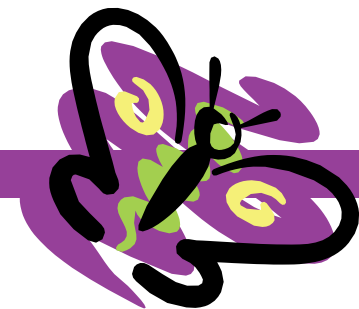


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## 2.0 Overview and Rationale

In this chapter we discuss the rationale for re-thinking education for children from age 3 through third grade. This chapter addresses the need to unite the thinking of early childhood, elementary, and special education. Further, we discuss the commitment of FirstSchool to vulnerable children, and discuss evidence-based innovation.







## FIRSTSCHOOL

FirstSchool is a public school Pre-kindergarten through third grade initiative. Our two overarching goals are to:

- Create a national framework of early schooling for children from pre-kindergarten through third grade
- Help schools and communities implement FirstSchool concepts

FirstSchool is a framework of evidence-based approaches that help schools and communities respond effectively to an ongoing achievement gap, mediocre quality in too many pre-kindergarten and early elementary classrooms, and insufficient integration of early childhood, elementary, and special education. The framework guides diverse stakeholders to consider multiple features that are critical to systemic change, including: Coordinated School Health and Wellness; Instructional Practices and Curriculum; Evaluation and Research; Facilities; Families and Communities; Finance; Professional Development; and Transitions. These features interact and intertwine. This document focuses on the facility, and highlights other key elements of the FirstSchool model.

### Rationale

#### Why Public Schools?

The United States is at a turning point in public education. For many children, school begins before the traditional age of five when they enter kindergarten. Public schools across the country are providing early care and education for children as young as age three. In fact, nearly a million four-year-olds are served in public schools<sup>1</sup>. State and local governments invest billions of dollars in pre-kindergarten education. We fully expect these investments to expand over the next decade. We have a unique moment in history to thoughtfully and strategically determine how we are going to best educate our young children. The decisions we make today will impact children, families, communities, and the American workforce for generations to come.

#### Why Pre-Kindergarten-Third Grade?

FirstSchool, as well as the larger pre-kindergarten through third grade movement, calls for re-thinking public education during a child's first years of schooling from age 3 through third grade<sup>2</sup>. This age span represents a unique time in children's development. By age 3, most children have successfully mastered oral language skills. The period between age three and third grade is a time when children learn to read and write; in turn, reading and writing skills enable them to learn. This acquisition of basic skills provides the crucial foundation for later learning. While there is a relatively predictable sequence of development in all domains (i.e. physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and language) during the first nine years of life<sup>3</sup>, there is also a substantial amount of variance within groups of children and across the domains. It is essential that these foundations are secured for all children.

State and local governments invest billions of dollars in pre-kindergarten education. We fully expect to see these investments expand over the next decade.



Many children's educational experiences and the indoor and outdoor environments available to them are not high quality, and do not allow them to learn and develop to their full potential.



We cannot think about pre-kindergarten in isolation from the early elementary grades. We believe it is important to move away from separate notions of “early childhood education,” “K through 12 education” and “special education” toward an integrated approach for children ages 3 to 8 that unites the best of all three. The research base for educating children in these early years draws upon work from each of these fields. Historically, early childhood teacher preparation programs have emphasized child development, whereas preparation programs for elementary school teachers have emphasized academic content (e.g., math, literacy). As children advance through grade levels, they may encounter an increasingly academic curriculum, different teaching styles, varied rules and systems of classroom organization, and decreasing parent involvement<sup>4</sup>. Research has also demonstrated that the developmental appropriateness of classrooms decreases from kindergarten to third grade<sup>5</sup>. Summarizing findings across multiple studies, Pianta<sup>6</sup> noted the “exceptional variability in the nature and quality of learning experiences offered to children in the early grades.” All of these findings suggest, when considering the profound effect of early education on long term success<sup>7</sup>, that it is vital to have a carefully articulated and continuous plan of learning for children as they launch their academic careers. Successful inclusion of children with special needs, as defined by Schwartz and colleagues<sup>8</sup>, goes beyond enrolling them in a program with typically developing children. It involves 1) meaningful and successful participation in the productive learning experiences; 2) membership in the classroom; and 3) the development of positive social relationships within the peer group. In this age of accountability, children's abilities need to be recognized far beyond achievement on standardized tests, and schools and educators must consider how the goals and approaches of special education can be applied more broadly to the education and nurturance of each child in the school community.

#### Our Commitment to Vulnerable Children

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, our nation's report card on education, suggests that many children have not acquired basic skills by fourth grade (age 9 for most children). In 2007, 43 percent of Caucasian fourth-graders tested at or above “proficient” in reading, and only 14 percent of African-American children and 17 percent of Latino-American children were considered “proficient” or higher in reading<sup>9</sup>. The findings are only slightly better in math<sup>10</sup>. At least half of the educational achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children already exist at kindergarten entry. Racial and cultural minority children and children from low-income families are more likely to enter kindergarten behind their middle class white peers, to have lower educational achievement in reading and math, to be assigned disproportionately to special education classes and, even when their incomes are similar, ethnic minority children fare worse on standardized tests<sup>11</sup>. African-American boys are more likely to be expelled from preschools<sup>12</sup> and African-American and Latino-American boys have higher rates of grade failure<sup>13</sup>.

What we do know is that: 1) vulnerable children who participate in high quality early childhood programs have positive cognitive and social outcomes<sup>14</sup>; 2) there is much evidence to support the long-term positive effects of high quality child care programs and the resulting cost savings and benefits to society<sup>15</sup>; and 3) how children perform in the early elementary years predicts how they do in later schooling<sup>16</sup>. FirstSchool will utilize this knowledge to guide change in instructional and institutional practices to address this national crisis.

### Evidence-based Innovation

Decades of research has identified effective early education practices by demonstrating the benefits those practices confer on children<sup>17</sup>. A comparison of position papers by national education associations and state and national early learning and performance standards indicates that there is much agreement about what constitutes the enriched learning environments, positive teacher–child relationships, and instructional approaches that make learning meaningful for children and support them as they grow and develop<sup>18</sup>. However, research also tells us that many children’s educational experiences and the indoor and outdoor environments available to them are not high quality, and do not allow them to learn and develop to their full potential. “The Journal of Early Intervention” provides guidelines for the use of innovative practice. The publication defines innovative models, programs, techniques or practices as those that have well-formulated and coherent procedures and preliminary evidence demonstrating potential effectiveness<sup>19</sup>. As a society, we possess the knowledge to create indoor and outdoor learning environments which will help children flourish; and, we must commit ourselves to offering such environments to all children.

As a society, we possess the knowledge to create indoor and outdoor learning environments which will help children flourish, and we must rededicate ourselves to offering such environments to all children.



Endnotes:

1. Clifford, Early & Hills, 1999.
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3. Piaget, 1952; Erikson, 1963; Dyson & Genishi, 1993; Gallahue, 1993; Case & Okamoto, 1996.
4. Kagan & Neuman, 1998.
5. Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001.
6. 2003, p. 7.
7. Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002.
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10. Lee, Grigg, & Dion, 2007.
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12. Gilliam, 2005.
13. The Twenty-first Century Foundation, 2005.
14. Barnett, 1995.
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16. Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989.
17. Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 2001; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993.
18. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988; National Education Association, 2003; National Education Goals Panel, 1998; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005.
19. Journal of Early Intervention, 2006.