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Rediscovering KINDERGARTEN

Embracing **PLAY & JOY** in Learning



Foreword by Swati Adarkar

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FOREWORD

It is an honor to contribute to my colleague and friend Laura Bornfreund's book, *Rediscovering Kindergarten*. The book is an important contribution to both the fields of early childhood and elementary education. It is a timely call to action to all of us who care about the transformational potential of public education to support human development and learning in a pivotal and consequential year of a child's education. Laura underscores the urgency to translate research and best practices in kindergarten into sustained action toward scale and impact.

Rediscovering Kindergarten provides an overview with practical examples of the essential enabling conditions for success that must be implemented over time and in concert from the classroom to the federal level to lay a strong foundation. Making these strategies stick is essential, particularly for children in low-income communities, if we are to reap the intended benefits of an effective kindergarten year. The inclusion of the history of kindergarten helps us to better understand the enduring and persisting gaps in educational access and quality that continue today, which have enormous consequences for the learning that follows from first grade onward. Laura's stories from her school visits across the country bring the book to life, making it an accessible and easy read.

Laura and I have been fellow travelers supporting developmentally informed and quality early learning experiences that begin before kindergarten and continue into kindergarten through 3rd grade—the critical span of early learning and development. Dr. Ruby Takanishi, mother of the pre-K–3 movement, mentored several of us to elevate the urgency and potential of better aligning the “two galaxies” of disparate programs, services, and systems. A commitment to educational equity relies on creating this sturdy bridge between the early years and early grades. The kindergarten year is the foundational connector.

And yet, as Laura points out, there is still wide variation across states as to when public school officially begins. The result is an ambiguous message to parents about kindergarten's importance. In fact, kindergarten is the first year of a publicly funded early learning program at scale with the potential to reach every child. Embracing kindergarten is an opportunity to reduce pernicious achievement gaps and to enable teachers to meet all students' development and learning needs. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, called kindergarten “the missing step.” Embracing, or rediscovering, kindergarten would change the trajectory for children in underserved communities.

One of the primary themes of the book is play-based learning and its role in supporting developmentally appropriate and rigorous instruction. Many of us can remember a time when kindergarten was designed for exactly that purpose. It spurred our curiosity in ways that we did not even realize. As a mother, I was quite surprised many years later when my son attended his first day of kindergarten and asked how many more days of school he had to attend! Recess was taken away on one of the days to coax the boys into behaving. This response missed the opportunity to emphasize well-rounded and whole-child learning. Laura shares her own children's experiences too, and I suspect these stories will resonate with many readers on how much has changed. The word "rediscovering" in the title is fitting.

During my time at the US Department of Education, I found kindergarten teachers were strong advocates for supporting joyful and engaged learning but often did not have the permission, encouragement, or supports to do so. In this book, examples of bright spots across classrooms, districts, and states help us to understand that transforming kindergarten is indeed possible. Several champions are highlighted across the country, including legislators, elected officials, agency leaders, teachers, and school leaders. They are the unsung heroes. And there are undoubtedly many more to unearth. We can learn from these examples and build on them.

Putting all the pieces in place together takes vision and leadership at every level. Kindergarten success also relies on effective partnerships and collaboration with teachers, families, and community partners. This is especially true to support everyday school attendance, which is strongly associated with improving grade-level mastery. At the end of each chapter are questions for reflection and action to guide our improvement efforts.

My gratitude to Laura for elevating the kindergarten year and helping us to understand **why it matters and why it matters now**. *Rediscovering Kindergarten* provides us with actionable steps to ensure that kindergarten can be a sturdy bridge between the early years and early grades.

Swati Adarkar

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary, Policy and Early Learning, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, US Department of Education

PREFACE

It was Meet the Teacher Day, a warm Friday in late August 2017. My five-year-old daughter, Ainsley, picked out one of her favorite brightly colored dresses, and I braided her hair. With a mix of excitement and uncertainty for both of us, Ainsley would soon begin a new adventure: kindergarten.

I was an excited and nervous parent whose oldest child was starting kindergarten. And I was curious, as someone who has conducted research on education policy in my professional life for more than a decade. Going to school was not a new experience for Ainsley. From three months old, she attended an early childhood education (ECE) program at two different child-care centers on Capitol Hill before moving into prekindergarten at our local public school in Washington, DC. From the day she started ECE, my husband and I called it “school.” After all, she was learning, making friends, and had several great teachers.

While the idea of school was definitely not new to our child, the formality of kindergarten was. As we walked up the steps into her public elementary school for Meet the Teacher, we saw a “Welcome Families” banner hanging in the entryway. Across the lobby, staff members smiled, standing behind a table on which the class lists rested. Questions flooded my mind: Who would Ainsley’s teacher be? Would she be in the same class as her pre-K friends? How big would the class be? What would the teacher be like? How long had they been teaching? What would they know about early childhood development? What would her teacher know about Ainsley’s pre-K experience and our family?

I did know some things already. There were two kindergarten teachers, and I had seen them in the hallway the year before, when Ainsley was in pre-K. They seemed friendly. One had a lot of energy, and the other was more reserved. In June, before school let out for the summer, I attended a “stepping up” meeting held by one of them for parents of rising kindergartners. Ms. Underwood¹ introduced herself and welcomed us. She asked us to find a partner and talk about what we thought our children should know when they entered kindergarten. And she asked us to think about our own favorite kindergarten activity. Then, she put up a slide that read:

1 I used pseudonyms for Ainsley’s teachers who are mentioned in this book.

Kindergarten is not how it used to be. Old school kindergarten consisted of fingerpainting, playing with blocks, and eating snacks. Some of you (or your parents) may have gone for only a half-day, and some of you may not have attended kindergarten at all.

I sighed. Kindergarten had changed since I was in school, and not necessarily for the better. My memories of kindergarten include acting out stories, playing in the kitchen and block areas, playing with friends, cooking, and going on nature walks behind the school. I know that I also learned my letters and sounds, and I started reading. I learned about numbers and counting. I learned how to write my numbers and most letters. But most importantly, I remember loving school. I was excited to go. I was excited to be there.

As I emerged from daydreaming about my very important role as a cucumber in our kindergarten play on vegetables, I looked up to see “NO NAPTIME!” on the slide. The next slide read, “Kindergarten is much more academically rigorous,” with a list of eight things children would be learning:

1. How to blend sounds to make words (once all 52 letters and sounds are mastered)
2. Recognize sight words
3. Read books with repetitive themes
4. Write a complete sentence
5. Recognize numbers up to one hundred
6. Compare numbers
7. Understand positional words and 2D and 3D shapes
8. Compose and decompose numbers
9. Add and subtract

Ms. Underwood did note on a later slide the importance of social readiness for kindergarten, in addition to students’ academic readiness. She made it clear, though, that the emphasis would be on reading and math. One of the last slides previewed the daily schedule:

8:35–9:00 Breakfast in the class
9:00–9:15 Opening
9:15–10:00 Phonics/phonemic awareness
10:00–10:05 Brain break
10:05–10:25 Story time
10:25–10:45 Writing block
10:45–11:30 Guided reading
11:30–12:30 Lunch and recess
12:30–1:00 Health/science/social studies
1:00–1:45 Specials
1:45–3:15 Math block
3:15 Dismissal

It looked like a pretty boring day. Ms. Underwood’s presentation was a lot to take in and underscored that kindergarten would be hugely different from pre-K, the experience that we were “stepping up” from. In fact, it felt much more than just advancing from one step to another on a normal staircase. This felt like there were big gaps between the steps. I glanced around the room at the other parents. Some had a deer-in-the-headlights look, and others were nodding along as if this was what they expected. One mom whispered to me that now that our kids were going to kindergarten, they would be in “real school.” I had two thoughts. First, I don’t think I’m going to like real school. Second, school, and especially kindergarten, doesn’t have to, and really shouldn’t, be this way.

Honestly, the fact that kindergarten “is not how it used to be” did not surprise me at all. I had been a fourth-grade teacher before working in education policy. For over a decade, I have written about the value and importance of pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades. I have seen evidence of the shifts underway that have turned the teaching of kindergarten to third grade (K–3) into an experience that is less appropriate for young students. Instead of teaching through play, art, and music, many teachers deliver lessons to the whole class at once and keep children in their seats or on the floor for long periods. Instead of providing opportunities

for students to discover, explore, and create, many teachers assign worksheets. There is less emphasis on building relationships and classroom community and more emphasis on student behavior. Science, social studies, art, music, and physical education are all crowded out of the school day.

These changes began in earnest after the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. The new emphasis on testing and accountability under the law put pressure on schools and teachers to achieve at higher levels for each child. In many places, this led to the removal of kindergarten staples like pretend play and block areas in classrooms (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, 2016). “No time for play,” some school administrators said. I had hoped for something different in the elementary school that Ainsley would attend. As a researcher and writer, I knew that some states, school districts, and schools were shifting back to or at least searching for a better balance between rigorous academics and playful learning.

At Meet the Teacher Day, Ainsley spotted her friend Evie, and they ran up to the table, waving for me to help them find their names. We found them. Ainsley got Mrs. Wilson. Not the same teacher as Evie. Ainsley frowned and started to worry that she wouldn’t know anyone in her class. I reminded her that she would make new friends and still see the kids from the other class. I led her into the cafeteria, where the teachers were gathered. It was crowded and buzzing with excitement. It took us a while to spot Mrs. Wilson, but once we did, I introduced myself and said Ainsley was excited to start kindergarten. Mrs. Wilson was a warm, petite woman who had taught kindergarten for many years. It was tough to do more than say hi in the noisy room. Mrs. Wilson told us she looked forward to seeing Ainsley on Monday and that she’d send home lots of information and forms during the first week. And that was that.

On our way out, Ainsley waved to some of her pre-K friends. None of them were in her class, but then she ran into someone who was. Ainsley beamed. We walked back home. Over the weekend, we’d buy school supplies, make sure her uniforms were ready to go, and get to bed early to be ready, bright and early, for her big first day of “real school.”

• • • • •

At one time, children in kindergarten played much of the school day. But in the last few decades, the pendulum has swung almost entirely in the opposite direction. Kindergartners today spend much of their day sitting, listening to reading lessons, and completing worksheets (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem, 2016). They have limited, and sometimes no, opportunities for choice, exploration, and play. But it doesn't have to be an either/or proposition: academics versus play. The best kindergartens include the best of both: challenging academic content woven into playful experiences.

Over the last several years, I have visited dozens of kindergarten classrooms in multiple states to understand children's early school experiences. I've seen classrooms like Ainsley's, with long stretches of reading instruction where children sit, listen, and respond. And I have seen classrooms where teachers meet the required academic standards while challenging learners, encouraging student talk and choice, and building a strong classroom community to guide learning through play and exploration.

In one such classroom in New Hampshire, I observed a group of students exploring magnetic tiles and bells. At first, the students played only with the tiles and ignored the bells. But then one student noticed that when a magnetic tile fell onto the table, a bell on the table moved toward that tile. The students' curiosity was piqued, and they began putting bells on the magnetic tiles. When center time was over, the class gathered on the carpet. The teacher asked for volunteers to share what they learned during play. One girl said she used the bells to decorate the tiles because they stuck to them. The teacher asked why the bells stuck to the tiles. The girl didn't know.

Later that day, when the students were in music class, I asked the teacher why she didn't probe more. She said it was only Monday; she planned to pair different objects with the magnetic tiles throughout the week, some magnetic and some not. She wanted to see what the children could figure out independently. As the week went on, she explained, she would ask more probing questions to help guide her students' thinking.

That New Hampshire classroom illustrates how young children learn best: play, discovery, and opportunities to talk through ideas. During kindergarten, in addition to building on the literacy and numeracy skills they already have, children are

supposed to increase their understanding of the world around them, expand their ability to interact positively with adults and their peers, and explore their curiosity in a way that develops a love of learning that carries them through their schooling.

There is a lot of variation across the country when it comes to approaches to kindergarten. In some places, district or state leaders set class size limits for kindergarten. In Florida, for example, the maximum number of kindergartners per classroom is eighteen, which is a little less than I've seen in other places. In some schools, every kindergarten classroom has an assistant teacher (also called an ed tech, paraprofessional, or aide). This is the case in Boston, Massachusetts, for instance. In some states, district officials must select curricula from an approved list. In other states, district and school leaders can choose whatever curricula they want. Decisions about the types of curricula, books, and materials teachers use in the classroom matter. Kindergarten is an important year in children's development, but state and local leaders' choices about it seem haphazard to the outside eye.

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When Monday morning arrived, we got ready and then snapped some “first day of school” photos. In her navy blue jumper and yellow polo shirt, and with her braided hair, Ainsley climbed on top of the brick bench outside our door, proudly holding her “first day of kindergarten” sign. My husband and I had our phones ready to go, taking at least a dozen pictures we would share with family and friends later. “Okay, let's go,” I nudged, glancing at the time, and Ainsley jumped down.

We walked into the bustling school. Smiling teachers, the principal, and other staff greeted us as we walked down the corridor to the pre-K and kindergarten wing. Ainsley pulled me into her classroom, and we found her name on a cubby and hung up her backpack on the hook inside. I hugged Ainsley and wished her a fantastic first day. As I left the room, I turned for one more look.

I hoped Ainsley would build friendships. I hoped she would have opportunities to play, explore, ask questions, and be creative and joyful. But my final thought, walking down the hallway, was that if the furniture weren't so small, I'd think this was a classroom for older children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began with a conversation. It was late spring, and I was discussing a writing idea with Lisa Guernsey. I had previously written articles about full-day kindergarten, kindergarten environments, and quality in kindergarten, and now I wanted to draw on my experience as a soon-to-be kindergarten mom. Lisa suggested I turn my ideas into a book. Several years and dozens of classroom visits later, here it is.

Thank you, Lisa, not only for that suggestion but for your mentorship over the years and your work in the early education field. I am also grateful to the researchers, advocates, and educators who have shaped my thinking about the pre-K–3rd movement: Swati Adarkar, Kristie Kauerz, and the late Ruby Takanishi. Your work to strengthen the education continuum from birth through third grade continues to inspire me.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Joy and Play Matter from the Start

It was 1982, and I was starting kindergarten at Holy Family Catholic School in St. Petersburg, Florida. My family had just moved from a small town in Indiana, and my parents weren't yet familiar with the public schools in the area.

My kindergarten program was for half a day, and my teacher was Mrs. Pam Ferguson. My most vivid memory was from my first day of kindergarten. Mrs. Ferguson called students' names, in alphabetical order, to choose a center to go to during choice time. My last name started with a *W*. The only center left was the library corner. I didn't know how to read, and I didn't want to sit in that center by myself looking at books, especially when other children were building with blocks and pretending in the kitchen.

The end of my first day was not happy, but the days got better. Mrs. Ferguson rotated names for choice time, and eventually, I had a turn in the kitchen. I fondly remember playing outside with friends and examining bugs and plants during class nature walks. I still sometimes make the apple sauce recipe we cooked in class for our Thanksgiving feast. And I remember practicing my two lines as a cucumber in our play about garden vegetables.

Mrs. Ferguson taught us letter sounds and sight words. By the end of that year, I started reading simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) books. I learned to

count, recognize shapes, and add numbers up to ten. I also learned how to write some numbers and letters.

I played a lot, and I learned a lot. My kindergarten teacher helped me love learning and flourish as a learner.

WHAT IS KINDERGARTEN?

Elizabeth Peabody, a kindergarten pioneer from Boston, Massachusetts, wrote in 1877 that *kindergarten* means a garden of children. In her *Guide to Kindergarten and Intermediate Class*, Peabody (1877) asked, “How does the gardener treat his plants? He studies their individual natures and puts them into such circumstances of soil and atmosphere as to enable them to grow, flower, and bring forth fruit.” This vision makes the teachers the “kindergartners.” And as kindergarten took hold in the United States, that is what people often called them.

But the vision for kindergarten has changed since Peabody’s time. The kindergarten year has shifted as we’ve learned more about the learning capabilities of very young children and the benefits of attending high-quality early learning programs and full-day kindergarten. Kindergarten is no longer just about teaching children to be good future students and good citizens, as it was in the late 1800s.

Still, kindergarten sits squarely in the period of children’s early development, which spans birth through age eight. Middle childhood begins at about age nine, typically the beginning of fourth grade. Considering this, kindergarten and first grade should look much more like a preschool classroom with child-led, play-based learning than it should a fourth-grade classroom with desks in rows or groups, paper and pencil assignments, and more time with the teacher at the front of the room talking to the students.

Today, however, kindergarten in many places looks more like what you would expect for upper elementary classrooms. What early education researchers tell us about how young children learn best is often ignored (Dorsey, 2015). While kindergarten does, and should, look and feel different from how it did in the late 1800s or even the 1980s, it has become barely recognizable to the earliest kindergartens. Some children have opportunities for play in kindergarten, but others attend highly controlled and reading-driven kindergarten programs. Research on class

size shows that reducing class sizes to thirteen to seventeen students (averaging about fifteen) in early grades significantly improves student performance compared to regular-sized classes of twenty-two to twenty-five students (Mosteller, 1995). Across the country, some children are in classes with fewer than eighteen students. Some children attend a kindergarten where their teacher has a full-time assistant. Other children may be in a class with twenty-two or more students with one teacher to manage the multitude of tasks and activities on their own. Some children attended pre-K before kindergarten, while for others, kindergarten is their first experience in a classroom setting.

There is great variability and inequity in children's school experiences, especially in kindergarten. State and local lawmakers and decision-makers play a major role in explaining why. Not every state requires children to attend kindergarten. Not every state requires a full day of kindergarten. Not every state funds kindergarten at the same level as first grade (Education Commission of the States, 2025). This funding decision may seem logical. Policymakers may assume that older students are the ones who need more resources. Fifth-grade teachers may have more students than kindergarten teachers. Upper elementary grades may, for instance, do science experiments or other projects requiring equipment and materials. But quality kindergarten does not cost less than upper grades, especially in a school that understands the purpose and goals of kindergarten. School leaders who understand how young children learn and develop value play-based learning and recognize the need for more than one trained adult in a kindergarten classroom. They will work to find the funding to support quality.

Children from families with the lowest incomes are often hit the hardest by under-resourced kindergarten. Schools in middle-income and affluent neighborhoods can fill funding gaps with local property taxes (the largest source of school funding) or through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) sponsored fundraising events. This is not the case for many schools in low-income neighborhoods or with schools serving high numbers of children from families in poverty or experiencing homelessness. To the detriment of our young students, this can mean fewer dollars and resources to pay for effective teachers and learning experiences in kindergarten classrooms (Powell, Lamba, Ismail, and Marland, 2023). (I'll explore these topics more in chapter 2.)

Why do children need kindergarten? Kindergarten is the first universally available and formal educational opportunity available to all children in the United States. We cannot assume that children attended pre-K, participated in a high-quality early childhood program, or had a caregiver who could devote significant time to early education and development. Kindergarten is, in many cases, the first place children learn to be students and friends. In an ideal kindergarten, teachers nurture children’s curiosity and joy about the people and world around them and grow their natural love for learning. Teachers in kindergarten lay the foundation for a child’s future success in reading, math, science, the arts, and more.

The purposes of kindergarten may have evolved over time, but the way young children learn has not. Exploration and student-led, playful, and joyful learning opportunities have always been central to how teachers should deliver content. And this is a huge way many kindergartens are falling short today (Brown, 2016).

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I decided to write *Rediscovering Kindergarten: Embracing Play and Joy in Learning* just before Ainsley started kindergarten in 2017. For years, I had been writing about early learning, especially about pre-K through third grade—the span I continue to be most passionate about transforming. About a decade ago, I wrote for the *National Journal* about the lack of conversations on strengthening the early elementary years. I lamented, “Unfortunately, few conversations focus on improving kindergarten through third grade, the linchpin of the pre-K-to-12 education system. These years, some of the most crucial in a young child’s intellectual and social development, are largely ignored. Kindergarten through second grade is at least equally important to what comes before and after” (Bornfreund, 2014).

Those statements are still true. *And* there are growing pockets of promise, like that New Hampshire example. What I’m hoping to do with this book, first and foremost, is to bring more attention to kindergarten and the early grades and to highlight the bright spots across the country. I also hope to inspire families to think about what they want their children’s kindergarten experience to be and demand that it be challenging, playful, and joyful. I hope they will advocate for playful and deeper learning in their child’s classroom. I hope to encourage teachers and principals to rethink and transform how they deliver kindergarten in their schools based on the

research and examples I highlight. Finally, I hope to spur public education decision-makers to make significant changes to better support high-quality teaching and learning in kindergarten.

As I begin this book, I also think about my younger daughter, Tatiana, who just finished her kindergarten year. I think about the kind of experience I hoped she'd have. In 2021, when we moved to Orlando, Florida, I had hoped for what Ainsley had missed in kindergarten: the joy and robust learning I had seen in some of the dozens of classrooms I had visited. While Tatiana's kindergarten experience differed from Ainsley's, much work is still needed to create the right balance of rigor, play, and joy.

We parents are partially responsible for kindergarten's swing toward a more teacher-centered, academic, paper-and-pencil environment. All families want their children to succeed, and our current parenting culture is about having our kids do more, learn more, and take every opportunity to achieve. We want physical and concrete evidence of our children's progress. In some parts, this encourages worksheets, workbooks, and homework in kindergarten.

But our kindergartners don't need readiness workbooks and worksheets. They don't need to drill math facts and spelling. They need to learn to be good learners and ask critical questions. They need to build a love for learning and explore what they're curious about. They need to build relationships with trusted adults and friendships with their peers. And, in my opinion, the only kindergarten homework needed is for the family to talk about the world around us with our children and to read to them. That's it. That will give them the start they need to thrive and succeed.

Some leaders are beginning to recognize that kindergarten and the early grades must change. But more voices and more work are needed. Policymakers, education officials, educators, and families must get behind the slow but promising shifts in classroom practice to see real, transformational change.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

This book will bring you into the more than fifty classrooms I have observed over the past seven years. Many of those classrooms show what is possible. As I tell stories from the classroom and delve into my questions, frustrations, and hopes, I

will weave in my experiences as a mother of two daughters, as a former elementary school teacher, and as an early education policy researcher.

In the book's first two chapters, I will examine how and why kindergarten has changed over time and will explore its current state. In chapter 3, I will turn to what *high-quality* means in kindergarten and what is needed to improve quality in more places. Throughout the book, I focus on principles of quality, which I introduce in the third chapter. These principles lead me to certain curricula tools. But it is important to note that I am not saying those tools live up to all of my principles, nor are they the only products that live up to some of my principles.

In chapter 4, I'll talk about the important role of educators. Chapter 5 will dig deeper into what happens in classrooms. Chapter 6 considers high-quality experiences and what state and district leaders need to do to make them possible for more children and families, and highlights places that are making changes. Chapter 7 will feature the important role of kindergarten as a connector between pre-K and the primary grades and what it will take to transform kindergarten in a meaningful way. In closing, I will offer ideas on how to transform kindergarten and the early grades on a larger scale for the benefit of more children.

I am thrilled you are joining me on this journey to explore kindergarten. I hope what you read and the places we visit inspire you to imagine, and maybe even advocate for, a new and transformed kindergarten that includes joy, play, and rigor for young students.

To understand how kindergarten became what many children experience today, I'm going to first take you back, way back, to when and where kindergarten started.



CHAPTER 1

The Beginning of Kindergarten

A handful of three-, four-, and five-year-olds sitting in a living room in 1856, singing songs in German and playing with small wooden blocks and colorful felt balls: This was the first American kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin. The history of kindergarten in the United States is fascinating and certainly not straightforward. In this chapter, I tell the story of kindergarten’s beginnings through historical documents, accounts from individuals in the early childhood field, and histories of early childhood education written before me. Organizations such as the Association for Childhood Education,² for instance, took measures to capture this history, and I will weave some of those stories, testimonials, and arguments into this chapter.

Before jumping into kindergarten specifically, it is important to touch on the beginning of public education in the United States. American children started attending free public schools in the 1830s, with a public education advocacy movement led by Horace Mann, “the father of American Education” (Cremin, 1980). Before this time, only private education options were available. Public education proponents referred to these first public schools as *common schools* because they believed they would benefit the nation by creating a more literate, moral, and productive citizenry. It took quite a while for the idea of public education to reach everywhere in the country. Some people, predominantly white citizens in Southern states, were skeptical about its expansion (Harris, 2023). In fact, in the South, publicly funded education for all children was an idea that came from the Black community (Du Bois, 1935).

² Today this organization is called the Childhood Education International.

In 1830, 55 percent of children aged five to fourteen were enrolled; by 1870, about 78 percent of that age group were enrolled (Kober and Rentner, 2020). During these early years of public education, children of color, girls, and children with disabilities had limited or no access. Nonwhite students were excluded altogether or only had access to segregated schools. Thousands of Indigenous children were forced into boarding schools, where they were assimilated into European culture, losing their own culture and language (Kober and Rentner, 2020). For many years, children with disabilities were forced to remain at home or were put into institutions with limited or no access to education. Until the mid-twentieth century and federal laws, access to education for children of color and children with disabilities was unequal, and the quality of that education varied.

Today, education is compulsory for all “school-aged” children nationwide, but state legislators can determine who is school-aged. Depending on the state in which you live, school-aged can range from five to eight years old. In about half the states, the required age to begin school is six (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). And while there are laws in place to promote educational equality, de facto segregation and funding inequity widely persist across our country. Too many children of color, children from low-income families, and children with disabilities do not have the same opportunities for learning as white children, children from middle-class families, and children without disabilities (Powell et al., 2023).

THE GERMAN ROOTS OF KINDERGARTEN

Young children were not part of the original vision of public schooling in America. While five-year-olds could attend public primary school, they were lumped in with older children. The concept of an educational program specifically for young children developed an ocean away, in Germany, during the mid-nineteenth century. Women who emigrated from Germany brought kindergarten to the United States, and it began with the idea that play is how young children learn.

Kindergarten began with German educator Friedrich Froebel in 1837. He called it *kindergarten* because the word literally means “a child’s garden.” In other words, it is a place where children and their learning grow. Froebel had a lonely childhood. His mother died when he was very young. While Friedrich had two older brothers, his father led a church and had little time to care for Friedrich. In the

book *Inventing Kindergarten*, Norman Brosterman (1997) wrote that Froebel's yearning for motherly love was a "significant motivating factor in the creation of kindergarten."

Another influential time for Froebel was in 1805 when he began teaching at the Frankfurt Model School, founded by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Pestalozzi was a Swiss educator with progressive ideas and attitudes about children, including that active and hands-on learning was the best way to teach students rather than lecturing and requiring students to recite what they'd learned. These were extreme ideas for the time, but they resonated with Froebel.

About twenty-five years later, in 1837, Froebel opened his first early childhood education center in Blakenburg, Germany. This center would become the first kindergarten, once he found the perfect name to describe what he was trying to do. Froebel's early education philosophy centered on learning through play, design and discovery, and nature. He spent decades refining his kindergarten approach after observing children. Froebel's scripted approach centered on "gifts" for children, which consisted of a mix of toys, songs, and activities that children would play with and explore in a specific sequence. Froebel emphasized several principles for early learning, including the idea that everything is interrelated, so learning should be integrated and not compartmentalized. His approach included lots of outdoor activity and engagement with nature. He also promoted the ideas that learning begins with what children can do independently, learning is lifelong, and relationships are central in children's lives (Froebel Trust, n.d.). Many of these principles are still relevant in early childhood education.

KINDERGARTEN ARRIVES IN AMERICA

American kindergartens started as private early education programs for children aged three to six. (Yes, that's right! In the early decades of kindergarten, we recognized the benefits of having three-year-olds in an early learning setting, which is something many of us have forgotten over the last couple of decades.)

About twenty years after Froebel's invention, in 1856, a woman named Margarethe (Meyer) Schurz brought kindergarten to Watertown, Wisconsin. Schurz grew up in Germany, where she learned from Froebel. As a teenager, she attended lectures by

KINDERGARTEN

Shouldn't Be the New First Grade

The pressure to accelerate academics in kindergarten has led to rigid schedules, seated classwork, and a decline in joyful learning. *Rediscovering Kindergarten* offers a powerful call to reimagine kindergarten as a place where play-based learning and challenging academic content go hand in hand. Author Laura Bornfreund—education policy expert and nationally recognized voice in early childhood—argues for developmentally appropriate practice that supports the whole child. Drawing from research and real-world examples, this book shares ideas for teaching that nurtures curiosity, social-emotional development, and equity. For educators, leaders, and advocates, this is a practical and inspiring guide to reclaiming kindergarten from push-down academics and restoring it to what it was always meant to be: playful exploration full of rich learning.

Discover how to:

- Create a classroom environment where play supports rigorous learning
- Build developmentally appropriate, standards-aligned curriculum
- Support social-emotional learning as foundational to academic success
- Engage families and administrators in advocating for change
- Understand the research behind early learning and achievement gaps
- Position kindergarten within the pre-K–3 continuum of learning

Rediscovering Kindergarten is a guide for building a learning environment that fosters curiosity, equity, and joyful growth—without sacrificing academic excellence.



Laura Bornfreund, MPA, EdL is a program fellow in early and elementary education and former director of early and elementary education policy at New America. Her writing has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *Education Week*, *Slate*, and *The Hechinger Report*. A trusted voice in the early learning space, she brings both expertise and passion to the movement for developmentally appropriate, equity-driven education.


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