



NEWSLETTER

March, 2020

CALENDAR

March	1	TUITION DUE
	3	Staff Development, School closed for all classes



ODDS AND ENDS

- Please send in your 2020-2021 deposit if you have not already done so. The due date for tuition deposit and supply fee was February 19.
- Spring school pictures will be the week after Spring Break. More details will come closer to that time.
- **Dress your child appropriately for the weather.** Make sure they are prepared to go outside every day.
- Remember to bring snack on your assigned day or switch with another family if your day is not convenient for you. If you forget, please send something in to replace what we used from our cupboards.
- Remember, when coming to school that the entrance to the upper parking lot is from Menokin St and not Van Dorn St. When coming from Van Dorn St, please park in the auxiliary lot and press the signal light when crossing the street.

FROM THE DIRECTOR:

This is from an article in the Outlook section in the Washington Post, Sunday, January 25, 2015

I pushed my pre-K students toward reading. And I feel guilty about it.

Launa Hall is a teacher in Arlington, Va., and is working on a collection of essays about teaching.

It's a Tuesday morning in Room 132, and standing before me is a 4-year-old boy asking for a graham cracker. I'll call him Josue. His swinging arms are about to topple a crayon cup on my desk, so I steady the cup with one hand and reach for the crackers with the other.

"Ggg — graham cracker. What letter is that, Josue?" I ask, because in the public pre-kindergarten program where I taught for four years, a graham cracker was never just a snack. Every detail, from ceiling to circle-time rug, pulled double duty in pursuit of our mission: to battle the achievement gap. I had just one school year to fill in an early-literacy spreadsheet with categories in uppercase and lowercase letters, letter sounds, rhyming and writing. When Josue went to kindergarten, he would be expected to read.

I am prideful about my completed spreadsheets. A neat row of good scores next to a child's name reassured parents, lightened the load on my kindergarten-teaching colleagues, and made it easier and less stressful for my students to meet the next round of assessments.

At the same time, I am deeply troubled about the way I pushed Josue and many other children. Early-childhood education studies suggest that hurrying kids to read doesn't really help them. As *Defending the Early Years* and the Alliance for Childhood put it in an elegantly simple report this month: "No research documents long-term gains from learning to read in kindergarten." And all the time spent discreetly drilling literacy skills to meet standards imposes a huge opportunity cost. It crowds out the one element in early-childhood classrooms proven to bolster learning outcomes over time: play.

Play isn't wasting time when you are little. It's sense-making and experience-building. More important than performance on lowercase-letter assessments is time spent in the block area, working out differences of opinion with other kids. As they create a city together, they solve self-selected problems of engineering, resource-sharing, consensus-building, language and friendship. Josue should play in kindergarten. And he absolutely should be playing in my pre-kindergarten class.

In preschools where students come from literacy-rich (typically affluent) households, there's less of a trade-off. Some children read early. They have no idea how they know what they know, but the squiggles in books have a friendly familiarity. A nudge toward decoding may be all that well-prepared kids need to start their reading journey.

But some students just aren't ready yet. Josue walked into my classroom thousands of vocabulary words behind his middle-income peers. The demand that he must read within a matter of months meant cajoling him, drilling him, spending the morning at a low table with tiny chairs, sorting the required curriculum F—fff flashcards. Sometimes he went along with it. Sometimes he needed a graham cracker to keep it together.

In a *Preschool Policy Brief*, the National Institute for Early Education Research expressed concerns about trends in early literacy assessment, including "the use of assessments that focus on a limited range of skills and the nature of the assessments in use. Both factors may cause teachers to narrow their curriculum and teaching practices, especially when the stakes are high." As this Tuesday morning wears on, I watch Josue lose eye contact. The cowlick that juts up from his forehead bounces more frantically as his stress builds. His arms resume the windmill motion that almost knocked over the crayons. He longs to do what 4-year-olds have always done — run,

explore, touch things, make a lot of noise.

I told myself that if I shouldered the push — the benchmarks, the testing, the reporting, the retesting — and set the tone of the room so the children felt a sense of playfulness while they worked hard, then everything was fine, right? I incorporated playdough in the literacy block and little cars in math. I picked funny books so we'd have the chance to laugh, and I gave the kids a lot of high-fives. I taught them to take deep breaths to counteract their decreasing serotonin levels brought on by hours in our lovely but intensely scripted classroom. I took a lot of deep breaths myself, to keep the guilt under control.

Ideally, the children would choose their own questions to investigate. But for most of the day, I chose for them from the required curriculum, then tried to sell it as play. What they heard was song, rhyme and encouraging words, but the sound behind that was something like the insistent chugging of a troop train.

And these kids were relatively lucky as far as mandates. In Virginia, the state kindergarten reading standards are overambitious, to be sure, but they don't go quite so far as Common Core, which requires 5-year-olds to "read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding." While there are early-childhood programs that have eliminated all play of any kind, I taught in a program that guarded the hour of play on the state-approved schedule and allowed a half-hour of recess. Out on the playground, I could see Josue's shoulders relax and his eye contact resume. No wonder early-childhood educators so often burn out. It's not from working with energetic little kids. It's that internal lurch between feeling like American education heroes and feeling that we've met the enemy, and it is us. Often both before lunch.

In "How Children Succeed," education reporter Paul Tough makes the case that since the 1960s, "the poverty debate disappeared: it merged with the education debate. Education and poverty used to be two very separate topics in public policy." If America's war on the insidious effects of poverty has been conflated into a single front line that runs through our classrooms, then who are the foot soldiers? The ones with Velcro straps on their shoes.

But what if, instead, we got together and pushed back on ill-conceived, unrealistic standards? It would take all of us who know and care about kids like Josue — parents, administrators, teachers and policymakers — to agree that first grade, when many more kids are developmentally ready, not kindergarten, is a good time to learn to read. Kindergartners would then get to build pre-reading skills. And 4-year-olds? They should play in a literacy-rich environment, full of terrific books and engaging conversations. Children who tend to read early would still have that opportunity, and those with a normal need for further development would get back a year of childhood. Josue, too, deserves that kind of childhood, one in which if his attention wanders, it is allowed to roam for a while, instead of quickly — lovingly, mind you, cheerfully, but unequivocally — being brought back to task.

My pre-K classroom was part nursery rhyme, part precise flanking maneuver. Part joyful romp, part march. Part snack, part ration. We don't have a moment to lose, honey. Here, have a graham cracker.

We at Fairlington understand how important play is for preschoolers and that all we teach the children is in the context of play!