

Working to support and nurture the rights and needs of young children.

January 21, 2013

Open Letter to NAEYC: A Call for Leadership in the Field

“We are doing earlier and earlier to children what we shouldn’t do later.”

-Dr. Lilian Katz (keynote NAEYC PDI, June 2011, Providence, RI)

NAEYC has long played a valuable role in identifying and supporting best practices in early childhood education. The strong position NAEYC took with its 1986 publication, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, focused attention on respectful, child centered ways of working with young children and helped to unify the early childhood field and slow a “back to basics” push that began in the early 1980’s. Since that time, a growing concern with standards and accountability has moved education in the United States in another direction. The drive for performance standards and accountability for meeting the standards (usually in the form of scores on standardized tests) was first legislated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and that has now gained traction from Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. The national push for standards and accountability has led to the development of academic curriculum and assessment practices that are inappropriate for young children. These trends have led schools to focus on accountability rather than on meaningful learning experiences for young children. Excitement about learning and motivation to learn has been replaced by drill on skills that is tedious and often meaningless to children.

NAEYC appears to have gradually retreated from its strong defense of DAP. The voices of its leadership have not been heard vigorously protesting the proliferation of standards and assessments or offering meaningful alternatives to them. As a growing number of early childhood educators attest, many of these standards, curricula and assessments are developmentally inappropriate, ignore children’s needs, capacities, and cultures, and do not honor how they learn or their uniqueness as learners.

Dr. Lilian Katz, international education leader and former NAEYC president, has helped many parents and teachers understand the key differences between academic goals and intellectual goals. “I believe that we tend to overestimate children academically and underestimate them intellectually,” she writes. And “...early introduction of formal academic instruction may not be in the best interests of many of our children and, in fact, may be damaging in the long term.” (Katz, *STEM in the Early Years*, 2012)

NAEYC would do well to listen to the words of Dr. Katz and make every effort to help keep children's intellectual curiosity alive and supported in our early childhood classrooms.

In November 2012, NAEYC released their paper, *The Common Core State Standards: Caution and Opportunity for Early Childhood Education*. We were glad to see them weighing in to the national dialogue. We encourage NAEYC to provide the leadership that young children and the early childhood field desperately need to push back against the rapidly escalating academic push down. We call on the leadership of NAEYC, as the largest organization of early childhood professionals in the country, to stay true to our historic commitment to the healthy development of young children and to the original ideas of DAP and to forcefully and publicly take a stand on what is happening to early education in our country. We urge NAEYC to offer our expertise to help to revise standards to better reflect what we know about brain development and early childhood pedagogy and to participate in the development of curricula and assessments that are appropriate for young children. We further urge NAEYC to take this active role soon before the push for more academic content in early childhood classrooms puts more young children at risk for failure at the very time in their lives that they should be coming to love learning.

We often encounter members of NAEYC who are disappointed that the association has not spoken out against current harmful practices. Many of these members would welcome strong action and leadership from NAEYC. We realize that there are many pressures in today's world—financial and political—that can make it difficult to stand up for what we know to be right. Nonetheless, the time has come for NAEYC to embrace its historical commitments and strongly defend what we all know is best for young children.

Sincerely,

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Defending the Early Years (DEY) seeks to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is a non-profit project of the Survival Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt educational organization based in Watertown, Massachusetts. Find more information at deyproject.org or write to geralynbywater@gmail.com.

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