# Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in

# Preschool through 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)

Over recent years, the focus on meeting standards in English language arts, mathematics and other content areas has created opportunities for discussions about the balance between rigorous, standards-based instruction and intentional, playful learning opportunities for children in the early years, preschool through grade 3 (PK-3). Early childhood and elementary teachers, nationwide, have expressed increasing concern that times dedicated to playful learning experiences are often missed in order to maintain a focus on academics through teacher-directed instruction, preparation for standardized testing, and efforts to close achievement gaps. Such a rigorous academic focus in the early learning years can be perceived by some to put unfair pressure on young children. Fortunately, research strongly supports the concept that through play, cognitively demanding (i.e. rigorous), joyful learning opportunities can be delivered in a way that is responsive to the developmental needs of our youngest learners. This is made explicitly clear in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) developmentally appropriate practice position statement.

There are many definitions and stages of play. In the context of this statement, play is child-directed and defined as opportunities for children to be intrinsically motivated to engage deeply in content through exploration, inquiry-based learning, and reflection. Such intentional play can often be referred to by terms such as project-based learning; hands-on learning; and/or exploratory, deeper learning. Whatever the term, this statement considers play, and intentional, playful learning opportunities to be those designed by educators to support children in engaging with standards-based content, their own interests, and reflective practices. Play becomes an instructional strategy to build content knowledge, language, and physical, social and emotional competencies.

While research shows that high quality early learning opportunities lead to positive developmental and learning gains, not all children have equal access to such opportunities. Children arrive to kindergarten with varied developmental and learning competencies, in part due to differences in developmental trajectories and, in part, due to gaps in exposure to high quality preschool opportunities. Further, as children enter into the K-12 system, the number who are able to access consistently, high quality early learning experiences up through 3rd grade is low (Kauerz, 2019/ECS presentation). More specifically, data reflect that children of color, children who are economically disadvantaged, and children who are English Learners or have disabilities are more likely than their peers to be assigned to teachers and principals who are inexperienced, teaching out of field, and/or rated lower on evaluation standards (DESE; [Equitable Access to Excellent Educators](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeffectiveness/equitableaccess/), 2017). Further, the research is clear that without sustained, high quality learning opportunities in preschool through grade 3, positive outcomes resulting from preschool will likely fade out (Ed Week, 2018; 2017). This joint position statement, *Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool-3rd Grade Classrooms,* argues that the delivery of high quality PK-3 experiences that include intentional, child-centered and playful learning opportunities across the curriculum is an important part of the answer for how to build on and sustain gains achieved in the early years and as important, for creating equitable opportunities for all children, including our most marginalized and vulnerable learners.

This statement further posits that play is how children learn and therefore, is a necessary and leading instructional strategy when working with young children, PK-3rd grade, across the curriculum. When asked about playful learning opportunities available for students across the course of the day, it is often cited as something that happens during recess, physical education and/or an unstructured free time in the course of a day or a week; it is less frequent to hear examples of play being provided in the context of instructional strategies for English language arts, mathematics, science and technology/engineering and/or social studies. One goal of this position statement is to shift the understanding of the goals of playful learning away from exclusively supporting children’s social and emotional development, and towards a broader scope of opportunities that include the development of academic, physical and social-emotional competencies, addressing equitable learning opportunities and closing achievement gaps for all children.

Playfulness (the drive to play) serves educative purposes complementary to those of curiosity. While curiosity motivates children to seek new knowledge and understanding, playfulness motivates them to practice new skills and use those skills creatively (Gray, 2013, p. 118).

With the definition of play as an effective and intentional instructional strategy to support engagement in rigorous, standards-based instruction, the discussion amongst educators and administrators transforms into a synergy where both are seen as working together. Educators guide children through play in constructing and representing their knowledge of the world and developing a wide range of academic competencies as well as college and career readiness skills, such as communication, initiative, creativity, flexibility, critical thinking, and social emotional skills.

**Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool and Kindergarten Classrooms**

In high quality preschool and kindergarten programs, purposeful play is integrated through all the elements of a program including the learning environment, curriculum, instruction and the assessment of children. The curriculum in preschool and kindergarten is tailored to children’s interests, language, culture, and developmental capacities as well as being integrated across content areas in order to incorporate sustained play. Using play as an instructional approach provides opportunities such as working in groups on shared learning opportunities, problem solving, taking on different roles, and engaging with different types of materials to facilitate their learning and where children engage in extended discourse, critical thinking and creativity. When children are provided with many and varied opportunities across the day to be actively engaged cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically, they develop positive attitudes toward learning, deeper understanding of constructs embedded within our state’s learning standards, and important skills such as self-regulation, critical thinking, problem solving and relationship-building, all of which are foundational to college and career readiness.

Links to Resources for Preschool and Kindergarten:

1. [*Fostering Learning in the Early Years: Elements of High Quality Kindergarten*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-kindergarten.docx) (MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)
2. [Guidelines for Preschool and Kindergarten Learning Experiences](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/gpkle.docx)
3. [Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic for Early Childhood Programs (Preschool up to 3rd Grade)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/learning-environments.pdf)
4. Videos:
* [*Focus on Kindergarten*](https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/focus-on-k2) (Boston Public Schools – Department of Early Childhood)
* [*High Quality Early Learning*](https://highqualityearlylearning.org/kindergarten-videos-2/) (The High Quality Early Learning Project)
* [*Kindergarten: Where Play and Learning Can Meet*](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/events/archived_events/2018/december-12.aspx?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term) (Institute of Education Sciences/Regional Education Laboratory)
* [*Center for the Developing Child*](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/play-in-early-childhood-the-role-of-play-in-any-setting/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=august_2019) (Harvard University)
* [*Kindergarten Matters*](https://thelearningexchange.ca/projects/kindergarten-matters-intentional-play-based-learning-2/) (The Learning Exchange)

**Intentional, Playful Learning in First Grade through Third Grade Classrooms**

Thoughtfully planned play used as an instructional strategy in a first, second, and third grade classroom should look different than play in a preschool or kindergarten classroom, with children able to investigate, create and complete learning opportunities in an increasingly complex manner. Playful learning experiences in first through third grade classrooms:

* include investigations, dramatizations, construction, and experimentation;
* are integrated into the curriculum through careful planning that embeds these experiences throughout each day and across days;
* incorporate self-reflection and inter-disciplinary connections where children explore, ask questions, make choices, work together, solve problems and use their imaginations with the academic content and concepts;
* create safe places for children to take risks with their learning;
* develop and practice regulation of emotions;
* honor student choice and voice; and
* promote self-initiated learning.

To achieve improved development and learning outcomes for children in these grades, intentional, playful learning needs to be embraced as the leading instructional approach for delivering standards-based curriculum that is aligned to state standards. Through these experiences, children apply and practice new knowledge and skills in natural and relevant ways. Creating a balance of learning contexts, using varied instructional approaches and providing time for children to play is critical for all children’s success and learning. Advancement of this work must be done in partnership with educators, school and district administrators and institutions of higher education.

Links to Resources for Grades 1-3:

1. [*Fostering Learning in the Early Years: Elements of High Quality Elementary Classrooms*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-elementary.docx)
2. [*Science Technology/Engineering PK-2 Instructional Guidelines*](https://www.doe.mass.edu/stem/ste/?section=classroom#resources)
3. [Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic for Early Childhood Programs (Preschool up to 3rd Grade)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/learning-environments.pdf)
4. Video: [*High Quality Early Learning*](https://highqualityearlylearning.org/first-grade-videos/) *- first grade* (The High Quality Early Learning Project)

[*High Quality Early Learning*](https://highqualityearlylearning.org/second-grade-videos/) *- first/second grade* (The High Quality Early Learning Project)

[*How to Get Into Play-Based Learning: Part 1 – What is Play?*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31gZZZ-XG94)

[*How to Get Into Play-Based Learning: Part 2 – Small Steps to a Playful Classroom*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBT7hK6grT8)

[*How to Get Into Play-Based Learning: Part 4 – Assessment in a Playful Classroom*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65NMWwvjL5o)

[*How to Get Into Play-Based Learning: Part 5 – Educator Strategies for a Playful Classroom*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O471oW-B7Q4)

**Community Profile**

Boston’s *Focus on Early Learning* is a nationally acclaimed model of early education that can be scaled and sustained in a variety of settings. *Focus*’ child-centric approach empowers teachers and schools to use play as an instructional strategy, reduces the achievement gap, mitigates the need for later remediation, and sets children on a path for school and life success. Read more below, and/or download a brief [overview](http://bit.ly/AboutFocus).

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