

A tough critique of Common Core on early childhood education

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: January 29, 2013

The debate on the Common Core State Standards has in recent months centered around the issue of [how much fiction](#) high school students should read. Here's a tough critique on the standards and how they relate to early childhood education. It was written by Edward Miller, a writer and teacher who lives in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. He is the co-author of "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School," and you can reach him at ed@ed-at-large.com. Nancy Carlsson-Paige is professor emerita of early childhood education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is the author of "Taking Back Childhood" and you can reach her at ncarlsson@lesley.edu.

By Edward Miller and Nancy Carlsson-Paige

Recent critiques of the Common Core Standards by [Marion Brady](#) and [John T. Spencer](#) have noted that the process for creating the new K-12 standards involved too little research, public dialogue, or input from educators.

Nowhere was this more startlingly true than in the case of the early childhood standards—those imposed on kindergarten through grade 3. We reviewed the [makeup of the committees](#) that wrote and reviewed the Common Core Standards. In all, there were 135 people on those panels. Not a single one of them was a K-3 classroom teacher or early childhood professional.

It appears that early childhood teachers and child development experts were excluded from the K-3 standards-writing process.

When the standards were first revealed in March 2010, many early childhood educators and researchers were shocked. "The people who wrote these standards do not appear to have any background in child development or early childhood education," wrote Stephanie Feeney of the University of Hawaii, chair of the Advocacy Committee of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators.

The promoters of the standards claim they are based in research. They are not. There is no convincing research, for example, showing that certain skills or bits of knowledge (such as counting to 100 or being able to read a certain number of words) if mastered in kindergarten will lead to later success in school. [Two recent studies](#) show that direct instruction can actually limit young children's learning. At best, the standards reflect guesswork, not cognitive or developmental science.

Moreover, the Common Core Standards do not provide for ongoing research or review of the outcomes of their adoption—a bedrock principle of any truly research-based endeavor.

It's bad enough to set up committees to make policy on matters they know little or nothing about. But it's worse to conceal and distort the public reaction to those policies. And that's exactly what happened.

Take a look at the [summary of “public feedback” posted on the Core Standards website](#). It is grossly misleading. First of all, calling the feedback “public” is wrong: the organizers of the standards [would not make public the nearly 10,000 comments](#) they say they received from citizens. The summary quotes 24 respondents—less than 1/4 of 1 percent of the total—selectively chosen to back up their interpretation of the results.

Reading this summary, one gets the clear impression that the reactions to the standards were overwhelmingly positive. “At least three-fourths of educators, **from pre-kindergarten** through higher education, reacted positively or very positively to each of the general topics,” reports the section on the math standards. The summary concludes: “The feedback is, overall, very good news for the standards developers.”

Early childhood gets few mentions in this summary. The first one, on page 3, quotes an anonymous respondent: “**Add pre-k standards.**” **In other words, not only do educators supposedly like the K-3 standards, they want them pushed down to even younger children. (In fact, that's what's happening now in many states.)**

The authors of the summary do say that a “group of respondents believe the [K-3] standards are developmentally inappropriate.” They characterize that group as being mainly parents who are concerned that “children are being pushed too hard.”

But they don't even mention a critically important statement opposing the K-3 standards, signed by more than 500 early childhood professionals. The [Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative](#) was signed by educators, pediatricians, developmental psychologists, and researchers, including many of the most prominent members of those fields.

Their statement reads in part:

We have grave concerns about the core standards for young children.... The proposed standards conflict with compelling new research in cognitive science, neuroscience, child development, and early childhood education about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them in kindergarten and the early grades....

The statement's four main arguments, below, are grounded in what we know about child development—facts that all education policymakers need to be aware of:

1. The K-3 standards will lead to long hours of direct instruction in literacy and math. This kind of “drill and grill” teaching has already pushed active, play-based learning out of many kindergartens.
2. The standards will intensify the push for more standardized testing, which is highly unreliable for children under age eight.
3. Didactic instruction and testing will crowd out other crucial areas of young children's learning: active, hands-on exploration, and developing social, emotional, problem-solving,

and self-regulation skills—all of which are difficult to standardize or measure but are the essential building blocks for academic and social accomplishment and responsible citizenship.

4. There is little evidence that standards for young children lead to later success. The research is inconclusive; many countries with top-performing high-school students provide rich play-based, nonacademic experiences—not standardized instruction—until age six or seven.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children is the foremost professional organization for early education in the U.S. Yet it had no role in the creation of the K-3 Core Standards. The Joint Statement opposing the standards was signed by three past presidents of the NAEYC—David Elkind, Ellen Galinsky, and Lilian Katz—and by Marcy Guddemi, the executive director of the Gesell Institute of Human Development; Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld of Harvard Medical School; Dorothy and Jerome Singer of the Yale University Child Study Center; Dr. Marilyn Benoit, past president of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Professor Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education; and many others.

We know that the instigators of the standards at the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers were aware of the Joint Statement well before their summary of public feedback was written. Copies of it were hand-delivered to eleven officials at those two organizations, including Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the CCSSO, and Dane Linn, director of the Education Division of the NGA, who were primarily responsible for the creation of the standards.

We called Mr. Wilhoit and Mr. Linn (who is now vice president of the Business Roundtable), along with several other people involved in the process, to ask them to comment for this article on the way the public feedback summary and the K-3 standards themselves were written. None of them returned our calls.

Why were early childhood professionals excluded from the Common Core Standards project? Why were the grave doubts of our most knowledgeable education and health experts missing from the official record of this undertaking? Would including them have forced the people driving this juggernaut to face serious criticism and questions about the legitimacy of the entire project?

The Common Core Standards are now the law in 46 states. But it's not too late to unearth the facts about how and why they were created, and to raise an alarm about the threat they represent.

The stakes are enormous. Dr. Carla Horwitz of the Yale Child Study Center notes that many of our most experienced and gifted teachers of young children are giving up in despair. "They are leaving the profession," says Horwitz, "because they can no longer do what they know will ensure learning and growth in the broadest, deepest way. The Core Standards will cause suffering, not learning, for many, many young children."

Our first task as a society is to protect our children. The imposition of these standards endangers them. To learn more about how early childhood educators are working to defend young children, see [Defending the Early Years](#).