

# A KINDERGARTEN FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD  
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### INTRODUCTION TO THE STATEMENT

Called to action by parents, teachers, administrators, and other early childhood professionals in Nebraska, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), Office of Early Childhood began the process of revising the Kindergarten Position Statement in 2007. NDE's previous Kindergarten Position Statement was written in 1984 and was a landmark document in the world of kindergarten, not only in Nebraska, but nationwide. The revision of this statement reinforces the expectation of providing high quality experiences for all children to help them reach their full potential, regardless of individual circumstances. The intent of this document is to provide a summary of information about kindergarten that is deeply grounded in years of research, early childhood science, and best practices for young children. The full Position Statement, *A Kindergarten for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, can be downloaded from <http://www.education.ne.gov/OEC/pubs/KStatement.pdf>.

### KINDERGARTEN: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE TODAY

According to the 2008-2009 Nebraska State of the Schools Report, 22,792 children in Nebraska were enrolled in kindergarten. Of the 292,030 school-aged children in Nebraska during this school year, 38.35% lived in low income homes (measured by qualification for free and reduced lunch). However, in some counties the free and reduced lunch rate can reach as high as 67.0%. Data from the US Census Bureau show that nationally, 31% of families with a female head of household with children under 18 years of age fall below the poverty level. Of the estimated 6,718 female headed households in Nebraska with no husband present and children under 5 years of age, 44.9% fell below the poverty level. To further complicate matters, many of these children do not have health insurance. The National Center for Children in Poverty (2007) reported that ten percent of all children in Nebraska are without health insurance. For children living in poverty, this number increases to 19 percent. This means that a large number of our state's children who are already at risk because of socio-economic factors become even more at risk because they are not getting proper medical, dental, and developmental attention.

In addition to the risk factors outlined above, the diversity of learner abilities within Nebraska schools is great. High ability learners make up 13.41% of the school population, or 37,641 students in the K-12 system. Students with Special Education verifications make up 15.21% of students statewide. In addition, the state's population of English Language Learners remains above six percent. It is clear that *multiple outside stresses and pressures* exist for kindergarten children today and schools must take into account the diverse needs that children bring to the classroom when developing curriculum and implementing effective instructional opportunities for children.

Kindergarten serves as a training ground for social and academic skills where children learn how to interact with others and become familiar with school routines and the school environment (Burkham, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007). In this setting, children are helped to *develop basic academic skills* through a variety of experiences including teacher directed instruction, small group work, purposeful play and social interaction with peers. Children attend kindergarten to learn the language and vocabulary of early writing and reading, mathematics,

science, and social studies. They develop skills in communication and play and learn skills to appropriately interact with others. Kindergarteners also develop skills in the areas of physical education, music, art, and technology.

## KINDERGARTEN: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

### DEVELOPMENT OF KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

Kindergarten children’s developmental level requires a unique approach to teaching and learning that merges the teaching styles of preschool and the primary grades and includes both highly structured and less structured instructional opportunities, teacher and child led experiences, and time for purposeful, rich play and physical movement each day. The *uniqueness of kindergarteners* is that they can think somewhat abstractly but still need concrete experiences, they can follow directions but they also need to explore their own ideas, and they can think complexly about some concepts but still think simplistically about others (Kostelnik, Soderman, and Whiren, 2011). Due to the unique development of kindergarten-age children, the role of the kindergarten teacher is quite complex. Kindergarten teachers are an intricate fusion of parents, nurses, conflict managers, instructors, supporters, and friends. The kindergarten teacher is *the provider of rich academic opportunities and experiences* and an *emotional and intellectual supporter*. The teacher fosters the development of language and literacy skills using multiple strategies and also *focuses on developing the whole child*. The teacher *infuses academic concepts and skills into children’s play*, encouraging higher order thinking and language skills through these purposeful, child initiated experiences.

### CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

A wide variety of experiences is necessary to develop a complex and integrated brain. Learning is highly interconnected for young children, and teaching should mimic the depth and complexity of these connections. It is *a balance of teacher and child led experiences, structured instructional times and less structured opportunities, and play based curricula* that work in collaboration to promote optimal learning outcomes for young children. Play is important not only for enhancing children’s physical skills, but also for the development of self-regulation, cognition, language, social skills, emotional regulation, and creativity (Bergen, 2002). The curriculum should include a balanced approach that takes note of children’s developmental levels in appropriate ways and is responsive to the unique development of kindergarten children. However the developmental strengths and needs of the kindergarteners should be the driving force in the planning of daily instruction. While kindergarten is traditionally considered the beginning of formal academic instruction, the instruction and practice of new skills should occur in teacher and child led activities and within an engaging, inquiry based environment.

Teachers must be prepared to use a *wide range of teaching strategies and instructional processes* to effectively meet the learning needs of all children. They should make intentional decisions about classroom activities, routines, and interactions based on what would be most effective for both the classroom and for individual children. Regardless of the curriculum or instructional method chosen by a district, the socio-economic makeup of the class, or the number and types of instruction materials (including technology), the most important factor in the success of the students is a highly-skilled teacher with a strong understanding of both the needs of young learners as well as the programs and curriculum being utilized in the classroom. Additionally, teachers of this foundational grade level need to understand the importance of their role in imparting skills and dispositions for lifelong learning. (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000).

*Assessment data should be used in an ongoing manner* and should be analyzed by teachers to help them understand children’s developmental levels and zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova &

Leong, 2007). In knowing this, teachers can design their instruction to meet the needs of children. It is within these zones of proximal development that effective teaching occurs. Assessment, particularly in the early years, should be used as a tool to inform the curriculum and instruction occurring in the classroom. The tightly connected triad of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are critical to the success of today's kindergartener. Kindergarten teachers are constantly observing and assessing (formally and informally) their students to ensure that learning is occurring and the individual needs of their rapidly-developing learners are being met.

## KINDERGARTEN: THE CLASSROOM

Children must feel safe, connected to others, and valued in a classroom in order to learn (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The physical environment has a large impact on teaching and learning and should promote language development and socialization as well as cognitive growth and the development of other academic skills. To accomplish these goals, children need a variety of *hands-on materials* available to them daily that provide both challenge and success and time should be devoted to child-led experiences in centers each day. *Play in centers greatly fosters language and social development* (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, and Munro, 2007; Bergen, 2002) and helps children integrate academic concepts into their brain structures. This time for children to interact with the teacher and other children is essential to healthy development and outcomes, and is equally as important as teacher-directed instructional activities. Children also need daily exposure to music, art, and movement activities.

During input sessions teachers shared that kindergarten classrooms of 20 or more children and one adult are common across Nebraska. Adult support through individual and small group interactions is crucial to long-term success and in-depth learning, but even with the best intentions, these interactions are hard to maintain with such large teacher-child ratios. *A second adult is important* for high quality learning experiences to occur in kindergarten classrooms. The second adult should be engaged in interactions with children and not assigned to photocopying or other administrative tasks while the children are present.

## KINDERGARTEN: PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS

### TRANSITIONS

Research clearly demonstrates the need for schools and communities to have a more *comprehensive view of the transition from home to kindergarten* (Seung Lam & Pollard, 2006; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufmann, Gercke & Higgins, 2001; Sink, Edwards, and Weir, 2007; Nelson, 2004; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer & Pianta, 2008). As schools plan strategies for strengthening transition practices they must remember that transition is not a moment, but a continuous, evolving process. Incorporating a comprehensive transition system will require restructuring and rethinking the school's traditional transition practices and policies, including traditional staffing patterns.

The transition from *kindergarten to first grade* is often overlooked as an important time in the child and family's life. This transition marks a significant change in teaching style, curriculum content, and learning environment, moving from a child-centered kindergarten into a classroom that involves more teacher-directed activity and a less child-focused environment. In preparation of first grade there is a subtle transition that happens throughout the year in the kindergarten classroom. As kindergarten age children develop academically, socially, and behaviorally throughout the school year, the structure of activities tends to change in response to the student's increased abilities. Kindergarten classrooms evolve along with the children throughout the year and the instructional strategies may become more structured as the year progresses to match the developmental level of the children.

The change in expectations from kindergarten to first grade can be quite powerful for all children, but it seems to have greater effects for children in racial/ethnic minority groups. For children who are struggling in kindergarten and are already “behind” according to school expectations, the facilitation of a smooth transition to first grade is extremely important. The responsibility of creating a successful transition experience to first grade should be shared by the kindergarten and first grade teachers and the school system as a whole.

## ACADEMIC REDSHIRTING AND RETENTION IN KINDERGARTEN

Academic redshirting is the practice of holding back a child who is age eligible to attend kindergarten (Marshall, 2003; Katz, 2000; March, 2005). In Nebraska the mandatory age of attendance in Nebraska is age 6 by January 1 of the school year (§79-201B). Parents rightfully make the choice to hold their children out of kindergarten for several reasons such as the child’s current age, maturity, size, gender, and how old the child will be at his/her high school graduation.

An unintended consequence of academic redshirting is that it creates a cycle of increasing curriculum and behavioral expectations in the kindergarten classroom (Crosser, 1998). If a child is held back for a year and is six when he enters kindergarten, he is likely developmentally ready for experiences for which young five year olds are not. As more children are held back, the curriculum becomes more focused on teaching to the six-year-olds and less to the five-year-old child for whom kindergarten is intended. Research indicates that while achievement differences were found in children held back from kindergarten for a year the differences diminished by the third grade, and as students entered high school, the children who started kindergarten at a younger age actually outperformed those students who had been redshirted (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Lincove & Painter, 2006). The *diminishing effects of age* by third grade show that children who enter kindergarten younger learn more and catch up with their peers by the end of third grade (Stipek, 2003) and at third grade, those with summer birthdays are academically indistinguishable from others in the third grade population (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; March, 2005; Katz, 2000).

Data gathered at NDE shows that the average rate of kindergarten retention statewide is three percent. However, some districts present kindergarten retention numbers as high as 30-50% of all enrolled children. The variance in these rates fit what research is showing us; *retention rates are highly variable nationally, state-wide, and at times even within school districts*. Case studies indicate that both retention and academic redshirting are strongly influenced by community notions of child development and the role of the adult in supporting this development (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). It is highly unlikely that the actual readiness of children varies so greatly from community to community, but rather that the community’s standards of readiness, and their interpretation based on these standards of readiness are what influences this practice. In a meta-analysis of 20 studies chosen for their methodological rigor, 80% of the studies concluded that retention was ineffective as an academic and socioemotional intervention (Jimerson, 2001). Because there are several factors influencing children’s success in school, *it seems unlikely that one intervention (retention) would be an effective solution* to the problem. Simply having a child repeat a grade does little to address the multiple individual and experiential differences that have influenced the child’s poor achievement and/or adjustment in school (Graue, Kroger & Brown, 2002).

# A CALL TO ACTION FOR NEBRASKA

## FOR EDUCATORS

### CONNECT TO FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY

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Use multiple strategies to engage families in your classroom. Recognize that parents are the child's first teacher and approach families using a strengths-based framework. Respect that all children are unique and live in diverse families and communities and that families have valuable knowledge about their children. Take note of each child's strengths and seek multiple ways to gain information from families and also to share information with them.

Engage with preschool programs and community agencies to promote continuity through a comprehensive approach to kindergarten transition, including bridging from preschool experiences to kindergarten, and then from kindergarten to first grade. Arrange visits to preschool classrooms and have preschool children and families visit your classroom. In addition, be sure to engage with first grade teachers to support smooth, successful transitions for all children and their families.

### PROVIDE MANY AND VARIED CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

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Balance child-initiated and teacher-led activities, as well as structured and unstructured time. Implement curriculum and teaching methods that engage and appropriately challenge children's thinking and that allow them to try out their ideas in a variety of teaching contexts - whole group, small group and learning centers. Set aside time each day to engage with children in child-initiated play and support children's deep engagement in their play experiences. Utilize this time to build important relationships with children and to appropriately assess child learning and growth through observing and recording children's behavior. In addition, incorporate movement, music, and creative experiences into calendar time, transitions, and other daily routines.

### SELECT EFFECTIVE CURRICULUM

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Continually examine the links between state standards and your curriculum. If possible, select a curriculum aligned with state standards. If working with an existing curriculum, choose the pieces of that curriculum that fit the goals of the standards. Select a curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, engaging, and culturally and linguistically responsive. Remember that effective curriculum builds on children's prior learning, knowledge, and experiences. Regularly review your curriculum and assess its effectiveness based upon evidence obtained from your observations and assessments of student progress. Know the strengths as well as the gaps in the curriculum you use so that you are able to find/request supplemental resources as needed. Do not assume that any program is complete and meets the educational needs of all students.

To effectively meet the state standards in your classroom, engage children in a variety of activities that incorporate multiple senses and ensure the child is an active participant in learning. Work from the physical world toward more abstract principles of learning by incorporating rich materials and problem solving activities into educational experiences. Provide opportunities for children to collaborate and work through ideas together and build social skills. Connect children to the natural world by spending learning time outdoors and bringing natural materials into your classroom.

### UTILIZE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

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Assessment in the kindergarten setting should be an ongoing process blending academic and developmental measures and tied to children's daily activities. Formal benchmarking, universal screening, formative and summative assessments based upon the academic standards, are all critical pieces necessary to evaluate the development of the child as a whole person and to provide a clear picture of the child's strengths and needs.

Administration of these assessments should be done in the least intrusive matter possible and each assessment should be evaluated to determine if it provides adequate information. If necessary, advocate for additional staffing or flexible time to adequately assess children. Information from these assessments should be used to inform instruction and allow the teacher to differentiate the curriculum to fit the needs of each learner.

## FOR ADMINISTRATORS

### SUPPORT AND ORGANIZE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Provide professional development experiences for kindergarten and primary grade teachers that address the unique developmental level of children in these grades. Utilize a professional development plan that is intentional and focused and meets the individual needs of each teacher and the students he/she serves while also addressing school wide priorities. Provide professional development in meaningful ways that include follow up training and consultation, such as coaching, to ensure that growth is occurring and that new methods and materials are being used effectively. School administrators should also be engaging in professional development experiences that increase their understanding of child development, early childhood education, curriculum selection, effective, age-appropriate assessment, and the diversity of learners.

### PROMOTE LEARNING FOR ALL CHILDREN

Welcome all age-eligible children into your school and if needed, connect children and families with appropriate community and interagency supports to ensure success for the child and family. Support a mixed age kindergarten classroom that values the individuality of each child and engages each child in a process of growth and development. Recognize that developmental differences exist among children and work with kindergarten, prekindergarten, and first grade teachers to devise strategies to maximize teaching and learning.

### SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE TRANSITIONS

Support a comprehensive view of transitions to and from kindergarten. Recognize that multiple partners are needed to develop an effective transition system that meets the needs of children and their families. In your local decision making, consider policy changes that provide contracted release time and possible compensation for teachers to engage in effective transition practices such as home visits and ongoing community outreach.

### SELECT EFFECTIVE CURRICULUM

Continually examine the links between state standards and your curriculum. If working with an existing curriculum choose the pieces of that curriculum that fit the goals of state standards. Regularly review your curriculum and assess its effectiveness based upon evidence obtained from your observations and assessments of student progress. Do not assume that any program is complete and meets the educational needs of all students. Encourage teachers to use multiple strategies and supplemental materials to strengthen the curriculum in needed areas and to meet the diverse needs of learners. Support teachers in providing a variety of learning experiences that incorporate multiple senses and ensure the child is an active participant in learning.

## FOR POLICY MAKERS, LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

### SUPPORT A COMPREHENSIVE TRANSITION SYSTEM

Support a more comprehensive view of transitions to and from kindergarten. Recognize the multiple players that must be engaged in a comprehensive transition system that is effective for children and their families. Engage various community agencies in this process and connect children and families with community resources that can benefit them. Support policy changes that provide flexible scheduling for teachers such as contracted release time and compensation for their involvement in effective transition practices.

## PROVIDE RESOURCES TO SUPPORT KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

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Seek opportunities to support and strengthen early childhood programs in the school and broader community, including kindergarten, through adequate financial and personnel allocations. Budget appropriately and adequately for increased adult support in the kindergarten classroom. Provide funds and resources for hands-on classroom materials that will enrich the learning environment. Provide resources, including meaningful staff development opportunities with structured follow-up, to ensure that new initiatives and ideas are implemented with fidelity.

## THE COMMUNITY AS A LEARNING PLACE

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Throughout the community, provide access to rich learning opportunities for children and their families, before and after children enter school. Ensure that families have the supports they need to provide optimum health care, nutrition, and safety for their children. Promote a highly collaborative network of service agencies that can serve as resources and supports for families. Support high quality early childhood experiences in multiple community settings (in-home childcare, preschool, center-based childcare and community resource centers) especially for those children and families who are most at risk.

## FOR PARENTS

### FORM A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SCHOOL

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You know your child better than anyone and your voice is critical in the school process. Talk about your child's strengths and needs with the school staff. Ask how the school will meet those needs and support the strengths of your child. Become familiar with the rules and expectations regarding school, including entrance and enrollment.

Talk to your child's teacher about including a variety of learning experiences into the kindergarten curriculum. Your child should experience teacher led and child led activities each day. Children use opportunities for purposeful play to expand on the academic concepts they are learning. Multiple types of learning opportunities are a part of effective and appropriate instruction for young children.

### SUPPORT YOUR CHILD AT HOME

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Ensure that your child has daily experiences outdoors and indoors. Encourage your child to engage in activities such as drawing, reading, and building with blocks or other safe, household materials. Monitor the amount of time your child spends watching television, movies, and playing video games and involve your child in routine activities that can be completed together (making dinner or folding laundry). Talk about ordinary things you see and do and expand your child's world through books and conversation. If your family speaks a language other than English at home, help your child to maintain this language by speaking to your child in his/her first language as often as possible.

Keep a routine with consistent sleeping times and behavioral expectations. This helps children know expectations and ensures they are rested, ready and able to learn during the day. Provide healthy meals and nutritious snacks whenever possible for your child. Be sure to have your child's medical and dental needs addressed. If necessary, work with the school or other community agencies to access local resources that can assist you in meeting your child's needs.

Learn more about how young children grow and develop in the early years. Utilize online resources such as [learningfromdayone.org](http://learningfromdayone.org) that support parents in understanding the development and needs of their child(ren).

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**SUE BANTER**

Education Specialist, Office of Early Childhood  
Nebraska Department of Education

**JEN BENSON**

Education Specialist, Office of Early Childhood  
Nebraska Department of Education

**JAN CARMAN**

Staff Development Coordinator  
Westside Community Schools

**LAVENIA COOVER**

Kindergarten Teacher  
Union National Public Schools

**ROBIN EINSPAHR**

Special Education  
Lexington Public Schools

**CAROL FICHTER**

Co-Administrator, Office of Early Childhood  
Nebraska Department of Education

**MELODY HOBSON**

Co-Administrator, Office of Early Childhood  
Nebraska Department of Education

**JULIE HOOGESTRAAT**

Early Childhood Curriculum Consultant  
Omaha Public Schools

**ELEANOR KIRKLAND**

Head Start Early Childhood Systems Director  
Head Start-State Collaboration Office

**MARJORIE KOSTELNIK**

Dean, College of Education & Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**DIANE KVASNICKA**

Education Specialist, Office of Early Childhood  
Nebraska Department of Education

**M. SUSAN MCWILLIAMS**

Assistant Professor, Teacher Education  
University of Nebraska-Omaha

**MARY PHILLIPS**

Administrative Supervisor  
Lincoln Public Schools

**TRICIA PARKER**

Reading & Writing Director  
Nebraska Department of Education

**BEV PAUL**

Literacy Coach  
Gordon-Rushville Public Schools

**MARY BETH PISTILLO**

Training Coordinator, Early Childhood Training Center  
Nebraska Department of Education

**SUZI SCHULZ**

Kindergarten Teacher  
Red Cloud

**SUSAN STRAHM**

Regional Training Coordinator  
Northeast Professional Development Partnership

**PAT TIMM**

Nebraska State Board of Education  
District 5

**MISSY TIMMERMAN**

Kindergarten Teacher  
Beatrice Public Schools

**KELLY VANNESS**

Regional Training Coordinator  
Platte Valley Professional Development Partnership

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS STATEMENT,  
PLEASE CONTACT:  
OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD  
NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
402-471-3184