

National Center for Early Education Excellence at Bright Horizons

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We don't simply want to teach children to know what is already known, but to be the **creators of new knowledge**: to be the **thinkers, leaders, problem-solvers, innovators, and entrepreneurs** of our future.

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From the Bottom Up: Reshaping Our Academic Curriculum Expectations Starting in ECE

The term academics is most often associated with core subjects: reading, writing, math, and science. They are considered the serious part of education and collectively get the most focus, the most measurement, the most testing, and the most prestige. For a while now, we've prioritized these subjects over what are often considered "extras" like visual or performing arts, music, languages, social sciences, and soft skills. In large part due to the societal preoccupation with academic achievements

and the fact that many school rankings are measured by test scores, we've been known to cut extracurriculars, and even lunch or recess to have more time for core content instruction. We have been doing school this way this for a long time. While the history of public education and our current U.S. school system is complex, we know the vision and design of what we'd consider a traditional school was crafted and first implemented in a world, context, and job market that was drastically different; when no one could imagine a day where we'd have the current and growing power of the internet at our fingertips, other technological innovations on the horizon, let alone the enormous social, civic, and cultural changes that have

occurred in the last two centuries. Some moments in U.S. educational history, like the work of the Committee of Ten were innovative and bold at that time, yet they have now become cemented and un-questioned rather than continually examined and progressively adapted. Other historical discoveries, like the measurement of IQ, have been overly reduced and have unduly shaped systemic expectations. We keep perpetuating or iterating on the existing system, even in the face of loads of research, giant breakthroughs in neuroscience, the clear lapses and gaps in the model, the cottage industry that has popped up around public education, the stubborn scores we use to measure our performance, and the thousands

of students getting less than they need. We keep doing this despite the advances in how we understand brains, the impact of trauma, and the booming levels of anxiety in students. We keep doing it despite the innovative examples and visionary teachers and leaders that prove there are different and more effective ways to do education. We keep doing it, even though we know better.

What would happen if, instead, we re-defined core curriculum, or academics for every age group, instead of chipping away at the edges? ***What if we universally recognized the critical social-emotional needs of learners and embedded durable skills into our definition of academics?*** What if our aim was to teach students to be thinkers and problem-solvers outside of the constructs of specific subjects, allowed educators to focus their time on the exhilarating process and pursuit of learning rather than the drudgery of teaching to the test, and recognized all of this as the core of core curriculum? What if we insisted on using evidence-based research to guide our decisions, priorities, practices, and definitions of what mattered most? What if we looked at long-term results more than short-term gains? What if our approach to “catching students up” and our responses to “learning loss” included — or even prioritized — critical social and emotional competencies? What if we built coursework and class schedules that were about enriching and nurturing students in their pursuit of an array of meaningful skill development and individual interests? ***What if we limited simplistic educational activities and insisted on transformational learning experiences?*** What if we capitalized on the interconnectedness between subjects like music and math, languages and psychology, history and science, the world around us and everyday life? What if a love of learning, communication, collaboration, self-regulation, strong executive function, and critical and creative thinking became our north stars of successful education? What if each student was individually respected and reflected: their strengths, their realities, their histories, their interests, and their potential? ***What if we demanded that exemplary educational experiences were commonplace rather than notable?*** What if we expected education to build a set of skills valuable for what we have not yet invented or experienced? What if we were slower to use disciplinary action and quicker to include self-regulation, intra- and interpersonal skills on the lesson plan? ***What if we gave students problems to solve more than answers to memorize?*** What if we allowed proof of learning to come in more authentic and meaningful ways, recognized multiple ways of knowing and expressing, and helped students see what they can achieve before they question what they are capable of? ***What if we removed the incessant competition from education and truly left no child behind?***

As the recognition that early childhood education has lifelong implications has spread, the temptation has been to push down so many of these outdated practices and ineffective expectations: in essence, to do more of what isn't working and to start earlier. This doesn't honor the child, this doesn't reflect the science, this doesn't help families understand what their children need in the early years, this doesn't help each child flourish, and ***this doesn't get us the results that can change children's lives and societal outcomes.*** We must remember that ***school isn't just about being good at school, it is to thrive in life.*** We should let early learning — all learning, really — be fun and messy, hands-on and experiential; a safe place where trying, healthy risk, and mistakes are welcomed. It should be a place where children feel seen and feel safe.

Of course, the traditional academic subjects matter throughout education and as part of early learning, but they should be taught in a way that reflects our scientific understanding of how learning unfolds in each domain and learned within the context of authentic and interesting experiences. We must recognize the importance of igniting an early love of learning and helping children see themselves as confident and capable, rather than dogmatically focusing on yes or no questions, getting the right answers, following directions, and coloring in the lines. We must ensure inclusion and equity are verbs as much as they are nouns. And we should do this because ***we don't simply want to teach children to know what is already known, but to be the creators of new knowledge: to be the thinkers, leaders, problem-solvers, innovators, and entrepreneurs of our future.***



And, if we do all this, then we surely need to reimagine what school readiness means. Early education is not, in fact, simply a preparatory stop on the way to real school, it is real learning. It is a time when the most brain development is happening, when the foundational architecture for all that comes next is forming and strengthening. ***It's the place where children begin to discover who they are, how the world works, and***

what is possible. It should be full of joy and wonder and exuberant play; not desks in rows, worksheets, and cookie cutter crafts that squelch curiosity and imagination when they are at their very peaks. We must protect children from wasted time memorizing facts to jump through artificial academic hoops when they should be soaking up rich, joyous, interdisciplinary learning. We must not rush some development so much that we skip other equally consequential development. We must let go of our fascination with outdated instructional models and shallow evidence of learning. ***We must insist on developmentally appropriate practices and ensure developmentally fortifying experiences.*** We must elevate the value of critical and creative thinking and give learners a chance to explore exciting learning dilemmas and complex topics. We should capitalize on wonder and inquiry and provide beautiful and inspiring spaces for learning. We must recognize the importance of teacher-child relationships and infuse everything we do with social-emotional learning (SEL), recognizing the interdependencies between SEL and all other skills and successes. We have to actively resist the false wedge driven between nurturing care, enriching play, and “real learning”. (We might even consider pushing up just a few of the lessons from high-quality early learning programs rather than always pushing down from a K-12 system that needs so much change). We must let learning be fun and messy, hands-on and experiential. ***Early learning should be about trying and tinkering; pondering and playing. And being ready for school should be about so much more than shapes and colors.***

Through all of this, we should ***fervently celebrate and elevate those who dedicate their lives to teaching:*** those who professionally pour themselves into their work with hearts and souls. We need to respect and value their expertise and experience; reward innovation over

status quo; offer professional development that has equally high standards for quality and rigor; provide the resources needed to create educational experiences children deserve; inflexibly prioritize psychologically safe learning spaces; and hold ourselves accountable to student learning, progress, and engagement. We need to get the applicable research into the hands of educators and engage in scholarly inquiry with them, not just to or about them. And, most importantly, ***we absolutely must recognize the exponential power of student-teacher relationships and the impact of learning interactions on child outcomes.***

If the education system is to meet the needs of today and tomorrow, it needs — it deserves — bold rethinking and transformative shake-ups. We do not have to start from scratch when envisioning what we should do or what this would look like. There are many divergent thinkers, thought-provoking scholars, exemplary educators, and brave innovators inside and outside of the educational system already reimagining, reshaping, and transforming. But they are still the exception rather than the rule, and they are still primarily focused on K-12. We need as many visions and voices as we can get to create a modern, inclusive, and equitable system — ***that includes visionaries with practical early childhood education expertise*** — to renovate our collective value of what and how children should learn. We can't let the fear of 'what if?', stop us from us deeply considering 'what if?'. We can't get lost in a defense of what is working so much that we don't address what isn't working. We can't confuse intentions and efforts with outcomes. ***We can't let the stories of what has gone wrong, prevent us from urgently striving for making more things right.***

The idea that change is needed is not a new one. But at this pivotal moment when the long-term impacts of high-quality early childhood experiences are more accepted than ever and school systems and states are making consequential decisions about their shape and place, the moment is now. With recognition of the life-changing, brain architecture altering, and societal influencing power of early childhood programs, we must redefine what matters most to create exceptional places for childhood, to equip children for all that comes next, and to ***make an enriching, foundational early learning experience a promise, rather than merely a possibility. To make what is often considered extraordinary , quite ordinary.***

SOURCES

(1) Accreditation systems somewhat do this, but don't specifically rate programs, tools, or products used by an ECE center, school, or setting.

