

Community Conversations Series: Kindergarten

The Alliance held its first Community Conversation in October of 2017. The purpose of the conversation was to introduce the Alliance and engage our stakeholders in one of our priority areas: *empowering early learning professionals by facilitating conversations.*

With over twenty Kindergarten teachers from the local area participating, we focused on a series of questions to guide the conversation.

- When you think of Kindergarteners today, what comes to mind?
- What does it mean to be “ready” for Kindergarten?
- Is there a difference between those students that attended preschool and those that did not?

The discussion highlighted a strong desire towards **nurturing and developing young people** as caring, considerate, respectful individuals. Kindergarten teachers are passionate about developing a love of learning and creating a first experience for K12 education that is welcoming, nurturing, and helps build the confidence and capabilities of all students in academic, intellectual, social, and emotional domains. Kindergarten teachers are proud of their work, work diligently on behalf of their students, and support parent/family interactions. Kindergarten teachers report spending a great deal of time helping parents/families understand how they can support learning that is developmental appropriate for their children. There is a strong focus on helping children as individuals and promoting growth as an individual (rather than comparison to peers).

In essence the group talked about the impact of empowering young learners by igniting a desire for and appreciation of learning.

There was consensus regarding the pressure on Kindergarten students to focus on academic achievement. There was a strong sense of concern over standardized testing at the Kindergarten level, and use of report cards that provided little description to parents and families around the progress of each child as an individual. Further, the group discussed the need for a **clear, articulated, and shared vision** of teaching and learning. Comments and conversations denoted a clear pressure among Kindergarten teachers to “get students ready” for first grade, rather than meet each child where they are and demonstrate individual progress.



It may be advantageous for Kindergarten teachers to have a research-based understanding of how long-term learning and preparation for higher stakes assessments (like Indiana’s i-Read) are supported. *How can data around who does not pass i-Read help lessen the pressures, and clarify the positive impact of developmentally appropriate practice?*

There is a clear need to help **parents and families understand learning** and what that looks like in purposeful, meaningful ways. This includes improving parents/family understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations, understanding the limitations of standardized assessments with five

year olds, and understanding the need for social/emotional and behavior growth and focus during preschool experiences.

With very few differences recognized among teachers when comparing learners who did and did not attend preschool, there is a presence of behaviors that are demonstrate preparation for compliance but not the preparation for self-direction, independent play, and persistence that supports learning goals of Kindergarten. While those students with formalized preschool experiences may have **more rote academic skill**, they often show little depth, excitement for learning, and self-direction.

Kindergarten teachers shared a great desire to focus on learning and growth of the **whole child**. They have serious concerns that children are arriving in Kindergarten with no depth to their knowledge and/or skills, a lacking independence, and self-confidence the centers on adult affirmation. Teachers voiced several concerns about **disconnects between preschool and Kindergarten**, pointing out specifically the lack of any continuous communication from early learning to Elementary.

"Behavior issues are almost too much to manage. We are seeing more and more behavior and social-emotional issues."



It may be advantageous for the Early Learning Alliance Network to develop a system that supports continuous communication between preschool and Kindergarten. *How can we facilitate effective, purposeful input on how the child best learns, what they are interested in, and what developmental skills need to be supported in Kindergarten from the perspective of preschool?*

One of the strongest messages that was received during this first Kindergarten conversation was that teachers feel pressure on a near daily basis from first grade teachers and Kindergarten parents/families around "being ready for first grade." As one teachers shared, "there is the perspective around our community that while Kindergarten is the first year of K12, first grade is where things get *real* and pressure is high."

With **no continuum of learning** experiences and whole child expectations for all of early childhood (ages 2-8) any innovation in single grades is being challenged by core academic expectations of across K-4 classrooms. Further, kindergarten teachers observe a **strong disconnect in curriculum and models** being promoted. Kindergarten stakeholders (parents, families, early learning professionals, k12 administrators, etc.) would benefit from a clear re-focus and overall reduction in piling and compiling of curriculum, initiatives, and strategies that may at a very practical level demonstrate competing and misaligned priorities.



The Early Learning Alliance Network is currently investigating the best way to facilitate the development of a community commitment around early learning. This articulated commitment will provide one continuum from a community stand point and help to support early learning professionals as they dialogue about best practice, pressures, and goals for Kindergarten.

Through continued conversations the following were highlighted as possible areas of change that could further support our youngest learners.

"We cannot just change kindergarten. We need to focus on igniting a desire to learn and meeting our kids where they are at the day they walk into our school."

- Narrative report cards with clear rubrics that explain to parents what each level or score (S, P, N) truly means.
 - Use state standards as a base but allow kindergarten teachers to come together to articulate those non-cognitive or non-academic areas that are truly imperative.
 - Begin to focus energy not on models and curriculum, but shared beliefs about learning and development.
- Decrease standardized testing for kindergarten (currently reported at 4-6x per year).
 - Reduce class size for kindergarten to fully meet the behavioral needs of all children.
 - Provide a cultural liaison from the district to support any family that moves into or enrolls in the districts that needs guidance with culturally relevant student transition and school expectations.
 - Clearly articulate as a district what expectations are and use data sources to inform those expectations for teaching and learning.
 - Refocus on growth instead of achievement.
 - Empower more networking and cross-school, common grade level connections that provide time for sharing, community building, and collaboration.

The Early Learning Alliance Network is a not for profit organization that is fueled by a shared passion for purposeful, transparent, and high quality early learning experiences for all children in Hamilton County, Indiana ages birth through age eight. We are composed of educators, leaders, advocates, parents, and professionals who see a need to collaboratively facilitate our community efforts to ignite high quality early learning.

- We provide a mechanism to stay informed about early learning and get information on local resources.
- We collect and share data to empower the community to make decisions, be proactive, and respond purposefully to the needs of all early learners.
- We provide professional development, family/parent education, and convene our community in efforts to accelerate achievement of our mission.

Questions about this report should be directed to Dr. Denna Renbarger at deena@earlylearningalliancencenetwork.org