

First School

UNITING THE BEST OF EARLY CHILDHOOD,
ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Number One

Issues in PreK-3rd Education



What is FirstSchool?

Sharon Ritchie, Kelly Maxwell, & Richard Clifford

The United States is at a turning point in public education. Public schools across the country are providing early care and education for children as young as three. In fact, nearly a million four-year-olds are served in public schools.¹

Simply being in a public school building will not help children acquire the skills they need to succeed. We believe it is important to move away from separate notions of “early childhood education,” “K-12 education” and “special education” toward an integrated approach for children ages 3 to 8 that unites the best of all three. We must think of pre-k together with kindergarten, first-, second-, and third-grade as an aligned, coordinated experience in which children acquire the basic skills that provide the foundation for later lifelong learning.

Many children are not acquiring these basic skills. Data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, our nation’s report card on education, found that only 43% of White fourth-graders tested at or above “proficient” in reading, and only 14% of Black children and 17% of Hispanic children were considered “proficient” or higher in reading.² The findings are only slightly better in math.³

We have a unique moment in history to thoughtfully and strategically determine how we are going to best educate our children. The decisions we make today will impact children, families, communities, and the American workforce for generations to come. FPG Child Development Institute, long recognized as one of America’s premier child development research institutions, in partnership with The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill School of Education is uniquely positioned to address this important issue. We are creating FirstSchool as a new vision for the education and care of young children from pre-kindergarten through third grade that unites the best of early childhood, elementary, and special education.

FirstSchool is committed to a set of values and an inquiry approach to systemic change in school. These values and an approach to change are described in the next sections.

FirstSchool

FirstSchool is a pre-K–grade 3 initiative led by FPG and the UNC-CH School of Education to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population. FirstSchool unites the best of early childhood, elementary, and special education.

www.firstschool.us

FirstSchool is part of a national PreK–3rd movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different projects use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. For more resources on this movement, please visit the Foundation for Child Development’s website.

www.fcd-us.org

Who is FPG?

For more than 40 years, FPG Child Development Institute (FPG) research and outreach has shaped how the nation cares for and educates young children. We are one of the nation’s oldest and largest multidisciplinary centers dedicated to the study of children and families.

www.fpg.unc.edu

Who is the UNC-CH SOE?

The School of Education was established at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1885 and is organized under four academic areas: teaching and learning; educational leadership; human development and psychological studies; and culture, curriculum and change.

www.soe.unc.edu

FirstSchool Values

Our values guide decision-making throughout the change process.

Value 1. Change is based on making schools ready for children, not making children ready for schools. Instead of making younger children “fit” into the K-12 system, FirstSchool turns the question on its head and asks, “What do schools need to do to be ready for children and their families?” The emphasis is on changing schools, not on changing families or community programs to help make children ready for school.

Value 2. Committed to the success of each child. School must work for each child and family. It is the responsibility of the adults in the school to support the development and learning of each child.

Value 3. Willingness to invest resources and time to bring about systemic change. FirstSchool assumes a systems perspective in its approach to promote and support change toward a new kind of education for children age 3 through third grade. FirstSchool recognizes the need to work on multiple components within and across systems—including local schools, school districts, state departments of education, communities, and institutions of higher education—if we are to dramatically transform the early schooling experience for children in the US. This kind of change cannot be affected easily or cheaply. FirstSchool is committed to finding and allocating the human and monetary resources and time for systemic change.

Value 4. Actively explore and strengthen equity in all aspects of schooling. FirstSchool is committed to honestly and openly addressing race and other issues of equity as they relate to all aspects of schooling.

Value 5. Positive, reciprocal relationships are key to successful reform and successful education. Positive relationships are foundational to all aspects of FirstSchool. Children feel safe to explore within their classrooms, optimize their learning opportunities and make friends when they trust the education professionals in schools to care for them and help them solve their problems. Education professionals are more effective when they work well with other educational professionals and develop positive relationships with their students and families.

Value 6. Integrate and unite the best of early childhood, elementary, and special education for children in pre-kindergarten through third grade. FirstSchool works to move from a position of isolation to collaboration among early childhood, elementary, and special education to provide a seamless and excellent education for children in pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Inquiry Approach to Change

Genuine inquiry can only take place within a trusting environment—one where people can pose hard questions, be honest about their beliefs, and be open to different points of view. An inquiry approach pushes members of the school community to continually examine and refine instructional practices to improve teaching and learning processes for children. An inquiry group, community of practice, or professional learning community is characterized by sustained problem solving opportunities based on the problems or issues encountered by education professionals and families in daily living, regular reflection, and a common mission to create change in schools.^{4,5,6}

Trust is the basis of strong relationships that are developed within and among multiple stakeholders. FirstSchool is committed to a collaborative process that will integrate the best available scientific research about early schooling with the wisdom and values of both families and practitioners. We can best develop and implement new approaches to early schooling only through strong relationships with all those involved in the education and care of children including families, the early childhood community, public schools, multidisciplinary professionals, and a wide range of individuals and agencies who are invested in positive outcomes for children.

The inquiry approach is one that provides a clear message that there are no simple answers. The families and communities in which schools are embedded provide their own set of facilitators and barriers to making changes on behalf of children. Each school, each educator must be able to bring those circumstances to the table in order to engage in meaningful discussion about the successes and challenges of their programs. We invite you to use the FirstSchool products to guide your inquiry into supporting a seamless, excellent educational foundation for children in pre-kindergarten through third grade. ■

Notes

- ¹Clifford, R. M., Early, D. M., & Hills, T. (1999). Almost a million children in school before kindergarten. *Young Children*, 54(5), 38–51.
- ²Lee, J., Grigg, W. S., & Donahue, P. L. (2007). *The nation's report card: Reading 2007* (NCES 2007-496). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- ³Lee, J., Grigg, W., & Dion, G. (2007). *The nation's report card: Mathematics 2007* (NCES 2007-494). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- ⁴Buysse, V., Wesley, P. W., & Able-Boone, H. (2001). Innovations in professional development: Creating communities of practice to support inclusion. In M. J. Guralnick (Ed.), *Early childhood inclusion: Focus on change* (pp. 179–200). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- ⁵Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁶Pugach, M. C. (1999). Success, access, and the promise of communities of practice. *Teacher Education, Special Education*, 22, 269–271. © 2008 by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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