COLLABORATIVE FOR STUDENT GROWTH

BRIEF

Preparing early learners: Considerations for supporting the kindergarten class of 2021

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Among the many ways in which schools are being transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the change in public school kindergarten enrollment is one likely to have important consequences in classrooms across the nation. Because the academic and non-academic skills students develop in their preschool and early elementary school years are foundational to important longer-term outcomes, understanding these changes and finding ways to effectively support our youngest students' learning is critical for educators and leaders. Drawing on recent research, we offer four timely considerations for district, school, and classroom leaders.

1. Expect greater age differences in kindergarten (and some first-grade) classrooms

Comprehensive data are just emerging, but districts across the country reported substantial drops in the number of students enrolled, especially in their kindergartens, in the 2020–2021 school year. An NPR survey, for example, showed steep declines in kindergarten enrollment in districts across the country in fall 2020, with an average drop of 16% in kindergarten enrollments. The "missing" kindergarten students likely include children who ended up attending kindergarten in private or other schools or formally homeschooled this year. But COVID redshirting is an important factor: many families postponed their children's school entry in light of the challenges and demands of online or hybrid instruction for young learners and concern about children's health and safety in schools in the midst of a pandemic.

The options and obstacles faced by families with young children varied widely this year, as do state policies regarding issues like early learning and preschool, whether kindergarten is mandatory, and the age at which students may first enroll. The majority of states (39) do not require children to attend kindergarten, but most require districts to offer either full or half-day kindergarten instruction. The enrollment shift suggests a likely scenario of a "kinder bubble" in the coming year as more and older students enter school. Districts may see larger and more split-age classes for both first-grade and kindergarten cohorts, with many more students unfamiliar with in-person classroom routines.

Local enrollment patterns also suggest that kindergarten composition changes and COVID redshirting may differ across communities. Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, reported a drop of nearly 14% in kindergarten enrollment, with the biggest drops generally in neighborhoods with the lowest household incomes, according to Superintendent Austin Beutner. Mr. Beutner noted: "We suspect some of this is because families may lack the ability to provide full-time support at home for online learning, which is necessary for very young learners." Indiana saw state-wide kindergarten enrollment declines (7%). Oregon saw an even larger overall 16% decrease in fall 2020, and White families were twice as likely as Black or Latino families to postpone kindergarten enrollment for their five-year-olds. In sum, just as COVID-related economic and community impacts varied dramatically across locales, parents and guardians also have varying circumstances and resources to redshirt their children. Taken together, these trends suggest educators will likely face a larger kindergarten class in fall of 2021, with a wider range of student ages, abilities, and skills than prior cohorts.

2. Prepare for wider skill disparities upon entry

Extensive research shows that the academic and non-academic skills children develop before kindergarten are a critical foundation for their subsequent learning and success. There are also troubling and persistent early learning opportunity disparities: children living in communities experiencing poverty and/or from historically marginalized groups enter school with lower reading and math skill levels than do their more advantaged peers. In efforts to reduce opportunity gaps, recent state and federal policies have focused on promoting early education programs to improve academic skills for all children, especially targeting families in low-income communities. Recent research showed some promising trends before the COVID-19 pandemic, with narrowing of gaps in skills for kindergarten students. One study showed both income and racial/ethnic gaps narrowing modestly from 1998 to 2010, particularly between high- and low-income students and between White and Hispanic students, and suggested that shifts in preschool enrollment patterns over that period could be an important factor in that change. More recent research finds this national pattern of a narrowing in math and reading achievement gaps by race/ethnicity and school-poverty level continues, although more recent cohorts of kindergarteners have had moderately lower performance overall compared to prior years. Additionally, emerging studies bring insight into where extra support may be needed to foster our youngest learners.

While data that will illuminate the academic trends in the 2020–21 academic year are forthcoming, without proactive resourcing and planning in the months ahead, many of the inequities sharply highlighted during COVID-19 could continue to differentially impact our most underserved communities. Measuring and quickly sharing information on what works will help scale approaches to support more learning for more students.

3. Use summer to get kids kindergarten-ready

States and districts are also seeing sizeable declines in preschool enrollment. If these missing students enroll next school year, more students will enter formal schooling without typical pre-K preparation. Increasingly, systems are exploring how to use the summer months more effectively to address unfinished learning and better equip first-time school attenders. For example, Alexandra City Public Schools, whose summer school program was invitation-only in prior years, is expanding to all pre-K–12 students. "Interest in offering summer instruction and enrichment programming for greater numbers of students is building amid pressure for school systems to address students' learning loss and social-emotional health," said National Summer Learning Association CEO Aaron Dworkin. Such summer opportunities will be particularly important for early learners.

Promising early kindergarten programs bring early childhood and school partners together to promote successful kindergarten transition for children and families in high-need communities. More specifically, such efforts help children build social skills, acquire confidence, and become excited about classroom learning. Many three-week programs prioritize the enrollment of children who have not had a structured preschool experience, have a primary language other than English, and/or have struggled with attendance or behavior while enrolled in preschool.

4. Use data to drive evidence-based decision making and understand long-term implications

It is commonly believed that giving children some additional time before enrolling in kindergarten will allow them to become more ready for school. The assumption behind this belief is that being older and more mature when they enter school will help children learn more while they are in school. For example, an older child may be more developmentally ready to engage with academic materials presented in class and less likely to have disruptive behavior. This assumption might seem reasonable, but research evidence shows that the relation between age and learning is not that simple. Being older might give students an initial advantage when they enter kindergarten, but the benefits fade over time.

Research from the past three decades on school entry age produced mixed results, with some studies linking an older starting age to positive effects on students' later outcomes and others finding links to negative effects. A recent study using MAP® Growth™ data found that students who were around six years old when they entered kindergarten had higher initial math and reading test scores and higher initial growth than students who were around five years old; however, during first and second grade, the older students grew less than the younger students. We don't yet have the data to see if older students will continue to grow less beyond third grade, but if the pattern persists, it means the benefits of being older will keep diminishing.

There are other important questions to be answered about kindergarten entry age and its short- and long-term implications. Being older seems to make a difference, but how or why it makes a difference is still unclear. Some research suggests that sharing a classroom with older peers (in other words, being relatively young in the class) is beneficial because the child can learn from more mature classmates. Other studies argue that being relatively older among classmates gives the child an advantage because teachers may favor students who are more mature. Another developing strand in this research is how age affects non-academic development, such as social-emotional well-being and social behavioral outcomes.

Much remains to be explored in this key research topic, and longitudinal academic and non-academic data will play a crucial role in helping educators and families understand ways to best meet the needs of young students. To design policies and programs that provide equitable opportunities to all students, knowledge of their growth and development over time will be essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Brooke Mabry and Cara Holt

Foster a sense of belonging and purpose

Cultivate strong relationships with and among students

Kindergarten may be many students' first experience with formal schooling, and students need time to develop relationships not only with you but also with one another. Spending a significant amount of time at the beginning of the year to truly get to know one another and form a classroom family pays a high return on fostering educational safety. Additionally, kindergarten teachers play a critical role in cultivating students' love of learning early in their educational career, and it all starts with relationships. Take time to engage your students in getting to know you and their classmates, and make space for all to collaboratively build the learning community.

Create a culture of learning

Students need to feel their classroom is a safe place to take risks. They need to know it is okay to make mistakes because that's where learning often happens. And they need to know you see them and value them as human beings. Remember to celebrate failure for what it is: a golden opportunity to try again.

Explicitly teach, model, practice, and monitor classroom routines

Establishing routines provides students with a predictable and organized learning environment, one in which they feel secure and empowered to self-manage. Be sure to provide ample opportunities for students to practice routines with actionable teacher feedback before asking students to execute routines alongside new learning. Remember, teach process before content, and invite students to help you create a clear set of classroom guidelines to keep your environment both physically and emotionally safe. Allowing students to self-monitor and reflect on classroom procedures together adds student voice, choice, and metacognition to the process—all necessary components for increasing engagement and motivation.

Collect and use a variety of data

Use data to determine student readiness for instruction

Consider the data available to you from a variety of assessments, including beginning-of-year interim or universal screeners, curricular or other diagnostics, and classroom formative checks for understanding. Triangulate data to develop a robust profile of student performance and compare to the scope and sequence for the current unit of study. The aim of your analysis is to determine which students may have unfinished or advanced learning needs so that you can differentiate your lessons to scaffold for access to or extension beyond grade-level expectations for students who need support or challenge.

Steps for planning responsive instruction:

1. Determine the focus of your instruction (standards), the intended outcomes (learning targets), and how you and your students will monitor their progress toward the intended outcomes (success criteria).

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2. Develop the assessments that will help you and students check for understanding (formative) and mastery (summative).
3. Create learning activities and tasks to guide learners along the path to mastery of the intended outcomes.
4. Consult existing data to determine student readiness for planned instruction and adjust lesson plans to proactively address student needs surfaced in the data (scaffold for access to or extension beyond grade-level expectations).
5. Teach, collect formative data, and responsively adjust instruction based on student performance.

Leverage individual conferences and small groups

Schedule one-on-one conferences

Making the time to set up conferences with students one-on-one provides teachers with a significant return on the investment. Conferences can be a way to check in and see how students are doing academically as well as emotionally. This is the time to hear students' successes and challenges as well as an opportunity to co-create and check in on plans that will support students in meeting academic, social-emotional, and behavioral goals. It is important to note these one-on-one conferences can be either formal or informal, ranging from conversations about a student's data and learning needs to opportunities to get to know students personally.

Set up small flexible groups for instruction and practice

Whole-group instruction can be challenging to design when there is high academic diversity and a variety of learning needs among students. When you want to provide opportunities to address students' differential needs and foster collaborative learning, consider creating small flexible groups of students. The aim is to be both purposeful and fluid in your grouping.

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The Collaborative for Student Growth at NWEA is devoted to transforming education research through advancements in assessment, growth measurement, and the availability of longitudinal data. The work of our researchers spans a range of educational measurement and policy issues including achievement gaps, assessment engagement, social-emotional learning, and innovations in how we measure student learning. Core to our mission is partnering with researchers from universities, think tanks, grant-funding agencies, and other stakeholders to expand the insights drawn from our student growth database—one of the most extensive in the world.

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