

POLICY

BOARD OF EDUCATION OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Related Entries: ABC, IEA, IFB, IFB-RA, JEB, JEB-RA, JEB-RB, IKA, IKA-RA, IKB, IKB-RA, KGC, KGC-RA

Early Childhood Education

A. PURPOSE

To establish early childhood education as a high priority for the Montgomery County Public Schools, given that there is a strong and growing body of evidence that successful programs during the pre-school and early school years lead to higher levels of success in school in later years, and that they also lead to a reduction in dropout rates, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, and other behaviors that impede a child's success in life

To reaffirm Montgomery County Public Schools strong commitment to quality early childhood education and to recognize the importance of early success by developing readiness for each new experience, involving families in a child's education, creating a curriculum based on child development theory, building children's self-esteem, maintaining a well-trained and competent staff, and building partnerships with community groups

To provide early identification and intervention strategies to promote student success

To establish a philosophy as a basis for planning, program implementation, and decision-making for young children

To set the expectations for early childhood education that include developmentally appropriate instructional practice, a supportive learning environment, an emphasis on multicultural education, parent and community involvement, staff development, and coordination among all early childhood education programs

To provide an appropriate and nurturing program for every child no matter where a child may be on the developmental continuum and every child will be viewed as "ready" because the programs will be flexible enough to accommodate each one

B. PROCESS AND CONTENT

1. Definition

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National School Boards of Association, and many other recognized organizations define early childhood education to be for children from birth to age eight.

In Montgomery County Public Schools early childhood education includes regular education programs that serve children from age three through Grade 3 and special education for children from birth through Grade 3.

2. Philosophy

An understanding of child development and appropriate instructional practices provides the framework for early childhood education. This framework consists of the following four beliefs:

a) Young Children Differ From Older Children

Young children's thinking, ways of learning, and view of the world are qualitatively different from older children and adults. These youngsters are active and concrete learners who construct knowledge through experiences and interactions with their environment. They are naturally curious and spontaneous. Their eagerness for discovery impels them to explore their world. They are also inherently social and learn from interactions with others. These interactions can often be constructive and enhanced when an adult is involved. For young children, learning is sensory—the result of seeing, feeling, manipulating, hearing, smelling, tasting, taking apart, constructing, and experimenting. Young children experience the world as an integrated whole, not fragmented into subject areas. Physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of children's development and learning are intrinsically interrelated.

b) Young Children Differ From One Another

Although young children share similarities as a group, they differ remarkably from one another. Family background, culture, gender, personality, learning styles, interests, and abilities contribute to a child's individuality. Most children pass through the same sequence of developmental stages, but the pace of development varies from child to child. Moreover, development often does not proceed evenly.

The cognitive, physical, social, and emotional levels of maturity may vary within the individual child.

c) Self-Esteem Is Essential

Young children's feelings about themselves directly affect their learning and development. Early childhood education programs nurture children's self-esteem by providing experiences of success, opportunities for self-direction and self-control, and a climate of trust and affection. Self-worth is also fostered by interactions which demonstrate appreciation for each child's individuality and ethnicity. Children need not to be encouraged to take pride in their own cultural heritage while respecting other cultures.

d) Parents Play An Essential Role

Parents are their children's primary educators. They then share this responsibility when the child enters school. The interrelatedness of the roles of family and school requires a partnership involving communication, shared decision-making, and a variety of opportunities for parents to contribute to the education process.

3. High priority programs

Among the programs which have been highly successful in meeting the needs of young children are Head Start, the Extended Elementary Education Program (EEEP), Kindergarten (both full-day and half-day), Chapter I, and the MCPS provision for instructional aides in selected Grades 1 and 2 classrooms, all serving students in regular education. A variety of exemplary special education programs are also provided for students with special needs. These programs, each of which plays an integral part of the effort to enhance early childhood education, need to be sustained as they are integrated into a comprehensive early childhood program. Specifically, with regard to several of these programs:

- a) Head Start, a program operated for three and four year-old children in MCPS, needs to be available and accessible to every eligible child, as eligibility is defined in MCPS. In addition to Head Start which serves disadvantaged children, there is a recognized need for programs for all four year-old children in MCPS, utilizing the same approaches Head Start has used with appropriate modifications.

- b) All-day kindergarten needs to be expanded so that it is available to every child for whom it is an appropriate program. Its value is clear from an educational perspective, and research as well as MCPS experience demonstrate that it plays a valuable role in the education of young children, not as a substitute for day care, but as an opportunity for children to grow and develop in ways the half-day program does not typically allow.
- c) Chapter I, a program designed to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged children in kindergarten through Grade 4, needs to be available and accessible to every eligible child in MCPS. This program provides classroom instructional assistants, materials, and enrichment activities in an effort to attain educational equity for the children it serves.
- d) EEEP is a state funded prekindergarten program for four year-olds. The classes are located in Chapter I eligible schools and meet the standards for quality preschool education as set forth by the Maryland State Department of Education. There are no income or other eligibility requirements for enrollment in this program.
- e) The provision for instructional aides in Grade 1 and 2 has proven its worth by allowing classroom teachers to individualize instruction and to deal with a steadily more diverse population through the efforts of more than one adult in the classroom, needs to be extended in two ways:
 - (1) to all classrooms in Grade 1 and 2, expanding first in those schools and classrooms where the need for added help is greatest, and
 - (2) to kindergarten and to Grade 3.
- f) MCPS provides a variety of special education services to children, ages birth to eight years, through school-based classes and other area and central programs. Services are provided to children with a wide range of needs, including, but not limited to, speech/language, auditory, vision, orthopedic, and developmental delays.

The growth and development of these critically important programs will, of course, be subject to the availability of funding support from the County Council.

4. Coordination

Programs for young children are located in elementary schools for Kindergarten through Grade 3. They are also found in prekindergarten programs located in elementary schools, in high school child development courses, in the child care center at the Edison Career Center, and in adult education offerings at a variety of locations. Decisions about curriculum, special education, construction, transportation, selection of books and materials, etc., often affect early childhood education. With so many on-going efforts, coordination, collaboration, and cooperation are essential for cohesion.

- a) It will be the major task and responsibility of the Early Childhood Unit to promote and coordinate the many early childhood programs. The Unit will also foster cooperation and collaboration among these programs.
- b) Communication between special and regular education school staff is essential. Each school will establish a process for that communication to take place.

5. Curriculum and instructional practices

Early childhood curricula will be designed to translate the stated philosophy into instructional practice recognizing that all children can learn and must have an equal opportunity to achieve in school. Their expected wide range of abilities, developmental levels, interests, backgrounds, learning styles, and experiences will be welcomed and used to plan programs that ensure success for every child.

For Kindergarten through Grade 3, the curriculum is contained and described in the MCPS Program of Studies. Prekindergarten programs will use curricula which are designed to meet the needs of each program's student population. In presenting the curricula, teachers must have high expectations of all children and provide manageable challenges to promote early successes that promote self-esteem.

Montgomery County Public Schools will adopt developmentally appropriate practice which includes the following:

- a) Methods
 - (1) Employing multiple teaching strategies
 - (2) Presenting a variety of active learning experiences

- (3) Presenting the curriculum through themes, projects, learning centers, and social settings in order to integrate the contents
- (4) Nurturing and valuing creativity
- (5) Encouraging thinking, problem solving, and decision making skills in all activities
- (6) Providing a balance between active and quiet period
- (7) Emphasizing small group and individual instruction, keeping all groups flexible, and ensuring that all students have similar learning experiences.
- (8) Allowing for long enough blocks of time in the daily schedule for children to become involved and persevere in their activities
- (9) Integrating multicultural education in all facets of the program

b) Materials

- (1) Making available a large selection of age-appropriate, non-stereotypic, and multi-perspective materials
- (2) Adapting materials and equipment, when necessary, to meet the developmental needs of a student
- (3) Emphasizing the use of hands-on activities, children's life experiences, concrete materials, and manipulatives

c) Student Involvement

- (1) Giving children choices and the opportunity to initiate activities
- (2) Recognizing play (both planned and spontaneous) as a valuable means for children to learn and develop
- (3) Assuring that opportunities are provided that help children develop initiative, responsibility, confidence, and independence

- (4) Infusing in all activities the opportunity for students to understand and use language with adults and other children

d) The Whole Child

- (1) Recognizing that learning also takes place outside the classroom through neighborhood walks, on the playground, during field trips, in cultural arts programs, at home, etc.
- (2) Providing instruction for all children in special subjects including art, guidance, media, music, and physical education
- (3) Integrating the visual arts, the performing arts, and movement education in daily activities. These may themselves be a theme around which other content is integrated
- (4) Providing daily activities for gross motor physical development

6. Assessment

National associations and acknowledged experts in the field have expressed concern for what is the most appropriate means for assessing very young children. The use of recorded daily observations and the collection of samples of student work is frequently recommended.

This kind of informal assessment will be used to plan programs rather than for making decisions about a child's placement in a program. The early childhood program must be modified for every child rather than expecting all children to fit into an existing program. Young children must experience success and, therefore, MCPS will strive to avoid retention.

MCPS supports these beliefs with the following directives:

- a) Teachers will assess regularly each child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development primarily through observations that are recorded. Special Education and Head Start programs may also utilize other appropriate assessment instruments.

- b) Recorded observations and samples of student work will be shared regularly with parents to keep them informed of their child's progress and to involve parents in the education process.
- c) In keeping with the philosophy that the pace of development varies from child to child and that children's feelings about themselves directly affect their learning, retention will be an exception in the early grades. This decision must involve the parent, principal, and staff in the Educational Management Team (EMT) process.
- d) The importance of early intervention to address young children's lack of expected development, knowledge, experiences, and skills has long been demonstrated. Staff will effectively use approved procedures to identify and intervene to provide the teacher and/or the student with the appropriate support to assist the student's success in school.
- e) It is expected that by the end of Grade 3 students will have attained the objectives listed in the Program of Studies for Grade 3.

7. Learning environment

Children learn best in an environment that is understanding of and responsive to them. Young children have special needs for their learning climate and the facilities in which that climate occurs.

- a) The climate will:
 - (1) Be healthy, safe, nurturing, compassionate, and respectful of each individual
 - (2) Be free of gender-bias
 - (3) Help children develop an understanding, sensitivity, comfort, and acceptance of others who have abilities or disabilities different from their own
 - (4) Be organized to facilitate active and interactive exploration and cooperation
 - (5) Encourage self-selection of materials and self-direction

- (6) Recognize the outdoors and use it as an important environment for learning
- (7) Include displays that are attractive, colorful, sensitive, multi-perspective, non-stereotypic, and age appropriate
- (8) Carefully, prominently, and proudly display the work of all students
- (9) View discipline as a means of helping students develop social skills and self-control
- (10) Employ guidance techniques to foster positive emotional growth that produces self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging
- (11) Encourage constructive risk taking and use errors as instructional tools
- (12) Promote energy and enthusiasm in staff as well as in children
- (13) Provide young children with a continuum of time in which to learn
- (14) Promote smooth transitions from one grade level to another through communication among teachers and the sharing of pertinent information about the child's levels of development, learning styles, progress, special needs, etc.

b) Facilities

- (1) Furniture and equipment (including computers, calculators, etc.) will be selected for their appropriateness in terms of the students' ages, sizes, and developmental levels.
- (2) The use of materials and equipment to support curriculum goals will supersede concerns for the appearance and maintenance of the facility.
- (3) Kindergarten-sized classrooms will be provided for all prekindergarten classes wherever possible.
- (4) Rooms will be planned and designated for prekindergarten programs in new and modernized schools. Those programs will be given priority for continued occupancy of this space. In schools that do not presently offer

a prekindergarten program, the designated space may be used by another grade level class until such time that a prekindergarten program can be provided.

- (5) Outdoor play areas will be designed for and then used primarily by young children.
- (6) Location of prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms must support staff collaboration as well as education in the least restrictive environment.

c) Class Size

Class sizes and student-adult ratios are assigned to the early childhood classes with full recognition of the importance of young children's need to have easy and frequent access to an adult for:

- (1) Supporting cognitive or emotional development
- (2) Promoting adult-to-child and child-to-child interaction
- (3) Individual and small group learning experiences

8. Parent and community involvement

Parents, family, the school, and community are supporters and contributors to successful student learning and achievement and share the responsibility for the education of children.

- a) It has been shown that parent involvement promotes student success and school improvement. Schools will
 - (1) Abide by the policy on parental involvement and its regulation as it applies to early childhood education
 - (2) Welcome and involve parents in a partnership that includes decision-making regarding all aspects of their young children's education
 - (3) Provide opportunities for parents to participate in curriculum decisions

- (4) Offer a program to facilitate the transition of children from home or the private sector into the public schools
 - (5) Provide guidelines and training opportunities in early childhood instructional content and strategies for volunteers
- b) The importance of and mutual gains from partnerships between the community and schools has been clearly demonstrated in recent years. Schools will be encouraged to:
- (1) Promote public understanding of the importance of quality early childhood education through the media, school system publications, open houses, etc.
 - (2) Establish close communication and cooperation with child care and family care providers who serve our students and their families
 - (3) Collaborate with agencies that provide services to children and families
 - (4) Cooperate with local colleges and universities that offer early childhood programs
 - (5) Encourage parent and non-parent volunteerism from community groups (e.g. retirees, business persons, scientists, and artisans)
 - (6) Actively seek the involvement of appropriate representatives from the community in developing curriculum

9. Staff development

In order to provide quality early childhood education programs, all staff need regular opportunities to broaden their knowledge base, improve their skills, and keep abreast of new research, theories, trends, and practices. For this reason, MCPS will:

- a) Provide in-service training concerning curricula, developmentally appropriate practice, infusion of multiculturalism in the curricula, recent legislation, and continuing advances in early childhood education for all staff with responsibility for young children's education

- b) Include the topic of developmentally appropriate practice in the pre-service training for new early childhood teachers
- c) Provide appropriate training in early childhood education for all principals but especially to those new to the position
- d) Provide a variety of training opportunities including credit courses, stipend training, school-based and area meetings on topics pertinent to early childhood education
- e) Promote system-wide coordination of all staff training, including collaborative efforts with colleges, universities, and other institutions that support research and training in early childhood education

10. Resources

Montgomery County Public Schools will seek resources required to achieve the objectives of this policy.

C. REVIEW AND REPORTING

This policy will be reviewed every three years in accordance with the Board of Education policy review process.

Policy History: Policy adopted by Resolution No.623-91, July 22, 1991.