

# Early kindergarten doesn't excite all

**Editor's note:** This is the final part in a series about developmental kindergarten — an early childhood program designed to give children not prepared for kindergarten an extra year of school. In this fourth article, some of the controversy surrounding developmental kindergarten is discussed.

By Casey Hens  
staff writer

**T**HE DEBATE over developmental kindergarten programs — and whether they are good for children — is a national concern.

At least two educators at county and state levels said they are not in favor of developmental kindergarten for today's schools and are studying alternatives to present to local school districts.

Joan Lessen-Firestone, early childhood consultant for Oakland Intermediate Schools, would rather see kindergarten return to the way it was years ago — a type of "play learning" focusing on the child's development.

Developmental kindergarten programs are only masking the real



problem, she said.

"I'm not in favor of developmental kindergarten. If you run a good child-initiated kindergarten program, you can deal with kids at different levels."

Today's kindergarten with its structured classroom setting is where the problem lies, some educators believe. Although developmental kindergarten proponents are trying to help, such programs are merely an outgrowth of the problem, she said.

CAROLYN LOGAN calls developmental kindergarten a "Band-Aid approach."

"We've gotten out of synch . . . from what kindergarten ought to be," said Logan, supervisor of the 2-year-old Early Childhood Education unit for the Michigan Department of Education. "The general feeling is that students come to school smarter than they used to. We've taken . . . standards that fit some children and are making them the norm."

"All of these children couldn't have learning deficiencies — maybe we're expecting too much of them," she added. "I don't know of another level of education where we have the system where children are being put behind before they have a chance."

"We're sending out a message that you've failed before you've even started."

But although these higher-level education officials say developmental kindergarten is not the ideal, they have no better alternative.

"As an agency, we are really not ready to address it," Logan said. "We're not ready to say 'let this slide.' You don't take support away without offering some type of alternative."

"I have to respect those that have

taken that (developmental) approach, because of their intent," she added. "It is done with the full intention of meeting the children's needs."

CYNTHIA ZWINCK, Farmington Hills resident and parent with a child in kindergarten at Forest Elementary, believes children do not need the additional year of school — and that the kindergarten curriculum needs drastic revision.

Both Lessen-Firestone and Zwinck believe the Gesell tests used by Farmington and other schools to place children in either developmental or traditional kindergarten are poor measurements.

"It's so slanted towards the average child," Zwinck said. She called the test very stressful to both parents and children involved. The 15-minute screening "gives a very limited view of the child," Lessen-Firestone added.

The Gesell uses an average score to help determine a child's recommended placement, Lessen-Firestone said.

Another concern with the test is that children are assessed in the following fall, leaving a gap, Logan said.

EDUCATOR CONCERNS involve not only the testing process, but how a child moves through the developmental program and into a lifetime of education.

Kindergarten is not a required program by the state — although it has almost become a necessity because of the academic basics taught. Children that don't attend kindergarten today could be lost entering first grade, Lessen-Firestone said.

In Farmington — where a task force is reviewing the district's early childhood curriculum — assistant



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Allison Green works a computer at Fairview Early Childhood Center.

superintendent for curriculum and staff development Judith White said. The concept is just that . . . a serious consideration will be given to the developmental Early Fives program. The district has never put curriculum studies, for any level, on a "back burner," officials said.

"I am very cautious, professionally, about developmental kindergarten," White said. "I think we have to seriously look at it . . . and define the whole screening process and see that it's applied evenly."

"We talk retention or remediation," she added. "We may be creating a lot of our own failures because of it — I buy into a lot of it."

WHITE SAID the way curriculums are structured today, she considers developmental kindergarten programs "a good option for parents whose children are truly not ready, rather than holding them back another year. It gets them into the socialization process."

Mary Los Angeles, assistant superintendent for special services for Farmington, said despite curriculum changes, the developmental kinder-

garten concept is here to stay.

"The concept is just that . . . a concept of development. Kids should be given a chance."

She believes all children that need more time should have it.

"We tried not to put a cap on the needs," she said of the numbers of students recommended for Farmington's Early Fives program. "Parents can put a natural cap on it, as it is."

In Farmington's program, parents make the final decision whether to place their child in developmental or traditional kindergarten.

LESSEN-FIRESTONE, one of only two such consultants of early childhood education in intermediate districts in Michigan, is concerned about the lifelong impact on the children in such programs.

"They give them a whole extra year of school," she said. "We don't know how that will affect them long-term."

"Is it fair to expect all the children would need a full year" to catch up, Logan asked. "I think it's wrong to do that."

Proponents for ridding kindergarten of its new academic clothing also want upgraded state requirements for those who teach at the kindergarten level. Currently, a teacher must have a kindergarten through eighth-grade certification.

The county consultant calls for a special early childhood endorsement that would require 18 additional credits in classes such as child development and early childhood education. Everything needs revision in this area, she said.

"We need to leave the paper and pencil and teacher-directed programs behind," Lessen-Firestone added. She also calls for smaller class sizes.

THE FACT that people are talking about early childhood education and the impact of developmental programs is important, Logan said.

"Folks are now questioning and talking about it. I realize we might not agree . . . but we haven't been as creative as we might be. "I know we can be more creative if we try."

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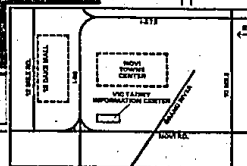
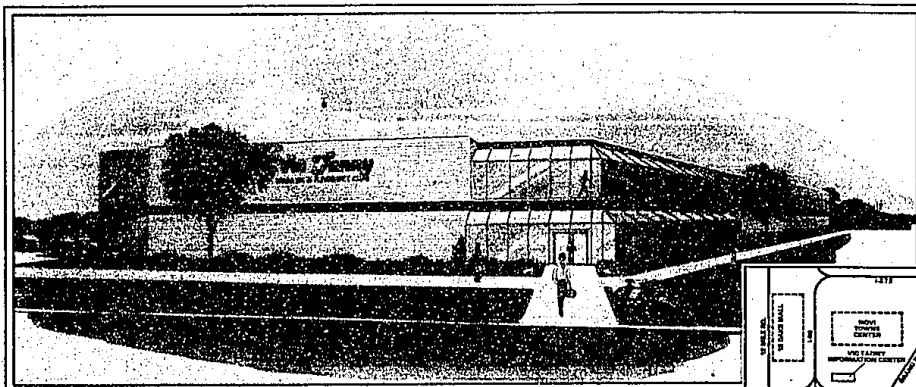
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