



TEACHERS SPEAK OUT:

HOW SCHOOL REFORMS ARE FAILING LOW-INCOME YOUNG CHILDREN

SOON AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION of federal and state early education mandates that require the teaching and testing of more formal “academic” skills, many highly experienced early childhood teachers began voicing concerns about the negative impact the mandates were having on the young children in their classrooms. Many of these concerns focused on children from low-income homes—the very children the mandates were most supposed to help.

This report documents what highly experienced and well-trained teachers in several states said in interviews about how school reform mandates are harming low-income young children, their families, their programs and themselves.¹ The responses reveal that the mandates—and the top-down manner in which they have been implemented—disregard teachers’ knowledge of child development, culturally appropriate practice, and how to meet the diverse educational needs of poor children.

Teachers of Low-Income Young Children Say the Mandated Basic Skills Teaching and Testing Are Having a Negative Impact on:

- ◆ Teachers’ ability to use developmentally and culturally appropriate practice that meets the diverse needs their children bring to the classroom.
- ◆ Children’s overall development and learning.
- ◆ Children’s overall behavior and general wellbeing.
- ◆ Children’s attitudes about learning and school.
- ◆ Children’s families and home lives.
- ◆ Teachers, their colleagues, and the teaching profession.

Many teachers are now confronted with a profound ethical dilemma: instead of providing a program that will do the “most good” for their children, they must now try to find ways to do the “least harm.”

Based on current knowledge of appropriate practice in the early childhood field, and the experiences voiced by the teachers interviewed, this report concludes with recommendations for how to better meet the needs of all young children in early childhood settings, especially those from low-income homes.

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS SERIOUS CONTROVERSY about many federal and state school reform policies and practices mandated in early childhood education (ECE) in recent years^{2,3}—such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). These policies require that early childhood programs teach more formal “academic” skills—especially in reading and math—than are generally viewed as appropriate practice. These reform efforts have also led to more frequent early testing to see if the academic requirements are being met. A key argument for implementing these mandates with young children from low-income homes is that teaching rigorous “academic” skills as early as preschool is necessary to overcome the impact of poverty on learning.

The challenge of providing children in poverty with the same educational opportunities available to children from more economically advantaged homes is a complex one, with a long history of attempts made at local, state, and national levels to meet that challenge. Recent reforms, however, have been developed and implemented by people with good intentions but often little formal knowledge of early child development. Consequently, many aspects of these “school reform” mandates are a source of serious concern among experienced early childhood professionals (including the authors), for the following reasons:

- 1 We know of *no significant evidence used to support the claims* made about how the reforms will benefit young children’s learning in the short or the long term. We also know of no pilot testing carried out to determine the effectiveness of the reforms before they were implemented.
- 2 *Experienced leaders of the early childhood field did not play a significant role* in developing the standards at the national level or in many states.
- 3 *The vital voices of teachers of young children were largely missing* in both the development and implementation stages.

We are especially worried about the impact the reforms will have on children living in poverty—a much larger proportion of children than many people realize.

- 4 The *mandates conflict with much of what we know* about how young children develop and learn best. All the formal teaching and testing leave little—if any—time for the kinds of high quality play and learning that have long characterized effective early childhood programs.
- 5 Practices to implement the mandates *leave little room to address the unique learning needs and learning styles of individual children*. Such practices seem to assume erroneously that all children learn at the same rate and in the same way.
- 6 We are especially worried about the *impact the reforms will have on children living in poverty—a much larger proportion of children than many people realize*. In February 2016, the National Center for Children in Poverty reported that 47 percent of children under six years old in the U.S. live in low-income families near or below the poverty line, including 69 percent of Black children and 64 percent of Hispanic children.⁴ Among the many OECD countries, only Greece, Mexico, Israel and Turkey have higher child poverty rates than the United States.⁵
- 7 The mandates seem to *ignore most, if not all, of what we learned from Head Start* and other early childhood education program research beginning in the 1960’s, when the United States made serious efforts to try to address the needs of children living in poverty and their families.⁶

Very soon after the mandates were implemented, many well-trained, highly experienced early childhood teachers began voicing concerns about how the new requirements were affecting their teaching and the children in their classrooms. Many of the most serious issues teachers raised related to problems experienced by children from low-income homes—the very children the mandates were most supposed to help.

Given what we were hearing about the consequences of these mandates, we decided it was vital to explore the issue further. We set out to document well-trained and experienced teachers' views of the current situation, as well as any additional concerns they might have. We wanted to help them bring their knowledge, experiences, and voices into the growing debate about how best to meet the needs of all children, with a special focus on children living in poverty. It is our hope that these findings will help inform current and future educational decisions about how to meet these young children's learning needs.

We used well-established qualitative research methods to explore teachers' understandings and reactions in depth.⁷ The interviews consisted of open-ended, qualitative questions about the impact of school reforms, and provided additional opportunities for teachers to discuss related issues of their choosing.⁸

We interviewed 34 experienced Pre-K and kindergarten teachers of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds from seven states and Washington, D.C. Each had a degree in early childhood education or had taken numerous courses in the field. Most had worked with Pre-K and kindergarten children for seven or more years, and had chosen to work in schools with significant proportions of children in poverty. Whenever possible, we also visited their classrooms.

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The teachers we contacted were eager to speak with us. They discussed at length how mandated school reforms have changed their programs—making them less individualized or less culturally relevant—and impacted their children's learning, development, and behavior. They spoke eloquently and passionately about their day-to-day experiences and the challenges they face in their classrooms. We found it striking that the responses and concerns of teachers across a variety of communities and states were so similar, and related to the same key themes and concerns. We were impressed that the classroom practices the teachers described implementing prior to current school reform mandates reflected the

guidelines for best practice proposed by such highly regarded organizations as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)⁹ and HighScope.¹¹ This confirmed for us the validity of listening to the voices of experienced teachers when considering how best to meet the educational needs of children in poverty.

The section below organizes the teachers' responses according to the nine main themes that emerged. The sample responses included illustrate the central issues teachers raised related to each theme. Some are direct quotes, while others are paraphrased for brevity. The final section has recommendations for future policy and practice based on what we learned.

KEY ISSUES RAISED BY TEACHERS WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN LIVING IN LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

I. How are the mandates affecting the OVERALL PROGRAM?

ALL THE TEACHERS WE INTERVIEWED discussed how the required school reform practices focus on teaching narrow academic skills to children at younger ages. They spoke about the ways in which this undermines their ability to make informed decisions regarding appropriate practice based on both their formal training and years of experience. The teachers provided specific examples of these reforms making it harder to do what they know they should be doing to address children's diverse individual interests, knowledge, and needs. It has become challenging—if not impossible—for them to connect learning to play and to provide the meaningful experiences with hands-on, concrete materials that they know are especially important for children from low-income homes. Many teachers emphasized that their expertise and judgment have become less and less relevant to classroom practice. Superintendents, principals, and supervisors, who often have little knowledge of what constitutes appropriate practice in the early years, are dictating more and more about the methods teachers must use to address the mandates.

- ◆ *I used to have a developmentally-based program with active and integrated activities, including complex play, which were designed to meet the whole child's needs. Now my children are only allowed to play "academic-skill games." I'm reprimanded when I plan creative teacher- or child-initiated activities like real play.*
- ◆ *The trust in my expertise and judgment as a teacher is gone. So are the play and learning centers in my classroom. Everything is supposed to be structured for a specific lesson and rigidly timed to fit into a specific, tight, preapproved schedule.*
- ◆ *When I first heard about the Common Core State Standards, I was excited by the emphasis on studying fewer topics in more depth, which is what we were told it would do. Actually, it's the opposite; I have to cover more in less depth. Everything is harder and I have to teach it faster.*

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- ◆ *We're not allowed to pick up on anything the children get interested in or anything the children know about from their homes and the diversity of their families. We have to teach skills for the test in the exact order the curriculum gives them to us.*
- ◆ *My school used to have a good mix of children from both low- and middle-income families. Since the mandates, my school has gotten more economically segregated. When the middle-class kids started getting very turned off to school—and a charter school offering less rote teaching opened nearby—many of the middle-class families moved their children there, or else to private schools. Now the families of most of my children are lower-income.*
- ◆ *With Common Core, my kindergarten program is expected to look like first grade, with quiet children doing their work at tables, or teacher-directed group activities with me. Administrators don't want to see messes; they don't want to hear noise.*

...we have no blocks, no dramatic play home area, no manipulatives or puzzles, not even play dough. Testing got in the way.

- ◆ *We're a one-size-fits-all-children county, and if teachers don't follow that, we're in big trouble. The entire focus is on compliance, with a narrow understanding of teaching to the standards. So now I'm not supposed to be thinking about the whole child, about the far-reaching needs of these children, or about supports for children and families.*
- ◆ *They trained us on the new CCSS. Expectations for reading went from the readiness level (like children drawing a cat with the letters C-A-T) to the reading level—meaning the children are expected to read long sentences. I can't accept the fact that in 90 days children with no previous school experience have to go from entry into kindergarten to being able to read.*
- ◆ *CCSS is a big snowball that needs to be stopped!!! With NCLB and now CCSS, kindergarten is disappearing. We have no blocks, no dramatic play home area, no manipulatives or puzzles, not even play dough. Testing got in the way. Then we lost art—no art budget. The funding went to purchase more tests and reams of paper to print worksheets to help children prepare for the tests.*
- ◆ *I'm given mandates with specific phrases I must use in my lessons that will prepare children for words they'll need to know in the upper grades. I need to say, "Refer back to the text" and "Record your data." It makes it even harder to make the lessons appropriate or interesting. And I have higher-ups coming in at random times to make sure I'm following orders.*
- ◆ *More of my job is managing technology, not teaching. I'm pushed to incorporate screens in inappropriate ways. We get donated iPads—the school has no money to buy them. The company that provided them offers free subscriptions to programmed lessons for our low-income families to use with their children at home. That is the homework we are supposed to assign.*

II. How is school reform affecting the program's ABILITY TO MEET THE DIVERSE NEEDS CHILDREN BRING to the classroom?

TEACHERS DESCRIBED A DIVERSE RANGE OF WAYS they see that living in poverty impacts families and children's development and learning. They talked about how their children's home situations, with fewer resources and more stressors, affect the kinds of needs they bring to school. The teachers described various practices they developed and used in the past to promote children's sense of belonging and success in the classroom—strategies they feel they are no longer able to use to any great degree because of the “one-size-fits-all” academic mandates. Teachers also voiced concerns about the growing number of inexperienced teachers placed in schools in low-income communities. Though these recent graduates have studied the Common Core State Standards, they have learned less about how to implement developmentally appropriate practices in classrooms serving diverse populations.

- ◆ *I think it's particularly important to form strong bonds with children living in poverty so they feel that school is a safe environment with caring adults. I find it's becoming harder and harder to do that because of the increasingly narrow academic demands on the children and me which take up nearly all of our time.*
- ◆ *We know a lot about how poverty affects families and parenting. Families in poverty often have fewer resources and more stressors. I have children whose families live in substandard housing and in unsafe neighborhoods, and move more often (meaning the children have to change schools). We know children in poverty are more likely to be hungry and have environmental health issues like asthma.*
- ◆ *There are a lot of ways we could connect with the strengths of our families and with the knowledge children bring to school. I've read that it's an advantage for kids to be fluent in another language; it's good for them socially and culturally, and good for their brains. But with this narrow focus on academics, people see it as a deficit if children need to spend time learning English when they're in school, which is upsetting.*

- ◆ *Often schools like mine in poor neighborhoods get a lot of newer teachers who are less confident and know less about appropriate teaching. They've been taught about the narrow standards, but less about teaching to the whole child's development. They stick to what they are told to teach and how they are told to teach it. For example, they're told to use the fill-in-the-blank math workbook, so their children have a harder time developing any meaningful understanding of math concepts. These teachers focus on getting the kids to pass the tests.*
- ◆ *Many of our children from poor families need more help adjusting to the rigid school demands, dealing with the stress, meeting the requirements. More and more resources keep getting cut. All our school adjustment counselors do these days is paperwork and IEPs. There is no one to provide special services to the children who need them.*

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- ◆ *I get children who have had almost no opportunities to play at home because they live in a single room or small apartment with no backyard. A lot live in unsafe neighborhoods. I often have homeless children in my class. Children come to me so in need of the kind of experiences and skills children learn through playing. But I'm barely allowed to have any play or outdoor time or other rich experiences they desperately need.*

III. How is school reform affecting CHILDREN'S OVERALL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING?

TEACHERS ARE VERY CONCERNED ABOUT THE NEGATIVE and potentially harmful effects current mandates are having on young children's intellectual, physical, and social-emotional development. There is less time for children to develop deep relationships with caring adults or to make friends with peers. There is almost no time for children to learn to play cooperatively, self-regulate, or be creative. It has become much harder for teachers to take individual strengths, interests, and needs into account, or to implement a curriculum that

is culturally relevant. Kindergarten children are now expected to do the reading, writing, and math that used to be taught in first grade. Pre-K children must learn many early reading skills and, in a few cases, are actually expected to be reading by the end of the Pre-K year. Children have fewer opportunities to become deeply engaged in the thinking and learning process. Instead, they spend most of their school day working on short prescribed skill-based tasks.

- ◆ *With this extreme emphasis on what's called "rigorous academics," drills are emphasized. It's much harder for my children to become self-regulated learners. Children have no time to learn to self-regulate by choosing their own activities, participating in on-going projects with their classmates, or playing creatively. They have to sit longer, but their attention spans are shorter.*
- ◆ *The mandates have totally shifted attention away from social skills and giving children time and activities where they can learn and practice them. Children aren't developing social abilities, making friends, or learning to play cooperatively. So many of my children have little opportunity to play with other children at home, and now that is the case at school as well. I have no time to facilitate complex play because I'm supposed to be teaching academic skills to individual children.*
- ◆ *With the curriculum and the way I have to teach, it's hard for kids to focus. It's extremely stressful for them. The level of work jumped without a plan and the expectations aren't developmentally appropriate. My kids are kindergarteners. Many already feel like failures.*

Children have no time to learn to self-regulate by choosing their own activities, participating in on-going projects with their classmates, or playing creatively.

- ◆ *My children are less engaged and learn less because the topics are unrelated to their lives and to the wealth of experiences they bring to school.*

- ◆ *Kids are spending two to four hours sitting and working at their desks. It's not the way 4- and 5-year-olds learn, and it's not healthy for them. How are they supposed to become active learners? When do they have the recommended time for physical activities?*
- ◆ *At the beginning of the year it's brutal. It's a huge transition from preschool. Kids are active for less than an hour a day. Typically, kids spend four-plus hours sitting on the rug or at tables, writing, reading, or doing math. Kids are anxious about coming to school. They're exhausted and stressed by the end of the day.*

IV. How are the mandates affecting children's OVERALL BEHAVIOR AND GENERAL WELL-BEING?

MOST TEACHERS EMPHASIZED THAT CHILDREN ARE EXPECTED to spend much longer periods of time on tasks for which they are not ready and which they do not understand. This is having a negative impact on many aspects of the children's overall development, learning, and well-being. Many children are exhausted much of the time and feel heightened levels of stress. These inappropriate demands are contributing to behavioral problems and negative attitudes toward school, resulting in referrals for special education services, and even increasing numbers of suspensions and grade retentions, all of which can contribute to a reduced likelihood of school success over time.¹²

- ◆ *It's affecting children's mental health. The pushdown of academic standards causes such great stress on the young children in my school. I see stress as the main cause of the increase in children's withdrawal or acting-out behavior. It's the underlying reason we're having rise in referrals for special education and Title I services.*
- ◆ *The more structured I'm required to make my curriculum, the more behavioral problems I get. But, I'm not supposed to help children work on their behavioral problems because of the instructional demands. I'm just supposed to punish them.*
- ◆ *As the standards got more demanding, I saw a big increase in children's behavioral outbursts. Boys are much more affected and having a harder time than girls.*

I worry about the children's physical well-being. I think it is really harmful for the children who don't get to play outside...

- ◆ Behaviors are best when kids are at the play centers, even though that's only at the end of the day. I see the worst behaviors during academic times. It's too much. The kids get exhausted.
- ◆ Kindergarten is hard—it is NOT an experience children will remember positively. They're not becoming interested in learning. It gives them and their families a negative view of school.
- ◆ I have even had cases where parents took their child to a doctor. The child has something like a stomachache or trouble sleeping, and the doctor tells them it's probably from stress. These tend to be the children who seem quite anxious in the classroom, too, especially when I have to put lots of pressure on the kids to get their "work" done.
- ◆ Some children don't want to come into the classroom because they're anxious or don't like it, much more than before. I'm using hugs and physical contact a lot more than I used to, in order to help kids get into the classroom.
- ◆ I worry about the children's physical well-being. I think it is really harmful for the children who don't get to play outside most of the time because we "NEED TO LEARN MORE." When we do go outside anyway, some administrators and parents get mad that I'm not doing my job—that is, teaching my children all they need to learn to succeed on the tests.

V. How is the EMPHASIS ON TESTING affecting classroom teaching practice and the children?

ALMOST ALL THE TEACHERS WE INTERVIEWED ARE CONCERNED about how the increased focus on testing is affecting their children as well their teaching practice. Testing determines much of what is taught, taking valuable time away from what teachers know they should be teaching. In teaching to the tests, many skills are taught in isolation, apart from any meaningful context. Many of the skills being taught are definitely not developmentally appropriate for kindergarten children.

The tests do not provide teachers with the information about the individual children they need to assist them in their teaching—information about the knowledge and cultural experiences children bring to school, or their individual interests, strengths, and needs. In particular, teachers worry about how this emphasis on testing will benefit children in poverty. The teachers have strong ideas about what high and appropriate expectations should be, and how to teach and assess them.

- ◆ I feel insecure about the benchmarks we are using to evaluate children, and they keep getting higher. The expectation for the children's reading achievement by the end of kindergarten has jumped two levels. Children can't meet this. This worries me a lot, because these benchmarks are supposed to determine if children move on or not.
- ◆ There is so much wrong with the testing, I don't even know where to begin. Three times a year I have to administer flip-book test questions, one-on-one. Then my Pre-K kids are tested when they get to kindergarten for "kindergarten readiness." The assessments don't look at where the children started at the beginning of Pre-K and their growth during the year, only if the kids are "ready" for kindergarten.
- ◆ It's essential for every kindergarten child to feel welcomed and included, to be part of the class. Instead, we're separating "the cream from the milk." From the beginning, we're telling kids who are poor, "You're deficient," instead of helping them become competent and feel successful and part of their class. Then it's "remedial this, remedial that." It's discrimination.
- ◆ I'm concerned about equity for all children, and especially for children who are learning English and come from families that are poor. The assessments we are required to do related to the standards are very language-based, so these kids never get a chance to succeed. For example, the math tests we use actually test kids' language understanding—not their math understanding.
- ◆ This rigid hurry-up and test, test, test system doesn't allow time for immigrant kids or kids from low-income families to be successful learners regardless of their ethnicity, race, and background. I was low-income. I am Hispanic. But how can I help my students succeed when I have less time to teach and have to teach to the test?

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- ◆ *We use VP K Assessment three times a year—evaluating print, oral language, and math. It's time consuming. It's not helpful. We don't get information we can use to help us teach. But the administrators can evaluate the children and us!*
- ◆ *I have to give them three pre-tests the very first time I meet them. Many children start crying, especially during the last test, which they all fail. And I have to do it. So the first time I meet them I'm making them feel like failures. None of them leaves school feeling like they did a good job. Not one.*

VI. How are the mandates affecting CHILDREN'S FAMILIES AND HOME LIVES?

MANY FAMILIES TELL TEACHERS that their children are coming home from school stressed out from the demands of the school day. They worry that school stress is affecting their children's mental health and positive attitudes toward school and learning. Most kindergarten teachers pointed out that they are required to give children regular, usually worksheet-based homework, which they know often adds to the stress at home. In addition, teachers say the mandates are negatively affecting home-school relationships. Sometimes parents blame schools for the complaints children have about school. And sometimes schools blame parents when children arrive at school anxious and exhausted, or not having finished their homework or prepared adequately for tests.

- ◆ *A lot of my children feel many pressures at home, so I want them to feel safe, secure, and happy at school. I want them to make friends, and learn how to play and interact with friends. Instead, they arrive at school stressed out, and because of school's inappropriate expectations, the stress just increases.*

- ◆ *It can take an hour to do the homework I have to assign every day. This puts a huge burden on families who are already overloaded. Many families, especially immigrant families with little formal education, feel insecure about helping their children with the required skills.*
- ◆ *Pre-K children are given weekly homework packets. I think that many teachers end up judging the families by what the homework looks like when it's turned in. This puts a real strain on parent-teacher relationships.*
- ◆ *It's everyone against everyone: parents getting mad at the teachers and kids because the kids aren't doing well on tests; teachers getting mad at some parents who don't prepare their kids when they're supposed to; the principal getting mad at us and the parents and even the children.*
- ◆ *Parents don't understand that expectations for kindergarten children aren't appropriate, that there's no room to individualize programs. Sometimes when parents see their children getting bad test scores, they get mad at their children and punish them for not doing what they're supposed to at school.*
- ◆ *Never before have I had so many parents who worry so much about how their children are doing at school. They have heard about the requirement for children to learn to read in kindergarten. They worry so much about how their children are doing with reading. Some want me to "make" their kids sit and work all day on reading. I explain that their children need to learn a lot of things that get them ready to learn to read. I explain when they're painting, creating, playing, they're also working on vital "skills." I help them see how much their children are learning. Then many tell me, "You're right!" But some still worry, and even pressure their kids to work on reading at home.*

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VII. How is school reform affecting the TEACHERS THEMSELVES, THEIR COLLEAGUES AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION?

THE EXPERIENCED, DEVELOPMENTALLY TRAINED, AND HIGHLY-REGARDED TEACHERS in our study are deeply concerned about how their teaching is being affected, especially with regard to those things they “must” do that they think are harmful to children. Many said they that the increasing amount of time they have to spend on a very highly-prescribed curriculum devoted to the CCSS takes vital time away from implementing a curriculum they feel will best meet the diverse needs of their children in poverty. Teachers also emphasized their own increased levels of stress and reduced levels of satisfaction and joy in teaching. Because of these stressors, they see growing teacher turnover rates at their schools, as well as increasing difficulty finding qualified and experienced replacements. Some pointed out that many new hires are recently certified teachers who have less training in developmentally and culturally appropriate practice because course requirements related to teaching the CCSS are taking up more and more time in teacher education programs.

- ◆ *I worry that only a handful of these expectations are realistic. We want to keep high expectations. We want to give kids the tools and resources to be learners. It's not happening. It can't happen with what we have to do now. It's such a struggle to go to school each day. I don't know how much longer I can continue. My dearest colleague has already left because she couldn't take it.*
- ◆ *Fourteen years ago when I began teaching, children had play. They could do more things they wanted to do (and so could I). They had so many opportunities for really in-depth learning. I know that's how it should be. And I sneak it in when I can.*
- ◆ *In my school, the inappropriate demands have resulted in stress levels that teachers feel threaten their effectiveness, and are even causing some teachers to leave the school and the teaching profession altogether.*

I feel like I am supposed to be a robot!

- ◆ *I have 30 years of early childhood teaching experience. I have now left the classroom—something I never expected—because of the academic pressure. My county created higher standards than even my state. Teachers are being punished if they make waves and speak up about their concerns. No one is holding our school board responsible. Every Pre-K teacher I know is miserable, and many are trying to find ways to leave the classroom like I did.*

I used to use dramatic play, art, or blocks to plan activities connected to foundational academic math and literacy skills—but that's all banned now.

- ◆ *I feel like I am supposed to be a robot! Every teacher is supposed to use the same very detailed lesson plan in exactly the same way with all the children. And even when we do small group activities, every class is supposed to give every child in the designated group exactly the same lesson.*
- ◆ *It makes me so sad and angry. I must use the mandated Math Tubs with specific activities for all the children every day. The dramatic play and art areas can only be open once a week during choice time for 20 minutes. I can't help children learn how to play, learn through play, and develop their interests. I used to use dramatic play, art, or blocks to plan activities connected to foundational academic math and literacy skills—but that's all banned now.*
- ◆ *I read articles about appropriate practice and totally agree. Then I walk into my classroom and can't do anything like what I read about. Our administrators dictate how and what we teach—lesson-by-lesson, worksheet-by-worksheet—for all children. They know nothing about ECE and don't listen to us. They just want good test scores and think following the mandated curriculum is how to get them. Now that the scores aren't as good as they want (SURPRISE!), the kids and I will be punished.*

Every Pre-K teacher I know is miserable, and many are trying to find ways to leave the classroom like I did.

- ◆ *After loving my job for many years, I often now go home at night in despair. As my husband listens to me on the really bad days, he asks me why I don't just quit—I'm close enough to retirement. I just can't do it to the kids. They need me more now than they ever did.*
- ◆ *We have a huge turnover of teachers—much more than before. Few stay for more than a year or two. Many stay for less than a year.*

VIII. What do teachers think and know about the RESEARCH that was used to develop the current early childhood teaching mandates?

TEACHERS WONDER WHAT RESEARCH ON HOW YOUNG CHILDREN DEVELOP AND LEARN was used to develop the standards, considering the amount of existing research on meeting the educational needs of children living in poverty. On all counts, teachers think that the one-size-fits-all “factory model” approach to teaching to the standards has little to do with the early childhood research they know, or with how they themselves understand teaching and learning. They also say they have heard few legitimate arguments for how the reform efforts will help their children succeed in school or beyond. And some teachers think that corporate profit, rather than research, is what often determines decisions about the curriculum materials they have to use.

- ◆ *Is there any research to show us that these standards and how we assess them are appropriate for young children? If so, I haven't seen it.*
- ◆ *I'm not against standards, but I want them be appropriate based on what we know about children—what the research tells us about how to teach young children, especially low-income children.*

- ◆ *What's the research? How can the same teaching benchmarks for every child be appropriate when you have children in the same kindergarten classroom who are 12 months apart, who have such different needs, who vary so enormously in the experiences they've had?*
- ◆ *I thought we were supposed to be following state standards. But in my school, my principal sets academic demands for our kindergartners even higher than my state does, and the district head loves it. They think that faster is always better, and never ask teachers or look for any research to support anything they mandate.*
- ◆ *My district mandates that all 4-year-olds will be reading by the end of the Pre-K year. And this is for my school that has 75% low-income children, with English as a second language. What research shows that having such ridiculous demands will help my children in any way? My administrators don't care about research.*

Is there any research to show us that these standards and how we assess them are appropriate for young children?

- ◆ *People making the mandates didn't use any research and don't know anything about ECE. For example, we have “Go Math.” The company that makes it “sold” it to our school system by saying it aligns really well with CCSS. It is a big, colorful workbook. The children are supposed to do five pages every day, and then do activities on the computer. But it has nothing to do with what the children know or how they learn math. A total waste. Who's making the money from all this?*

IX. How are teachers trying to MAKE PRACTICE MORE APPROPRIATE (or “less harmful”) in the midst of the Common Core State Standards mandates?

MOST OF THE TEACHERS WE INTERVIEWED ARE USING A WIDE RANGE of ingenious strategies, both overt and covert, to try to reduce and counteract inappropriate practices. They are working in creative and resourceful ways to weave their knowledge of child development, individually and culturally appropriate practice, and play into classroom dictates and beyond.

They are doing everything they can to lessen the negative impact on children’s learning, attitudes toward school, emotional well-being, and family life. And when they can, they try to help teachers with less training or experience learn to do these things as well.

- ◆ *The kindergarten teachers at my school decided we’d read a book together about play and then plan purposeful play activities for our limited choice times using what we learned from the book. We would work together to show the anti-play administrators and worried parents how our play activities addressed appropriate learning and the standards. I have absolutely no idea if this will fly in my very strict district, but we’re going to try.*
- ◆ *Our school adopted an innovative program where we integrate the arts, focusing on movement. We get kids up and moving throughout the day and use the movement to teach CCSS content.*
- ◆ *After much lobbying of our principal and the superintendent’s office, we are now about to have some—though not enough—center time with our 4-year-olds, but not our 5-year-olds.*
- ◆ *Some administrators in my district are worse than others. After having a really hard time for several years, I was able to change schools so that now I am at one where the administrator gives us more room to incorporate social and emotional curriculum.*
- ◆ *The homework I assign encourages interaction and vocabulary-building opportunities. My hope is to help parents understand what their child needs to be successful, and help build communication between parent and child if needed. The effectiveness of this type of homework is hard to measure. I don’t require proof to be sent back to school. I ask the children to share, but that cannot always be a valid measure.*
- ◆ *In an effort to overcome the obstacles that I experienced from the new school reform demands, I work much harder to make sure my practice is developmentally appropriate. I have also focused more on building better relationships with my students and with their families. I handed out refrigerator magnets with my contact information and extended an open invitation to all parents to contact me whenever they had something to share and also to volunteer in the classroom as much as they could.*

LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEACHERS WORKING WITH LOW-INCOME YOUNG CHILDREN

THE HIGHLY EXPERIENCED AND DEVELOPMENTALLY-TRAINED TEACHERS we interviewed were definitely well informed and committed to serving young children from low-income families. Their responses reveal consistent distress about the impact of current early childhood education mandates on their work with these children and their families. Many are concerned that they are being forced to implement practices that are harmful to their children’s development and learning.

Without exception, Pre-K and kindergarten teachers emphasized the same themes over and over: many of the mandates, as well as the manner in which they must be implemented, disregard what the teachers understand about child development, developmentally and culturally appropriate practices in the early years, and meeting the diverse educational needs of poor children. This is true when it comes to considering the importance of play, hands-on curriculum materials, peer interaction, and large motor activities in the learning process, as well as the necessity of integrating early academic skills into meaningful contexts and working closely with families.^{13 14 15}

The teachers’ responses reflected the central tenets of best early childhood practice, and are in agreement with leading early childhood practitioners, educators, researchers, and associations, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). For example, the NAECS/SDE Position Statement “#1 K-Power—High Quality Kindergarten” defines a developmentally-appropriate environment for kindergarten students as “one in which children have the opportunity to learn through play, exploring the environment, and interacting with their peers.” Citing NAEYC guidelines for DAP, they state that the kindergarten environment “takes into consideration 1) child development and learning, 2) individually appropriateness, 3) culturally appropriateness.”¹⁶

...many teachers said they felt they have lost their ability to provide a rich program that will do the “most good” for the children. Instead, they are now trying to find ways to do the “least harm.”

In their efforts to help children overcome the complex impacts of poverty, these teachers see no evidence that the mastery of the narrow academic skills prescribed in the current mandates is helping their children become engaged and confident young learners. Furthermore, many teachers were frustrated and discouraged that their school principals and superintendents knew so little about early childhood development and education. From what these teachers said, administrators know much more about the curriculum for older students. And according to some of these teachers, in their race for higher scores, their principals and district administrators have even ratcheted up kindergarten expectations beyond CCSS for kindergarten.

Throughout these interviews, many teachers said they felt they have lost their ability to provide a rich program that will do the “most good” for the children. Instead, they are now trying to find ways to do the “least harm.” They are confronted with the profound ethical dilemma of being told to implement practices they know are harmful to many children.¹⁷

Most of the teachers we interviewed said testing took huge amounts of children’s (and teachers’) school time, as well as a huge toll on what and how they teach. The skewed emphasis on tests has led to a growing movement urging parents to opt their children out of taking the tests, a right which parents actually have been given in the school reform mandates.¹⁸ Results from the many required tests are now beginning to confirm what the teachers we interviewed are saying—that their young children are having limited success learning the narrow academic skills being taught. Test scores show that many

of the standards are not being met by significant numbers of children in the early grades. There is little evidence that children in poverty are benefiting in the ways those promoting the mandates promised they would. And listening to the voices of the teachers we interviewed, we have many concerns about what the long-term negative effects might be on school achievement, family relationships, attitudes towards school and learning, and much more.¹⁹

At this point, based on what teachers told us, the biggest beneficiaries of the current mandates may be the corporations that have developed the math and reading curriculum programs, workbooks, worksheets, tests, and technology that schools must purchase and teachers and children must use—often at the expense of hands-on play material or funding for teachers’ aides or special services from which children could really benefit. And even if we were to see improved performance on the tests (which is unlikely), we know of little evidence showing that doing better on the narrow academic skills assessed by the tests will have a significant impact on children’s overall academic achievement and overcoming the effects that early-in-life poverty can have on development and achievement in the long run.²⁰

FACING THE CHALLENGE

CHILD POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES has reached unprecedented levels. It is at a higher rate than any other industrialized country in the world, except for Greece, Israel, Mexico and Turkey.²¹ A recent survey found that U.S. public schools have now reached the not-widely-publicized milestone of having approximately half of the enrolled children coming from low-income homes.^{22, 23} In addition to increasing rates of child poverty in the country, the rising poverty levels in public schools are due in part to the fact that many children from more affluent homes, who have difficulties with the mandates or whose parents disagree with them, have transferred to private or charter schools that are not bound by the mandates.

To deal with the current situation, we must first admit that education is but one of the many essential pieces to address when considering how to counteract all of the disadvantages caused by poverty.²⁴ We should be using all of our considerable knowledge about how to create quality

early childhood education that promotes poor children's optimal learning and well-being. **But instead, today we are:**

- 1) **mandating practices that have been discredited for years;**
- 2) **ignoring the research we do have on effective practice, especially as it relates to working with poor children;**^{25 26}
- 3) **shutting out the voices of highly experienced teachers who have been trained in and deeply understand how to implement quality practices with low-income children; and**
- 4) **running the risk of having more and more of our best trained teachers leave the field because of their loss of control of what they do in their classrooms and feelings of despair.**

There is little evidence that children in poverty are benefiting in the ways those promoting the mandates promised they would.

Our interviews with teachers reflect all of this, as their statements attest.

For far too long, we have failed as a society to fully address the complex needs of our children living in poverty.²⁷ We made a commitment to try to address them in 1965, with President Johnson's founding of the comprehensive "War on Poverty." This is when Head Start was first created as one part of a multifaceted approach to counteracting the effects of poverty on children. The War on Poverty recognized that schools alone could not undo the effects of poverty. This is why the War on Poverty included goals for working with families to promote stability and security with food, health, housing, social services, employment assistance, and more.²⁸ The myth that existed before Head Start—that schools alone can eradicate all of poverty's effects on young children and become the primary source of children's social mobility out of poverty—seems to be back with us today.²⁹

The Head Start component of the War on Poverty taught us important lessons about how to work effectively with low-income young children in schools. When Head Start began, many different curricular models were intentionally adopted with the goal of determining which approaches were most effective in meeting the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of poor children in both the short and long term. Children were evaluated while attending Head Start programs, and for many years afterwards. The results were correlated with the different curricular models—from highly academic-skill based to highly hands-on material, child-centered, play-based. One of the follow-up studies showing the greatest positive long-term effects comes from the HighScope Approach. It has one of the most comprehensive, teacher-facilitated, individualized, play-based curriculum of any of the early Head Start models, some of which were far more teacher-directed and skills-focused.³⁰

The lessons learned about the value of a developmentally-appropriate and play-based curriculum from this early Head Start research seem to have been completely ignored in today's one-size-fits-all school reform efforts. And they confirm the validity of the concerns of the teachers we interviewed about how current school reform mandates are affecting the development and learning of their low-income children and ignoring what teachers know about appropriate early childhood practice.³¹

It is time for everyone who cares about the well-being of all of our young children living in poverty to look at the challenges they currently face and use our best, most comprehensive knowledge to do all we can to bring about positive change for them, their families, schools, and the wider society. Toward that end, it is essential that we *listen to the voices of these teachers* who have a unique understanding of how to meet the needs of young children impacted by poverty. **One size does NOT fit all. The time has come for us to RECLAIM appropriate early childhood practice for our early childhood classrooms in low-income communities, using the best information, research, and resources we have—including the voices of our experienced and developmentally-trained early childhood professionals.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- 1 Withdraw current early childhood standards and mandates so they can be rethought along developmental lines using the best available research about quality early childhood practice.
- 2 Ensure that efforts to develop new standards include the voices of early childhood experts, including experienced early childhood educators.
- 3 Focus on meeting the educational needs of children living in poverty, using strategies that address the diversity of children's needs, rates of learning, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds.
- 4 Conduct pilot testing of standards and strategies before wide-scale implementation of any new school reforms are undertaken.
- 5 Use on-going assessments based on observations of children, their development and learning to inform teachers and help guide their practice.
- 6 Provide principals and other administrators with the training in early childhood education they need to understand and support teachers' implementation of developmentally and culturally appropriate expectations and practices in their classrooms.
- 7 Assure that schools in low-income areas have the leadership and resources necessary to become innovative, model schools with positive environments that can attract and retain highly educated, committed and experienced teachers.
- 8 Promote new teachers' abilities to implement developmentally appropriate practices through high-quality teacher preparation and on-going professional development.
- 9 Implement comprehensive efforts to meet the needs of children in poverty that go beyond schools. Use what we learned from effective U.S. programs in the past as well those from other countries that have successfully reduced childhood poverty.
- 10 Work at all levels of society to reduce, and ultimately end, child poverty. To do this, we must first acknowledge that a narrow focus on improving schools will not solve the complex problems associated with child poverty.

DEFENDING THE EARLY YEARS (DEY) was founded in 2012 to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is committed to promoting appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and supporting educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices. DEY is a non-profit project of the Survival Education Fund, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 educational organization.

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The trust in my expertise and judgment as a teacher is gone. So are the play and learning centers in my classroom.

With this extreme emphasis on what's called "rigorous academics," drills are emphasized. It's much harder for my children to become self-regulated learners.

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