

Iowa DE/AEA Early Childhood Network

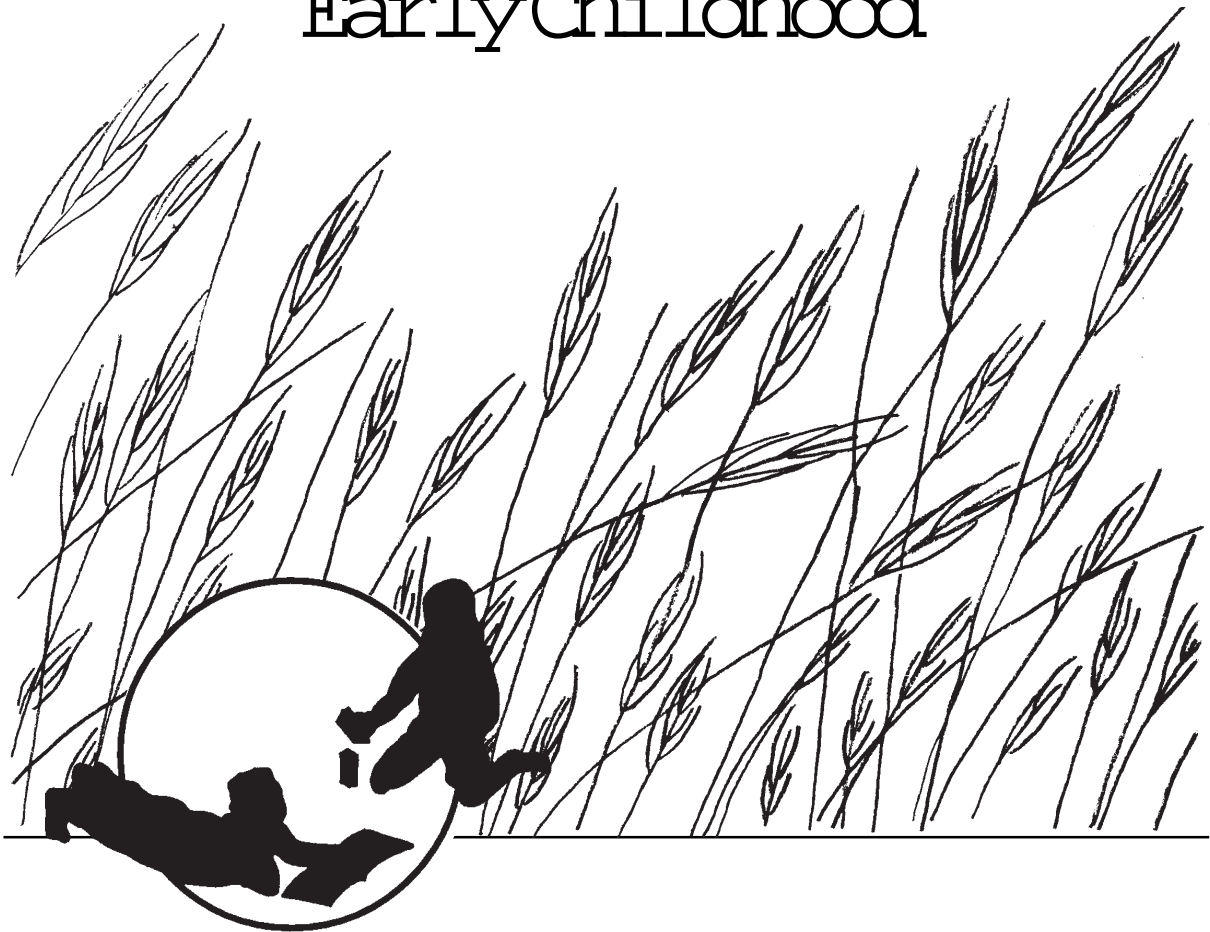
Fact Sheet

on

School Improvement

and

Early Childhood



This fact sheet was a collaborative effort of the Iowa Department of Education/Iowa Area Education Agencies Early Childhood Network. It is not intended to be an all-inclusive document on this topic, but rather a concise, helpful reference tool. This fact sheet is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.



School Improvement and Early Childhood

School improvement is a continuous process, not a destination.

Definition

School Improvement in Iowa is a systemic reform effort supported by the Code of Iowa, Sections 280.12 (evaluation of educational programs) and 280.18 (student achievement goals). The purpose of school restructuring is to continuously improve student learning opportunities and to increase student achievement. School improvement calls for fundamental restructuring of educational delivery and a significant shift in the roles of students, parents, community members, administration, and all educational staff.

In Iowa, school improvement is localized, with student achievement goals developed by each school district. The school becomes a system designed for all students, prekindergarten through post-secondary, rather than a collection of fragmented programs. The process for this change and its outcomes are both unique yet similar. The outcome of school improvement is to link the various local, state, and federal reform initiatives into a coherent system of school improvement endeavors. (Iowa Department of Education, 1998)

Early Childhood is defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children as spanning the years from birth to age 8. Early Childhood School Improvement initiatives include planning for the educational needs of children ages 5-8. It may include community partnerships with families and agencies supporting programs for infants-5 year olds.

Early Childhood Education as the Foundation for School Improvement

The Pomerantz's Commission stated, "Mounting research attests to the importance of the first years of life. Social and environmental factors in the young child's life are strongly linked to the child's ability to succeed in school and life. Recent research on brain development underscores the importance of early prevention and intervention and in working with the child's first teachers—his or her parents." (Pomerantz, 1997) The early years benefits from an extensive body of research on best practice which have been put together into a coherent framework-developmentally appropriate practice.

The Iowa Department of Education, the Iowa State Board of Education, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children encourage that prekindergarten through third grade programs be designed around a *developmentally appropriate approach*. In explaining developmentally appropriate Lillian Katz states, "Decisions about what should be learned and how it would best be learned depend on what we know of the learner's developmental status and our understanding of the relationships between early experience and subsequent development." (Katz, 1995)

Every school improvement committee needs to have broad-based community and school representation. Early childhood educators are important members on local school improvement committees. They have the background and knowledge to address the unique needs of children prior to school entry and students in the first four years of schooling which should be taken into consideration when school improvement decisions are made.

"All programs in early childhood education are not equally effective in promoting the learning and development of young children. The overall effectiveness of an early childhood program is dependent upon several factors: quality staff, suitable environment, appropriate grouping practices, consistent schedules, and parent involvement. Decisions about these factors often are made early in the planning and organizing process for an early childhood program. These decisions have important ramifications because they affect the child, the family, the classroom, the school, and the community." (NCREL, 1997)

Common Characteristics of Early Childhood and School Improvement

One characteristic of school improvement is that it follows a *continuous improvement model* which consists of data collection, analysis of data to set goals, creation of plans to achieve goals, collection of data as evidence towards achieving goals, reporting progress on achieving goals, and developing new goals from analyzing the data collected. This is consistent with system improvement in quality early childhood programs. This same process can be used in goal setting for individual children, classroom or building settings, as well as within the district.

Collaboration between multiple stakeholders (educators, parents, administrators, board members, community members, students) participating in the data collection, goal setting, implementation, and assessing & reporting on improvement is a second characteristic of School Improvement initiatives. In early childhood programs advisory committees, child care boards, and local school improvement committees collaborate together to assure that the needs of young children are represented in local planning and decision making.

A third characteristic consistent with school improvement and early childhood is creating and maintaining a *system where there are high expectations for all*. "All" includes children and families from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Children with limited English proficiency and identified special needs are included and provided services to assure success in learning. It also includes high expectations for staff working with the children and their families. Staff are qualified and prepared to work with diverse populations. They have knowledge about services provided within the school as well as those available in the larger community. A standards system, where the reporting of an individual's progress towards achieving district set standards and benchmarks can be congruent with early childhood education. The benchmarks must be challenging but achievable, with a variety of system supports including differentiated instruction to ensure success by all students.

A system that is *student focused*, basing decisions on what is "good" for students, and that will have an impact on increasing student achievement is a fourth characteristic consistent with school improvement and early childhood. Recognizing that there is an individually appropriate dimension as well as an age appropriate dimension in developmentally appropriate programming is critical in this area. Student achievement is measured using reliable and valid assessment measures for the child. In early childhood individual performance assessments, collected over time, are documented and used to plan for appropriate instruction and to report growth and progress. Marie Clay's Observation Survey, running records, portfolio assessment, teacher observation with anecdotal records, etc. are types of performance assessments used regularly in early childhood classrooms. These assessments are used for instructional decision making and reporting progress to others. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has a written position statement on "Standardized Testing" that should guide local decisions about the kinds of testing that is done with young children. Using a standardized test to exclude a child from a program, basing decisions on one test score, is an inappropriate practice when following a developmentally appropriate philosophy.

Early Childhood Resource- *The Primary Program*

The Primary Program- Growing and Learning in the Heartland is a framework to guide decision makers in designing a developmentally appropriate program for prekindergarten- third grade children in a school setting. It is available in each elementary building throughout the state of Iowa. This framework provides research information on:

- social/emotional development;
- intellectual development;
- physical development and well-being.
- development of responsibility;
- aesthetic and artistic development;

The "Descriptors of Learning" and "Widely Held Expectations" sections help identify characteristics of developmentally appropriate learning for young children. When committee members are in need of print information about the unique needs of young children this guide is a useful reference. A video series entitled "A Place to Learn and Grow", available from the AEA Early Childhood Consultant, shows classrooms and centers designed with a developmentally appropriate philosophy. Contact your AEA Early Childhood Consultant for additional information and technical assistance.



The Primary Program: A Paradigm Shift

Shift from:

Child adapts.....
 Child as passive.....
 Child as dependent.....
 Whole group instruction.....
 Individual tasks.....
 Preset material is covered.....
 3 R's instructional focus.....

Separate subjects.....
 Workbooks.....

Verbal information emphasis.....
 Single correct answers.....
 Work and play divided.....
 Holiday rituals marked.....

Teacher is the sole arbitrator of what is correct.....
 Grouping is by ability or age.....

Assessment is of what a child already knows.....
 Assessment is for classification and reporting.....

Child is recipient of the teacher's teaching.....
 Answers are valued.....
 Paper and pencil representations.....

Towards:

Schools adapt
 Child as active
 Child as partner in learning
 Whole group, small group, and individual instruction
 Balanced small groups, cooperative and individual tasks
 Children's capacity to learn is extended
 Focus is on concepts, skills, processes, and attitudes in five goal areas

Integrated subjects
 Concrete materials, quality literature, and a variety of resource materials

Constructivist, problem-solving, thinking emphasis
 Alternative solutions are generated
 Play is one condition of learning
 Multicultural content is based on the study of social experience.

Children as theory builders and negotiators
 Group is developed by interest, motivation, & learning needs

Assessment focuses on how a child learns and what a child "can do"
 Assessment is ongoing for purposes of instructional decision making

Child is collaborator in own learning
 Questions are valued
 Multiple ways of representing knowledge

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Iowa State Board of Education Priorities
<http://www.state.ia.us/educate/stbd/priorities.html>

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