
High Quality Kindergarten in Needham Public Schools

Central to our work is the relentless focus on enriching the lives of children. The start of their academic journey may be in kindergarten but children come through our doors with a unique set of experiences, strengths and personalities. Our work is to expand their worlds and provide rich, responsive learning experiences that build the skills necessary to continue to grow and succeed.

This document outlines our six core principles as educators. We believe that these principles create the highest quality learning environments for kindergarten children. This document serves as a foundation to ground our design, planning and implementation of a rich full-day kindergarten program.

Core Principles

- Principle 1:** [Learning encompasses the whole child](#)
- Principle 2:** [Kindergarten children construct their own knowledge and skills](#)
- Principle 3:** [Relationships and play are key ingredients](#)
- Principle 4:** [Families play an essential role in their children's learning](#)
- Principle 5:** [Diversity in backgrounds, experiences and learning styles enriches learning](#)
- Principle 6:** [Teachers and school leaders commit to continuous learning](#)

Principle 1: Learning encompasses the whole child

Children from birth through grade 3 need to build competencies in five interrelated areas of development. Lifelong success depends on an equal and solid foundation in each area of development. Learning experiences should be designed to stimulate each area of development.

Learning should be active and purposeful. Children should engage in authentic activities that allow them to practice their developing skills in real life contexts.

Children should be immersed in meaningful activities that challenge themselves socially, academically, physically, and emotionally. In a strengths-based model, teachers scaffold experiences and create challenging and achievable goals for each child. These experiences include opportunities to build persistence, resilience, and flexible thinking. We honor children when we set and communicate high expectations and our beliefs that each child is capable.



Principle 2: Kindergarten children construct their own knowledge and skills

Kindergarten children are capable, curious, competent and active learners who are eager to try new things. They make sense of their world through imagination and play. They seek out peers and are beginning to build relationships. As concrete learners they thrive in environments that allow hands-on manipulation of materials and repeated engagement with activities.

Children also learn best when they become motivated learners. Teachers build motivation and awareness by providing choices and encouraging self-directed learning. This independent learning is supported by setting up routines that require children to make their own choices, to plan their work, and to be accountable for showing what they have learned.

Critical to the construction of knowledge are opportunities to share discoveries and reflect on the learning process which should be embedded into the classroom discourse. In short, hands-on, heads-on learning is critical to children's success.

Principle 3: Relationships and Play are key ingredients

The intersection of the [areas of development](#) is predicated on two basic learning principles:

- (1) Children learn within strong, positive relationships;
- (2) Children learn primarily through play – the creative, active exploration and manipulation of materials and objects with ample time to engage with peers, materials and their environment.

Learning happens in the context of relationships. Teachers focus on forming strong, positive relationships with children. They invest time to get to know their students' interests, personality, and talents. Across the classroom teachers continuously foster trust and respect to build a cooperative community of learners.

Children are active participants in the learning process. They construct knowledge about themselves, others, and the world around them. The environment, especially nurturing, responsive engagement with adults and peers, provides the context for their learning. Our work as educators is to build engaged and supportive learning communities, help children form new friendships, and facilitate learning through the design of intentional, play-based learning experiences.

Principle 4: Families play an essential role in their children's learning

Families are integral to the life of the school and educational experiences for their children. Teachers and parents need to build collaborative partnerships to support the growth and development of children. Knowing our families is virtually as important as knowing each child.

We aim to build trusting reciprocal relationships centered on children's learning goals. We invite families into the learning process by sharing practice and highlighting opportunities to integrate and support learning through strong home-school connections. Respect and continuous two-way communication sets the foundation for our partnership.

Principle 5: Diversity in backgrounds, experiences and learning styles enriches learning

We value the diversity our children and their families bring to our learning community. Each child's cultural background and experiences enriches the classroom. We actively focus on building our cultural proficiency and seek family support to become more knowledgeable. Teachers also proactively engage student in topics of race, culture and citizenship with the aim of building cultural competency and helping children understand their role in the community.

Each child's learning style is strengthened when classroom experiences provide for an array of modalities and differentiation. Development and learning is on a continuum and all learners have differing abilities. Teachers work to support all learners through curriculum enhancements and/or adaptations and the consistent integration of support services into the classroom when possible. These strategies enrich learning opportunities and connections for all children.

Principle 6: Teachers and school leaders commit to continuous learning

Educators are lifelong learners. We commit to personal and professional growth by staying current in our practice through regular reading, reflection and conversations with colleagues. We look to national and state resources, such as CASEL, SEL/APL standards, responsive classroom strategies, and curriculum frameworks to provide a framework for competencies we expect all educators to know and be able to do.

The learning community for adults is an important component to high quality kindergarten programming. Teachers model their learning processes for children by sharing and exposing themselves as readers, writers, scientists, artists and mathematicians.

Teacher Agreements

“Kindergarten teachers have the power to begin the narrative of a child’s educational trajectory.” – NPS, Principal, 2017

Children learn best in a safe, predictable environment that supports their social-emotional health as well as academic success. Our vision for classrooms that embrace and promote [our principles](#) rely on the following agreements:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT & ROUTINES

- ❖ Classrooms are bright, engaging spaces where children are encouraged to explore. Learning spaces are inviting and welcoming, and reflect children’s culture and backgrounds.
- ❖ Classrooms are designed with learning centers and materials that are accessible to children.
- ❖ Children learn best when provided a planned and consistent schedule. Schedules are predictable and consistent yet remain flexible and responsive to each child’s learning needs.
- ❖ Indoor and outdoor areas for children are safe, developmentally appropriate and foster children’s independence, curiosity and responsibility.
- ❖ Prioritize consistency in teaching teams. Maintain a manageable class size and strive to incorporate two dedicated adults for each classroom.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

- ❖ Kindergarten is a place where every child feels appreciated and respected. Teachers know and celebrate each child as an individual. Teachers are engaging, warm, observant and focus on building relationships with children and their families.
- ❖ In kindergarten, children build a sense of self, independence, and self-efficacy. They have opportunities to develop a sense of purpose in developing their own talents, interests and in mastering skills.
- ❖ Children learn social emotional competence through direct experiences with peers and within the context of play. Children have multiple opportunities to engage with peers and adults, and social emotional learning is embedded across the curriculum.
- ❖ Goals for children’s development include building self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationships skills, and decision-making skills. These are the building blocks of success in life.

CURRICULUM

- ❖ Curriculum is deeply rooted in early childhood research and practice. It is rich, meaningful, and active and builds upon interests, and it is both challenging and designed so that children can grow and feel successful. Curriculum outcomes are clear and well-articulated.
- ❖ Learning is presented through an integrated curriculum and play-based learning and centers. Learning activities are meaningful, hands-on, engaging and related to children’s interests. Activities encourage discovery, imagination, and problem-solving.

- ❖ Teachers are guides and facilitators of learning. We provide a balance of adult-guided and child-initiated learning experiences. Our goal is to foster children’s engagement with ideas, peers and materials to build essential skills.

ASSESSMENT

- ❖ Children have opportunities to apply their knowledge and demonstrate what they know and are able to do in a variety of ways.
- ❖ Assessing student growth comes through engaged and observant teachers who have taken time to develop relationships with each child.
- ❖ Assessment practices are developmentally appropriate and are used to gather data to inform lesson planning and instructional practice.
- ❖ Formative, ongoing assessment is a core instructional practice. It involves multiple opportunities to observe children participating in authentic and meaningful experiences over time. Teachers use observations, work samples, portfolios and other tools that help them see the range of each child’s development.
- ❖ Children develop along a continuum at their own pace. Reports related to assessment are based on skills progressing along that developmental continuum.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- ❖ We approach families with respect and an open perspective, and we value their role in their child’s learning. They have vast stores of knowledge about their child and we seek to learn from them.
- ❖ We commit to establishing open and honest lines of communication with families with the expectation of two-way communication. We provide multiple methods of communication and seek to meet individual needs, as we do for each child.
- ❖ We consider families as partners in supporting their child’s growth and development. Therefore, we encourage families to learn about our curriculum and provide engaging activities to do at home.
- ❖ We welcome families to volunteer and share their unique talents and diverse culture. Opportunities to participate acknowledge the value of both in-school and out-of-school activities.

Notes:

This document is designed to be used in concert with the Commonwealth’s seminal document, *Building the Foundation for College and Career Success for Children from Birth through Grade 3*, and the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s guidance document, *Fostering Learning in the Early Years: Elements of High Quality Kindergarten*. Further, it is rooted in principles and practices of developmentally appropriate early education, as researched and outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.