s learning and development and that it is an essential element of a child’s education in the 21st Century.

Play is “a dynamic, active and constructive behavior. It is an essential and integral part of all children’s healthy growth, development and learning across all ages, domains, and cultures. . . . The absence of play is an obstacle to the development of healthy and creative individuals” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Through an interactive, play-based curriculum, children develop cognitive skills as they “explore, imagine, imitate, construct, discuss, plan, manipulate, problem-solve,

dramatize, create, and experiment” (Nebraska Department of Education, 2001). All the while, teachers intentionally weave goals and objectives from the N.C. Standard Course of Study for kindergarten into each experience. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “Play is integral to the academic environment; . . . it has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children’s learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills” (AAP, 2006). Numerous studies have shown a direct link between play in young children and “memory, school adjustment, oral language development, improved social skills, and self-regulation” (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Researchers believe that play provides a strong foundation for intellectual growth, problem solving and creativity. These are necessary skills for the 21st Century where “creative problem solvers, independent thinkers, and people with expert social acumen will inevitably surpass those who have simply learned to be efficient at getting the right answers” (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003).

**North Carolina’s
Charge**

The N.C. State Board of Education has charged that “all students will graduate from a rigorous, relevant academic program that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to succeed in both postsecondary education and 21st Century careers and to be participating, engaged citizens. Instruction and learning must include commitment to a knowledge core and the application of that knowledge core to solve complex, real-world problems. Schools must ensure rigor and relevance and guarantee supportive relationships for each student in the public school setting” (North Carolina School Board policy HSP-F-016).

Kindergarten students are innately curious and natural problem solvers. Recognizing these qualities, effective kindergarten teachers provide a rigorous and relevant curriculum. They intentionally create opportunities for:

- Interactive, challenging, and relevant learning experiences.
- Inquiry-based learning.
- Construction of knowledge.
- Solving of real life problems.
- Emotional/social growth and development.
- Physical growth and development.
- Language growth and development
- Collaboration.
- Creativity, imagination and innovation.
- Decision-making.

It is through these types of experiences that kindergarten students develop and demonstrate the 21st Century life skills of critical thinking, communication, leadership, collaboration, contextual learning, global awareness, information and media literacy and citizenship.

Recognizing that experiences in the early childhood years can have a powerful impact on the children of North Carolina, the importance of high quality kindergarten programs and practices becomes apparent. North Carolina has been a leading proponent of public school reform for many years, especially in the field of early childhood education. Continuing this tradition of innovation, North

Carolina has the opportunity to once again take the lead in supporting excellence in the kindergarten programs for the young children of our state. Through a culturally respectful, inclusive and appropriately challenging curriculum, coupled with a broad repertoire of instructional approaches, kindergarten children will grow and develop into independent, critical thinkers empowered to succeed in their future school endeavors and to become productive citizens in the global world of the 21st Century.

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