

Answer Sheet

How ‘twisted’ early childhood education has become — from a child development expert

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

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Nancy Carlsson-Paige is an early childhood development expert who has been at the forefront of the debate on how best to educate — and not educate — the youngest students. She is a professor emerita of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Ma., where she taught teachers for more than 30 years and was a founder of the university’s Center for Peaceable Schools. She is also a founding member of a nonprofit called Defending the Early Years, which commissions research about early childhood education and advocates for sane policies for young children.

Carlsson-Paige is author of “[Taking Back Childhood](#).” The mother of two artist sons, Matt and Kyle Damon, she is also the recipient of numerous awards, including the Legacy Award from the Robert F. Kennedy Children’s Action Corps for work over several decades on behalf of children and families. She was just given the Deborah Meier award by the nonprofit National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

In her speech accepting the award (named after the renowned educator Deborah Meier), Carlsson-Paige describes what has happened in the world of early childhood education in the current era of high-stakes testing, saying, “Never in my wildest dreams could I have foreseen the situation we find ourselves in today.” Here’s the speech, which I am publishing with permission:

Thank you FairTest for this Deborah Meier Hero in Education Award. FairTest does such great advocacy and education around fair and just testing practices. This award carries the name of one of my heroes in education, Deborah Meier—she’s a force for justice and democracy in education. I hope that every time this award is given, it will allow us to once again pay tribute to Deb. Also, I feel privileged to be accepting this honor alongside Lani Guinier.

When I was invited to be here tonight, I thought about the many people who work for justice and equity in education who could also be standing here. So I am thinking of all of them now and I accept this award on their behalf — all the educators dedicated to children and what’s fair and best for them.

It’s wonderful to see all of you here — so many family and friends, comrades in this struggle to

I have loved my life's work – teaching teachers about how young children think, how they learn, how they develop socially, emotionally, morally. I've been fascinated with the theories and science of my field and seeing it expressed in the actions and the play of children.

So never in my wildest dreams could I have foreseen the situation we find ourselves in today.

Where education policies that do not reflect what we know about how young children learn could be mandated and followed. We have decades of research in child development and neuroscience that tell us that young children learn actively — they have to move, use their senses, get their hands on things, interact with other kids and teachers, create, invent. But in this twisted time, young children starting public pre-K at the age of 4 are expected to learn through “rigorous instruction.”

And never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that we would have to defend children's right to play.

Play is the primary engine of human growth; it's universal – as much as walking and talking. Play is the way children build ideas and how they make sense of their experience and feel safe. Just look at all the math concepts at work in the intricate buildings of kindergartners. Or watch a 4-year-old put on a cape and pretend to be a superhero after witnessing some scary event.

But play is disappearing from classrooms. Even though we know play is learning for young kids, we are seeing it shoved aside to make room for academic instruction and “rigor.”

I could not have foreseen in my wildest dreams that we would have to fight for classrooms for young kids that are developmentally appropriate. Instead of active, hands-on learning, children now sit in chairs for far too much time getting drilled on letters and numbers. Stress levels are up among young kids. Parents and teachers tell me: children worry that they don't know the right answers; they have nightmares, they pull out their eyelashes, they cry because they don't want to go to school. Some people call this child abuse and I can't disagree.

I could not have foreseen in my wildest dreams that we would be up against pressure to test and assess young kids throughout the year often in great excess — often administering multiple tests to children in kindergarten and even pre-K. Now, when young children start school, they often spend their first days not getting to know their classroom and making friends. They spend their first days getting tested. Here are words from one mother as this school year began:

“My daughter's first day of kindergarten — her very first introduction to elementary school — consisted almost entirely of assessment. She was due at school at 9:30, and I picked her up at 11:45. In between, she was assessed by five different teachers, each a stranger, asking her to perform some task.

“By the time I picked her up, she did not want to talk about what she had done in school, but she did say that she did not want to go back. She did not know the teachers’ names. She did not make any friends. Later that afternoon, as she played with her animals in her room, I overheard her drilling them on their numbers and letters.”

The most important competencies in young children can’t be tested—we all know this. Naming letters and numbers is superficial and almost irrelevant in relation to the capacities we want to help children develop: self-regulation, problem solving ability, social and emotional competence, imagination, initiative, curiosity, original thinking — these capacities make or break success in school and life and they can’t be reduced to numbers.

Yet these days, all the money and resources, the time dedicated to professional development, they go to tooling teachers up to use the required assessments. Somehow the data gleaned from these tests is supposed to be more valid than a teacher’s own ability to observe children and understand their skills in the context of their whole development in the classroom.

The first time I saw for myself what was becoming of many of the nation’s early childhood classrooms was when I visited a program in a low-income community in north Miami. Most of the children were on free- and reduced-price lunch.

There were 10 classrooms – kindergarten and pre-K. The program’s funding depended on test scores, so — no surprise — teachers taught to the test. Kids who got low scores, I was told, got extra drills in reading and math and didn’t get to go to art. They used a computer program to teach 4- and 5-year-olds how to “bubble.” One teacher complained to me that some children go outside the lines.

In one of the kindergartens I visited, the walls were barren and so was the whole room. The teacher was testing one little boy at a computer at the side of the room. There was no classroom aide. The other children were sitting at tables copying words from the chalk board. The words were: “No talking. Sit in your seat. Hands to Yourself.”

The teacher kept shouting at them from her testing corner: Be quiet! No talking!

Most of the children looked scared or disengaged, and one little boy was sitting alone. He was quietly crying. I will never forget how these children looked or how it felt to watch them, I would say, suffering in this context that was such a profound mismatch with their needs.

It’s in low-income, under-resourced communities like this one where children are most subjected to heavy doses of teacher-led drills and tests. Not like in wealthier suburbs where kids have the opportunity to go to early childhood programs that have play, the arts, and project-based learning. It’s poverty — the elephant in the room — that is the root cause of this disparity.

A few months ago, I was alarmed to read a report from the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights showing that more than 8,000 children from public preschools across the country were suspended at least once in a school year, many more than once. First of all, who suspends a preschooler? Why and for what? The very concept is bizarre and awful. But 8,000? And then to keep reading the report to see that a disproportionate number of those suspended preschoolers were low income, black boys.

There is a connection, I know, between these suspensions and ed reform policies: Children in low-income communities are enduring play deficient classrooms where they get heavy doses of direct teaching and testing. They have to sit still, be quiet in their seats and comply. Many young children can't do this and none should have to.

I came home from that visit to the classrooms in North Miami in despair. But fortunately, the despair turned quickly to organizing. With other educators we started our nonprofit Defending the Early Years. We have terrific early childhood leaders with us (some are here tonight: Deb Meier, Geralyn McLaughlin, Diane Levin and Ayla Gavins). We speak in a unified voice for young children.

We publish reports, write op eds, make videos and send them out on YouTube, we speak and do interviews every chance we get.

We've done it all on a shoestring. It's almost comical: The Gates Foundation has spent more than \$200 million just to promote the Common Core. Our budget at Defending the Early Years is .006 percent of that.

We collaborate with other organizations. FairTest has been so helpful to us. And we also collaborate with –Network for Public Education, United Opt Out, many parent groups, Citizens for Public Schools, Badass Teachers, Busted Pencils Radio, Save Our Schools, Alliance for Childhood and ECE PolicyWorks —There's a powerful network out there – of educators, parents and students — and we see the difference we are making.

We all share a common vision: Education is a human right and every child deserves one. An excellent, free education where learning is meaningful – with arts, play, engaging projects, and the chance to learn citizenship skills so that children can one day participate — actively and consciously – in this increasingly fragile democracy.

 **204 Comments**

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Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times. **Follow** 