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## One size doesn't fit all

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THE PROPOSED common core national education standards for K-12 — which will impose higher academic standards on younger children — contradict decades of early education theory and research about how young children learn best and how to close the achievement gap.

The imposition of one-size-fits-all standards on young children can't solve the problems of an education system that is fundamentally unequal. Children in wealthy school districts receive many times the resources that children in poor communities do. The United States stands out in sharp contrast to the many countries that take a central and equal approach to school funding. Our unequal funding only adds to the disadvantages, such as hunger and lack of health care, that so many children bring to school resulting from the widening income disparities in our nation.

The proposed standards focus exclusively on teaching isolated reading and math skills starting in kindergarten. Academic learning is separated from social, emotional, and physical growth. But theory, research, and experience tell us that meaningful learning in young children does not come from rote skills. Children build knowledge through hands-on experience with materials, peers, and teachers in meaningful ways that relate to what they already know, to their developmental levels, and their interests.

If adopted, the national standards will lead to more rote learning by all young children, but especially our poorest young learners who are in overcrowded classrooms with less qualified teachers who will have to resort to more direct instruction rather than hands-on, experiential learning. Even if we did see better test scores after an implementation of national standards, it's unlikely that children would be able to apply the skills learned by rote to real-life situations, use them to solve new problems, or discover the satisfactions inherent when learning is meaningful. This will set young children up for school failure later on when transfer of knowledge and self-motivation become crucial to school success.

The increase in teacher-directed instruction that has resulted from No Child Left Behind has already pushed play out of the curriculum in kindergartens countrywide. This is a far greater problem than many realize. Play is the cornerstone of social, emotional, and cognitive learning and healthy development. It is through play that children develop the foundation for cognitive concepts, problem solving skills, and critical thinking which is essential for later academic learning. Play generates imagination and creativity, planning and self-regulation. It helps children develop a love for learning.

The No Child Left Behind Act, with its high-stakes testing beginning in 3rd grade, has led many schools, especially in poor communities, to start the drill and testing regime in kindergarten. This shift, even before the release of the new standards, has eroded the foundation young children need for school success.

We won't make genuine progress in closing the achievement gap in our nation's schools until we address the underlying inequities that are its root cause. Imposing more standards and tests is a misplaced, misleading, even harmful approach. If these standards are imposed, we will see a continuing achievement gap and new levels of stress and failure among young children. Worst of all, we will have missed an opportunity to give our nation's children the best possible education, the one they deserve and the one our future depends on.

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