



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.

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.

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.



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Full report, *Teachers Speak Out: How School Reforms Are Failing Low-Income Young Children*, available for downloading at

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