



## A Strong Start for All Young Learners

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THE TRUE MARVEL of young children is their boundless curiosity, unyielding energy, and unending ability to absorb new concepts.

High-quality early childhood education nurtures all these wonderful traits and helps build a foundation for children's long-term success in school and in life. Efforts to expand access to affordable, high-quality early childhood programs are gaining momentum. Legislation such as the Strong Start for America's Children Act, introduced last year in the U.S. Senate, would provide funding to expand early childhood education opportunities, develop quality partnerships, increase wages for early childhood educators, and support professional development.

As we continue these efforts, we also must ensure that the climate of hyper-testing currently in vogue in the K-12 world isn't wrongly transferred to our early learners.

Unfortunately, the mentality of testing over teaching and learning is beginning to seep into early childhood education. Children who should be exuding excitement are increasingly sitting still for long periods of time, tasked with filling in bubbles to answer often-confusing questions.

The impact of our national intoxication with testing has been well documented in the K-12 years. The United States is the only country that administers standardized tests to every child every year, which results in a fixation on testing that squeezes out vital parts of the curriculum and robs students of much-needed learning time.

Standardized testing is at cross-purposes with many of the most important goals of public education. It doesn't measure big-picture learning, critical thinking, perseverance, problem solving, creativity, or curiosity, yet those are the qualities that great teaching brings out in a student.

And that starts in the early childhood years. Research—and just plain common sense—tells us that young children learn actively, through hands-on experiences. This process is not always linear or quantifiable—expecting young children to know specific facts or skills at specific ages simply does not make sense.

Yet in states across the country, officials are developing Common Core State Standards for pre-K, without ensuring that these standards are appropriate for young children. At the same time, some states also are asking early childhood educators to begin to prepare their students for K-3 Common Core assessments—pushing developmentally inappropriate practices into those crucial early learning years.

Years of research show that the best way to assess the progress of our early learners is through the expertise of teachers who know how to observe and interpret young children's activities and behavior. Teachers like Erma Voss, a preschool teacher in Chicago.

"They need something that's hands-on, something that's tangible that the child can touch and see, as opposed to something that's written down," Voss says. "These big-time companies, they push their stuff, but every child doesn't do well with that."

The AFT has launched a multipronged attack on testing that aims to ensure that early childhood educators like Erma are able to keep doing what they do best—help our early learners discover the joy of learning by engaging them in developmentally appropriate ways, while assessing the whole child, instead of turning them into a data point from the beginning.

The AFT is taking on big testing companies such as Pearson Education, which recently agreed to discuss the gag orders and lack of transparency around standardized tests that are fueling a growing distrust and backlash among parents, students, and educators about

whether current testing protocols are in the best interests of children.

We are fighting back against VAM, or value-added measurements. These measurements, which are generated by unreliable algorithms, are being used to evaluate teachers, despite being developed initially for other purposes—and over the objections of leading researchers.



MICHAEL CAMPBELL

Randi Weingarten visits with pre-K students at W. B. Patterson Elementary School in Washington, DC.

We are working to change accountability systems so that they focus on improving and supporting rather than testing and punishing. Together with parents, teachers, students, and communities, we are fighting to turn our public education system around to restore the focus to teaching and learning, not testing above all else.

Our youngest learners possess an innate curiosity and joy for learning that we need to nurture—not squelch. That is why our fight is so important. Let's give our children the early education they need and deserve by ensuring that they are engaged in developmentally appropriate programs that foster their social and emotional development—and by ensuring that early childhood educators are supported in their efforts to meet the individual needs of every child. In this issue of *American Educator*, we highlight approaches to early childhood education that can help our youngest learners shine.