

TEXT OF THE FIVE-PAGE LETTER PRESENTED BY BROOKLINE, MA KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS TO MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE ON JUNE 6, 2019

Not everyone could be here tonight, but this letter comes from a group of 27 Brookline kindergarten teachers. Together we have welcomed thousands of kindergartners into our classrooms.

We teach our students to be kind, respectful, flexible and hardworking, as well as to persevere, to stand up for themselves and others, and to be lifelong learners. We know that all of us in this room — educators, administrators, School Committee members, and parents — want our children to be successful and happy people.

We feel so fortunate to be part of a district with a strong tradition of putting our students' needs at the center of our practice. Educators' voices have been respected, and we continue to feel support from many principals and administrators, as well as some School Committee members. Thoughtful choices for students have been made through a partnership between teachers and central administration. Brookline has always been viewed as a progressive, cutting-edge school system where children, families, and teachers thrived.

We are afraid that this has begun to change. The past few years have brought new opportunities, centered around new curriculum and programs. However, in embracing these programs without meaningful teacher input, the district has neglected the very reason for embracing those learning opportunities: our students' joy of learning.

We have dedicated our careers to teaching 5- and 6-year-olds, and we see that some current practices are leaving an everlasting negative impact on our students' social-emotional well-being. Therefore, we are here tonight to share with you our concerns about a new kind of gap that is emerging in Brookline kindergarten. It is a "reality gap" — a gap between the way research shows that young children learn best and the curriculum the district requires us to teach. It is a reality gap between Brookline educational values and what is actually happening to children in our classrooms.

We would like to share our concerns with you, but we also come before you, our leaders, to ask you to imagine with us what Kindergarten in Brookline could be: a Kindergarten program where our youngest learners thrive.

First, here is what we see in our classrooms:

In literacy:

We know that kindergartners are at the beginning of their journey towards becoming successful readers and writers. We, the kindergarten teachers, know how to foster enthusiasm, creativity and excitement in learning. Literacy has been and

will always be an important part of kindergarten. Nevertheless, we are concerned that shifting district mandates will result in a loss of the natural curiosity and joy in learning.

The district has made significant changes to expectations around literacy. We have all worked with our literacy coaches and specialists to implement the various reading and writing lessons with fidelity. However, block scheduling — 90-minute reading and writing blocks — comes at the expense of thematic units, play-based learning and social-emotional opportunities.

We are seeing the effects of this loss. We see many of our kindergartners struggle with anxiety about school because they know they are expected to read. A significant body of research exists showing the negative consequences to children's emotional well-being when they are forced to read before their developing brains can make sense of it. Reading sooner does not always mean better. The push to get our kindergartners to read earlier without consideration of their readiness is impacting their attitudes toward learning.

It is now common to hear their little voices announce to us, "I don't know how to read." "I hate reading." "I hate school." "I am not good at anything." This our greatest concern.

David Kohn, a freelance science writer, observes: "Reading can't be rushed. It has been around for only about 6,000 years, so the ability to transform marks on paper into complex meaning is not pre-wired into the brain. It doesn't develop 'naturally,' as do other complex skills such as walking; it can be fostered, but not forced. Too often that's what schools are trying to do now."

In our students' social and emotional development, here's what we see in our classrooms:

Current academic pressures on 5- and 6-year-olds are contributing to increasing challenges with our kindergartners' ability to self-regulate, to be independent and creative.

Study after study has shown that young children need time to play, but in Brookline, because of academic demands, time for play-based learning has been shortened and, on some days, eliminated entirely. As kindergarten teachers, we know that play is not frivolous. It enhances brain structure and function, and promotes executive function, which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions. It helps children learn to persevere, increase attention and navigate emotions.

Young children are also meant to move around and explore. Many children who sit for long periods of time experience frustration, muscle cramps and disruptive behaviors. We have seen an increase in the number of children diagnosed with ADHD and behavior issues within our schools, and we know why this is happening.

Yet we are doing things that will only exacerbate the problem, rather than make it better.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "When play and safe, stable, nurturing relationships are missing in a child's life, toxic stress can disrupt the development of executive function and the learning of prosocial behavior; in the presence of childhood adversity, play becomes even more important."

In our pursuit of equity for children, here's what we see in our classrooms:

We are not advancing equity. As mentioned with play and social-emotional development, the district is asking us to teach our children in ways that reduce equity in the classroom. We are told that everything has to be the same. Please think about what "the same" means. It is not uniquely tailored to maximize the joy and learning for every single child. Standardization is not equity.

Parents who recognize this and have the ability to enrich their children's experiences outside of school will do that. Other children will not have those same advantages and will only have the standardized instruction, rather than instruction driven by teacher innovation and differentiation based on the needs and interests of each student. Where once teachers were trusted to use their judgment and teach to the needs of each unique class, now we are directed to follow set curricula from textbooks. We are being given directives, not empowerment for our students.

This move away from differentiating small-group instruction to whole-group lessons does not work for a substantial number of children. Learners who need to be challenged or need modifications to access the curriculum are not considered with block-scheduling and whole-group methods of teaching.

We have also seen the data that shows the achievement gap widens when we decrease the amount of play, and yet we are choosing to make things worse for students of color. Where are the best kindergartens? They are in Finland, where children spend their days playing at age 5. For those who say we are not being attentive to the achievement gap, look at Boston, where their commitment to a play-based pre-K to grade 2 continuum is attracting educators from around the country because of the positive impact on their students, including their skill levels.

In our pursuit of data-driven education, here's what we see every day:

Teachers know that when assessment is at its best, its purpose is to help teachers know where each child is as an individual, so that we can design instruction that will move them forward as learners. But, this assessment must be authentic. It must match the developmental stage of each individual child. It must be used to guide instruction in real time. We believe the district's current data-gathering and utilization practices do not achieve these goals. We are turning children into data points.

Valerie Strauss, an education writer, says: "The current emphasis on standards and testing has led many schools to over-focus on assessment at the expense of meeting children's developmental needs and teaching meaningful content. Play and activity-based learning have been disappearing from many early childhood classrooms, and — along with them — children's natural motivation and love of learning."

Teachers have only so much time in a day, and as we continue to tack on more data, more paperwork, more standardized instruction, it's important that we as a community ask, "At what expense does this data come? What are we losing? Where is the opportunity for teachers and parents to be a part of this conversation?"

These are the things we see in our classrooms every day. Now, we ask you to join us in imagining what is possible for Brookline kindergartners.

We ask you to envision with us a future in which our kindergartners spend their days engaged in learning experiences through meaningful play.

Let's envision our children being excited to come to school each day, developing a deep love of learning, having confidence in their abilities as learners, strengthening social-emotional skills, creating deep relationships with peers and teachers, and being part of a community of learners. Imagine a classroom where teachers are spending time working directly with students, forming trusting relationships and engaging in meaningful teaching experiences that address students' needs as a whole.

Imagine a future where the educational power of play is returned to Brookline kindergarten. There is no arguing that our students learn best through play and real experiences that allow them to explore and make connections, build some background knowledge, and develop problem-solving skills. The play can be purposeful (teacher-guided), but there also needs to be time for children to explore freely without teacher direction. This is essential in the development of curiosity, and the ability to follow an idea or a project through. This is the bedrock of kindergarten practice. In fact, it is the bedrock of lifelong learning — and the reason why top labs such as MIT's "Lifelong Kindergarten" lab is working to create systems and technologies to infuse the basic concepts of kindergarten play throughout workplaces.

Brookline kindergarten can be a place where children explore relationships with others in order to develop a sense of empathy. It can be a place where they master amicable and respectful dialogue with their peers. It can be a place where they learn how to justify their own ideas and solve problems. Imagine a classroom where children learn how to fail, so they can try again and find their way.

We ask you to envision with us a future in which our kindergartners are deeply engaged in fun, integrated content areas. Envision with us classrooms where learning to read is fun, purposeful, engaging and organic.

We ask you to envision with us a future in which our kindergartners' assessments are observation-based, authentic, and are used for the purpose of improving instructional practices, in real time. Imagine with us a future in which data-driven practices in the name of the achievement gap are not adversely impacting many of our most vulnerable students.

Please envision a future in which students on individualized education plans receive the support they need from educators who have the time and training to work closely with paraprofessionals who are trained and committed to staying in our district because their pay allows them to do so.

Imagine teachers, administrators, and district leaders coming together to determine educational benchmarks and reading levels. We are here. We know kindergartners well. Use our expertise.

We ask you to imagine Brookline kindergarten classrooms where teachers are trusted to use their judgment about what's best for each class. Imagine a future where love of learning, not test-based performance, returns to the heart of our children's very first educational experiences.

We ask you to help us achieve that vision. We want to work together to plan next steps for our Brookline Public Schools. We ask that we are once again given a seat at the table — a seat that truly values our voices and our expertise in understanding what is best for our students.