

Giving Young Children the Curriculum They Deserve

In recent years, a growing consensus has emerged about the importance of early childhood education. Educators, policymakers, and researchers recognize that because students come to school with large differences in their prior learning, early childhood classrooms can help level the playing field. They understand that early learning can help those children who lag far behind their peers catch up on what they need to succeed in school.

But it's not just a matter of children entering the classroom early. Simply having 3- or 4-year-olds attend school does not guarantee they will be prepared to achieve in later grades. What many in education tend to overlook is the role that curriculum, in the hands of a talented and caring educator, plays in a child reaching his or her full potential.

This special collection of articles in *American Educator* highlights the importance not only of early learning, but also of what, exactly, young children learn. It begins with an article explaining the research on children's oral vocabulary development and how educators can effectively support students in learning new words. Acquiring and understanding a significant amount of vocabulary in the early years helps children build the necessary background knowledge that will lay the foundation for future learning.

It goes without saying that such a foundation must be rock solid. Each article makes clear that curriculum in early childhood classrooms must be content-rich, meaning that students should be exposed to the full range of academic subjects and disciplines: English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as music and the arts.

For too long, several myths have persisted in the field of early childhood education, including that young children are not ready to learn sophisticated content, and that they find it boring. Yet these long-held beliefs simply don't hold up against years of evidence, some of which is presented in the following pages.

Besides noting the elements that make an early childhood curriculum challeng-

including home daycare providers and daycare centers, schools are the central convening point for content. To that end, we hope these articles help all early childhood educators meet the needs of their students. Recently, the AFT, in conjunction with the National Center for Learning Disabilities, has developed a second edition of *Transitioning to Kindergarten* (highlighted on page 41 and the back cover



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ing yet still child-friendly, this issue also highlights a strong example of one such curriculum: Core Knowledge Language Arts. This program for preschool through third grade offers a phonics-based approach to teaching reading and writing skills, and features engaging and informative materials for teachers to share with their students on topics such as the five senses, Native Americans, astronomy, early Asian civilizations, and insects, among other complex subjects that young children are eager to explore and are fully capable of learning.

The AFT has long been at the forefront of advocating for early childhood education. Creating greater access to rich learning opportunities for young learners, especially for those who live in poverty and need extra preparation for school, continues to be an important focus of the union's work. While early childhood education takes place in various settings,

of this issue), with practical tips for educators, parents, and others on how to support preschoolers as they adjust to the next grade level.

Also, to better inform policymakers and help classroom teachers, *American Educator* maintains an archive of its research-based articles on early childhood education, available for free at www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/subject.cfm.

For years, the emphasis on developing students' reading and mathematics skills has too often left content in the elementary grades and in early childhood education settings bereft of substance. As the push to expand early learning opportunities finally gains momentum, it's time to give curriculum the attention it deserves. In doing so, we can ensure that young children learn the meaningful content that is essential to the high-quality education they *all* deserve.

—EDITORS