

Children of 2020

Creating a Better Tomorrow



Valora Washington and JD Andrews, editors

*Council for Professional Recognition
National Association for the Education of Young Children*

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PreK–Third Grade: A Paradigm Shift



Ruby Takanishi

In the next 10 years, we must take a giant step to assure that all young children in the United States have the opportunity to experience high-quality prekindergarten (preK) as a regular part of a transformed American education system that starts with programs at 3 years of age and never ends. In the year 2020, all American children will be engaged with a new primary education system that provides a coherent and sequenced set of learning experiences that is the foundation for later educational success.

We have the research now, and we will have more in the next decade, that documents the enormous learning capacity of young children. Our responsibility is to design educational experiences that take this capacity as a starting point and support children to achieve their full potential every day of their lives. Unless we meet this responsibility, we will continue to relegate millions of children to lives of frustration and hopelessness that are associated with inadequate educational attainment.

This vision will require a paradigm shift in how early education defines itself today. The portrayal of K–12 education as a skill-and-drill, mentally deadening experience that robs children of their childhood must change. The narrow focus on social and emotional development must end. The idea that children cannot

learn, at their level of development, concepts about mathematics and science, about art and about reading, is archaic and inconsistent with current research about child development. Such thinking limits children’s potential, and, most importantly, it limits their opportunities to lead a good life. All children can be educated in ways that are consistent with their development and with respect for their individuality.

Right now, in 2010, we fall far short of achieving this vision for the majority of America’s children. A child today is less likely to graduate from high school than his or her parents were. The college graduation rates in the United States are below the levels of the 1970s. This is nothing less than a national crisis.

Unless we make a commitment to changing our ideas about what is good education for children from the beginning, and have high aspirations for their futures, we will do them and our country a great disservice. Children who are not well-educated tend not to be healthy adults. They are less able to provide for themselves and for their children. Most importantly, they have difficulty contributing to their own children’s educational success. Their underachievement challenges the values of our democratic form of government, which relies on the intelligence and wise decision-making abilities of its citizens.

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Why we must act now

It is now widely accepted that public investments in quality preK programs can contribute to narrowing the gap between children as they enter kindergarten. Starting early is virtually a mantra. What is still the subject of debate is whether quality preK alone can sustain the gains made from early learning programs.

There is growing consensus that gains made in good preK programs must be sustained by quality education during the K–3 years at the minimum. Low-income children who attend elementary schools with inexperienced teachers and principals are particularly prone to loss of their preK gains. Research also shows that low-income children are vulnerable when they experience several grades of poor teaching, and that when they experience several years of good teachers, they thrive.

Thus, states and school districts throughout the country are implementing PreK–3 initiatives to connect more closely their preK programs with the early grades of elementary education. The more mature implementers have achievement data to support the efficiency of this approach, especially for children living in low-income families.

Third grade achievement is increasingly recognized as a crucial turning point in children’s educational trajectories. Children who are not proficient in reading and mathematics by the end of third grade are unlikely to catch up. Many will become discouraged and drop out of school, emotionally at first and physically when they are able to walk out the door.

There are encouraging signs that states are taking a birth-to-postgraduate-education coordinated-alignment approach to education reform. Governors are establishing councils and other initiatives. In reality, only a few states have a clear plan for and implementation of a birth-to-postsecondary-education strategy. In the next ten



years, the most important education reform that the federal government can encourage and that states can undertake is moving toward a PreK–3 primary education system as the foundation for all later educational achievement.

A preK–3 primary education system is not a magic bullet; nothing really is, given the complex factors that influence children’s lives. But such a system is a crucial and necessary part of narrowing the disturbing achievement gap in America. No solution to the gap in struggling schools can be effective without a preK–3 system as the basic building block.

Pathways: Five priorities for achieving the vision

To achieve the vision of a transformed primary education system that spans from preK into third grade, I offer five priorities for moving forward.

First, we must reframe primary education for the 21st century as starting with excellent preK education for 3- and 4-year-olds, followed by equally excellent full-day kindergarten, and excellent educational experiences at least into third grade.

Second, we must reframe what is shared responsibility or accountability for children’s learning by the end of third grade as involving three major partners: preK/early learning

programs, K–3 education, and families. All must work together so children are ready for the challenges of middle school, high school, and college. No one party is responsible for how children learn.

Third, we must work on aligning common standards, curricula, and assessment from preK to third grade. The educational experience of children should be well-rounded, including the arts and social competence, as well as reading, writing, mathematics, and dual-language learning... The benefits to both native English-language speakers and children who are learning English as a second language are cognitive and social, and can have long-term economic payoffs in a global society. Crafting national, voluntary standards that begin with preK, are informed by the developmental requirements of young children, and continue into postsecondary education is critical to guide learning and assessment.

Fourth, we must seriously invest in preparing and supporting educators during this period, through preservice and in-service professional development. All teachers should have a preK–3 teaching credential and should be supported by teaching assistants who have a minimum of an Associate of Arts degree or are working toward an education degree as student teachers. A preK–3 teaching credential could also contribute to the necessary horizontal alignment of learning with grades and vertical alignment across grades. Teacher quality should be as highly demanded as it is for the K–12 education system. Once teachers are in the classrooms, resources to support their continuing development are paramount.

Fifth, we must rethink family engagement in children’s learning. First, we must focus on enhancing the literacy skills of parents, especially when they have not been adequately educated. Second, we must engage parents closely in what their children are learning in the classroom so there is an alignment between what children learn and what parents do to support that learning over the years.

What early educators can do: cultural change

To create a preK–3 primary education system that reaches everyone, early educators must reach out to and also respond to K–12 educators who recognize the value of early learning and of early educators. These educators seek to partner respectfully with early educators to create seamless learning continuums from early learning programs, whether in public schools or elsewhere, through joint professional-development-and-assessment feedback loops that assure that children learn in a developmentally informed sequence from one year to the next. Every year counts, and every year that is a quality educational experience counts significantly for children’s performance.

What is involved is the hard work of cultural contact and cultural change. Early education and K–12 education are now largely separate cultures with their own values and ways of operating. The two cultures are institutionalized by different funding streams, requirements, assessments, and accountability systems. There are typically separate standards for young children’s learning, although some change is now occurring to align standards for early learning and K–12 education. Except in a few states, information about preK children is not part of state longitudinal education data systems. All of this must change, and change is not easy.

Early educators must abandon their position that they are the only ones who know the right way to work with young children. They must work with the K–12 education system as partners in shaping a seamless learning experience for children from birth to at least third grade. There must be reciprocal give and take; both sides have much to learn from each other.

K–12 educators must also change their ways, including how they see early educators. As the preparation of educators (principals and superintendents, as well as teachers) becomes more deeply developmentally informed, early

educators will find common ground with other educators from K–12 and beyond. A long-term effort at the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education focuses on how schools of education and other sites for preparation can better educate teachers about child and adolescent development.

Everyone’s eyes must be on the prize: well-educated, well-prepared, ethical, and thoughtful lifelong learners. No one level of education has ownership over children’s learning. At present, with a few exceptions, we have a situation of cultural conflict. But a preK–3 education system presents an opportunity to move from conflict to contact and eventually genuine cooperation. Children will surely benefit as the quality of their educational experiences improves.

No more lost generations

Because we have not provided opportunities for all young children to experience a high-quality early education, followed and sustained by a high-quality elementary education, we have lost too many generations of children to underachievement and diminished lives. This state of affairs is intolerable. David Gergen, a usually dispassionate observer, has called this “a national scandal.”

During the Great Depression, Langston Hughes wrote a poem titled “Let America Be America Again.” That America assures that all our children receive the best education we can provide in a society that values equality of opportunity. Educating each child well is the civil

and human rights issue of our time. If we start in their early years, by 2020, each child will be engaged in a system of primary education that integrates the best of preK and K–3 education. Only then will we have a chance to make a difference in children’s lives. ►

Hope for the children of 2020:

*That by 2020, the United States
will have signed the UN Declara-
tion on the Rights of Children and
joined the rest of the world in
according all our children the
basic rights to education,
health, and a good
life.*

About the Author

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Professional focus

Takanishi’s passion over the past 40 years has been to connect research with public policy to assure equal opportunity for every child to succeed in life.

ORDERING INFORMATION

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