**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments for**

**Young Children, Preschool to Grade 3**

July 2021

# Brief 5: Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices

The following early childhood brief was created as companion document for the [Elements of High Quality Kindergarten](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-kindergarten.docx), [Elements of High Quality Elementary Classrooms](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-elementary.docx) and the [joint position statement on play as an instructional strategy](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/play-statement.docx). The brief contains a summary of this topic along with strategies and approaches that reflect high quality early childhood practices. Each brief is followed by a list of related resources and references that were used to develop the brief.

The full set of briefs can be found on the [Department’s Early Learning webpage](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/).

* **Brief 1: Collaboration with Community Based Partners**
* [**Brief 2**](#_Section_2:_Culturally)**: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**
* [**Brief 3**](#_Section_3:_Supporting)**: Supporting Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways**
* [**Brief 4**](#_Section_4:_Creating)**: Creating Antiracist Environments for Young Children**
* [**Brief 5: Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**](#_Section_5:_Planning)

While the topics of these briefs are relevant to all grades, Preschool to 12th Grade, they are written with a particular focus on our youngest students, Preschool to 3rd grade.

**Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

The start of a new school year always provides district and school administrators with a unique opportunity to reimagine what instructional opportunities can look like for young children. This document is written to support planning before the start of a new year or during one to reflect on current practices and strengths to build on and to consider potential changes or areas to strengthen. It will focus on high quality early learning practices that can be considered and how to best meet the needs of our youngest learners, Preschool to 3rd Grade, as they move through the school year and beyond.

In April 2021, DESE and MSAA jointly issued a position statement entitled [*Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool to Grade 3 (PK-3) Classrooms: A Joint Position Statement of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA)*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/play-statement.docx)*.* This statement calls attention to the importance of deepening the learning and engagement of our youngest students through intentionally planned playful learning opportunities that are tied to our state's learning standards.

Now, more than ever, the engagement and learning of students, particularly their social-emotional health and well-being, needs to be at the center of instructional planning. For our youngest students, preschool to 3rd grade, well-planned play opportunities not only help to build social-emotional competencies and language skills, but they also provide students with the opportunity to practice, strengthen and build upon their understanding of concepts taught through literacy, math, science and social studies in ways that are engaging and hands-on. Play is developmentally essential to how young children learn.

As districts plan for what instructional opportunities will look like for our young students, administrators and educators are encouraged to utilize the resources embedded within the aforementioned statement that demonstrate what playful learning can look like when it is intentional, well-planned and linked to learning standards (e.g., [project-based learning](https://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning), [service learning](https://www.nylc.org/page/WhatisService-Learning), and [expeditionary learning](https://eleducation.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw4ImEBhDFARIsAGOTMj_l99dsyfcAyVk2zVpwy_lYLiuQM-FTy8mCZhy_sarf3yzR6UibkmEaAsg_EALw_wcB)). By engaging students in play, educators are not only deepening engagement and understanding of grade level content, but they are also providing authentic opportunities for students to practice and build social-emotional competencies. Social-emotional learning is a critical factor as we consider how to support students’ strengthened engagement.

In May 2021, DESE released the [*Academic Roadmap to Excellence*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/roadmap/), a guide to responding to varied academic needs of students using evidenced based practices to accelerate learning. Every year, students arrive to classrooms with differing patterns of skill levels in each content area, based on differing access to early childhood programs and experiences in the early grades. The following section provides some additional instructional considerations for district and school administrators as they work with educators to strengthen strategies that are inclusive of and responsive to the differing learning needs of all students. Appendix A: References provides articles and other resources related to many of these strategies.

1. **Heterogeneous grouping**

A key strategy appropriate for addressing the diverse development and learning needs of younger students is heterogeneous grouping, also known as de-tracking. Heterogeneous grouping provides students of various learning levels with the opportunity to learn alongside one another. Conversely, homogeneous grouping, also known as tracking, places students of like learning needs or skill levels in the same instructional groupings. The research on homogeneous grouping generally shows little benefit for student learning but the research on heterogeneous grouping shows positive impact for all students. In an article published by the National Education Policy Center, the authors write:

*Ability grouping has been found to have few benefits and many risks. When homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of students are taught identical curricula, there appear to be few advantages to homogeneous grouping in terms of academic achievement. More able students make greater academic progress when separated from their fellow students and given an accelerated course of study. Less able students who are segregated from their more able peers are at risk of being taught an inferior curriculum and consigned to low tracks for their entire academic career (2020).*

Dialogue amongst education stakeholders repeatedly has questioned whether homogeneous grouping may be seen as perpetuating proficiency gaps amongst students, particularly students of color.[[1]](#endnote-2) When done well, however, heterogeneous classrooms offer an alternative approach, one where instruction is more equitable and where students may be less stigmatized by group labeling, are held to the same high expectations for learning, and have the opportunity to engage more deeply in learning with and from their peers. This is a strategy that requires professional development and support in order to be implemented well.[[2]](#endnote-3)

1. **Multi-aged classrooms**

Multi-aged classrooms can be an effective strategy for addressing the varied learning needs of students. There are districts in Massachusetts that utilize a multi-aged model as a way, for example, to address smaller enrollment numbers across grades. From year to year, as districts consider how to address the varying developmental and learning needs of students, considering the potential benefits of implementing a multi-aged classroom might be informative:

*The benefits (perceived and real) of the idealized model of the multiage program are many, including: helping to develop students’ social, emotional, and verbal skills and self-esteem; enabling students to learn at their own pace; building a caring child-centered and project-based learning environment; and improving student attitudes toward school and school work, which results in increased attendance, etc. (Song, Spradlin & Plucker, 2009).*

The philosophies behind multi-aged classrooms are compelling but simply designing multi-aged classrooms doesn’t result in improved outcomes for students. Careful planning and fidelity of implementation are critical levers to multi-aged classrooms that can result in improved outcomes, both social-emotional and academic, for students.

1. **Looping**

Looping is a practice that allows for an educator to stay with a group of students over multiple years. This model allows for the strengthening of the educator-student relationship, for trust to be built over time and for a lengthier period of time over which an educator can work with a group of students. These levers can lead to deeper engagement, improved learning and other benefits related to increased attendance, decreased grade retention and special education referrals.

*Schools that have effectively implemented the looping structure point to the following benefits: improved relationships among students and between teachers and students, more efficient instruction, higher attendance rates, reduced student retentions, fewer referrals of students to special education programs and improved student discipline.(*[*Grant, Richardson, & Forsten, 2000*](https://www.aasa.org/schooladministratorarticle.aspx?id=14482)*)*

Like some of the other instructional strategies mentioned, simply offering a structure for looping does not result in improved outcomes for children; instead, what the students experience in the classroom over multiple years of learning with the same educator is what can lead to outcomes such as the ones described above.

As districts and schools consider what programs and supports will look in the early grades, many options exist with the power to strengthen engagement, deepen learning, and enhance relationships with students and families. A great deal has been learned about what works and what doesn’t in supporting the learning of younger students and both experience and research provide many bright spots to help guide the work, including professional development. The following appendices provide additional Resources (Appendix A) and References (Appendix B) to support concepts and ideas in this document. Endnotes follow the References.

For any questions, more information, or to speak with a member of DESE’s Early Learning team about this document or the work in your community, please email [achievement@doe.mass.edu](mailto:achievement@doe.mass.edu).

## **Appendix A: Resources for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

* [*Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool to Grade 3 (PK-3) Classrooms: A Joint Position Statement of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA)*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/play-statement.docx)
* [Expeditionary Learning Education](https://eleducation.org/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw4ImEBhDFARIsAGOTMj_l99dsyfcAyVk2zVpwy_lYLiuQM-FTy8mCZhy_sarf3yzR6UibkmEaAsg_EALw_wcB)
* [Project-Based Learning (PBL) | Edutopia](https://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning)
* [National Youth Learning Council](https://www.nylc.org/page/WhatisService-Learning) – this website presents information on both service learning and community service. The hyperlink connects to the service learning component of the website.

## **Appendix B: References for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

Reilly, J. (2020). “Where are the kids? School is back in session , but many kindergarteners are missing.” **Time.** September 22, 2020**.**

**Heterogeneous grouping**

Burris, C., Heubert, J., Levin, H. (2006). Accelerating mathematics achievement using heterogeneous grouping. American Educational Research Journal, 43(1), 137-154

Catsambis, S., & Buttaro, A. (2012). Revisiting “Kindergarten as academic boot camp”: a nationwide study of ability grouping and psycho-social development. *Social Psychology of Education, 15*, 483-515.

Glass, G.V.. (2020) [Grouping Students for Instruction](https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/Chapter05-Glass-Final.pdf); National Education Policy Center; University of Colorado;

Goldstein, (2021). “[Does it hurt children to measure pandemic learning loss?”](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/us/school-testing-education-covid.html) New York Times, April 8, 2021

Marzano, R.J, Pickering, J.E. and Pollock (2001) *Classroom Instruction that Works*. (1st edition). Association for Curriculum Development.

**Looping:**

Grant, J., Richardson, I., & Forsten, C. (2000). [Proponents find much to like about the practice of keeping teachers with the same students for two or more years](https://www.aasa.org/schooladministratorarticle.aspx?id=14482). *School Administrator*, AASA.

ENDNOTES

1. See research by Burris, Heubert & Levin (2006); as well as Catsambis & Buttaro (2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See Marzano, Pickering & Pollock (2001) and Dan, Hubbell, Pitler and Stone (2012):the 1st and 2nd editions of *Classroom Instruction that Works*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)