

## Preparing Our Littlest Learners for the 21st Century

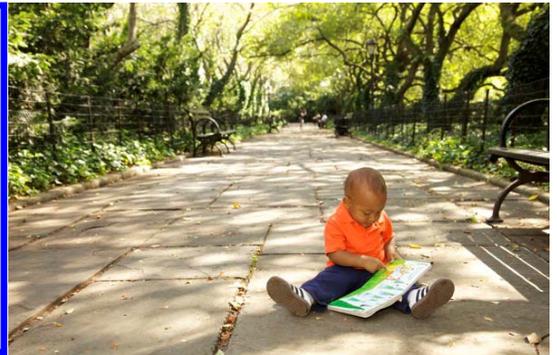
Each day as parents, caregivers, and educators, we are amazed at the way our toddlers and preschoolers can work an iPad or manipulate the TV remote better than many adults. We watch in awe as they locate programs on the computer or use our cell phones to dial friends or locate games—all skill sets that most adults find challenging. Our *littlest learners* have entered the 21st Century, more tech savvy than any other generation of learners. We know technology is an important skill set to promote when learning. However, we must ask ourselves, what other skill sets must our children have to be 21st Century Learners? What skills will our littlest learners need to be college or career ready, so they may be successful in this ever changing and complex world?

It might sound silly to speak about college and being career-ready when we're talking about toddlers and preschoolers. But, as educators and parents we know how quickly time passes and the challenges that lie ahead. It is never too early to start cultivating the four critical components of 21st Century Learning in our *littlest learners*.

This bulletin will first discuss the four core competencies of 21st Century Learning. Additionally, we will look at what it means for early childhood educators: the how and why and what the Common Core has to do with this age group, including children with disabilities.

*Learn everything you can, anytime you can, from anyone you can—there will always come a time when you will be grateful you did.”*

Sarah Caldwell (1924-2006); Opera Conductor, Impresario



### *The 4 C's (Core Competencies)*

Most of us know that there is a profound gap between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need in typical 21st century communities and workplaces. The national organization identified as the **Partnership for 21st Century Skills**, comprised of both business and education leaders, has identified the 4 core competencies (C's) of 21st Century Learning. These 4 C's are as follows:

**Communication**—Children/students will be competent in sharing thoughts, questions, ideas and solutions. It is the ability to listen, speak and convey one's thoughts.

**Collaboration**—Learners will work together in groups to reach a goal by putting their talents, expertise and skills to work. It is the ability to share responsibility, exhibit flexibility and be respectful of others.

**Critical Thinking**—Learners will be able to problem solve by looking at problems in a new way, by analyzing, using evidence and reflecting when linking learning across subjects, and/or applying the information to new situations.

**Creativity and Innovation**—Learners will be confident and proactive in trying new approaches while thinking creatively in day to day situations and in their own learning.

## What is the Common Core?

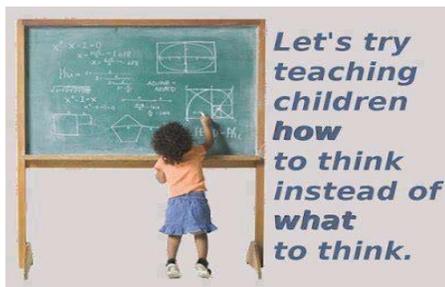
Over the last year, schools have worked to integrate the 4C's into the day to day educational experiences for all students. These Core Components also play a role in understanding the foundation of what we have come to know as the **Common Core**. There has been much debate around the **Common Core**—what does it mean for students, as well as children with disabilities? Parents often ask, will our children be able to find success in school or will they be left behind? Will they keep up with the rigor and expectations? What is the Common Core? Let's begin by answering some of these questions.

The Common Core is a set of standards with a logical progression of learning expectations designed to prepare all students for school and to be college- and career-ready. These expectations include Pre-K students, as well. In NY State, the Pre-K standards focus on five distinct interrelated domains upon which the **Pre-K Common Core** is built.

The domains are as follows:

- **Approaches to Learning**—how children become involved in learning and acquire knowledge (Creativity & Innovation)
- **Physical Development and Health**—children's physical health and ability to engage in daily activities
- **Social and Emotional Development**—the emotional competence to form positive relationships at school and home (Collaboration)
- **Communication, Language and Literacy**—children's understanding, creating and communicating meaning (Communication)
- **Cognition and Knowledge of the World**—what children need to know and understand about their world and how they apply it (Critical Thinking)

These standards, as part of the Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core, were established to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, Limited English Proficient (LEP) and English Language Learners (ELL), have rich and varied learning experiences that prepare them for success in school and lay the foundation for college and career readiness.



### What does it mean for students with disabilities?

One thing we know is that the Common Core has increased the rigor across all academic settings. This increased rigor is often the point of concern for parents and early childhood providers when talking about the education of students with disabilities. What we must remember is that preschool children with disabilities and their typical peers are all capable of learning, achieving and making gains. The approaches we take as educators in providing services, programs, modifications and goals through a student's IEP (Individualized Education Program) along with specially designed instruction will assist the child in achieving the learning standards. Regardless of where children receive their education, they must receive instruction based on the general education curriculum and the NY state learning standards. It is the right of all students including students with disabilities to be taught the same content (general education curriculum) but also to be provided appropriate supports and services based upon their individual needs so they can gain knowledge, skills and have the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned.

Source: NY State Special Education Advisory Memo, June 2014

## Resources

**The "Four Cs" of 21st Century Education**

<http://tinyurl.com/24sbhms>

**NYS Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core**

<http://tinyurl.com/a8bgxnn>

**Ready for Kindergarten?**

<http://tinyurl.com/lsttcvs>

**Special Education Field Advisory: The Role of the Committee on Special Education in Relation to the Common Core Learning Standards**

<http://tinyurl.com/mbjhqvc>

## What does it really look like?

Let's imagine in a 4 year-old Pre-K classroom! The teacher has been working for several weeks on a lesson that involves writing letters and mailing them to classmates or to their own home. There are many components to this one topic that a teacher may explore. A few components may include *Print Concepts* (demonstrates an understanding of the organization and basic features of print), *Geography/Social Studies* (understands similarities and differences among cultural groups), or the *Visual Arts* (expresses oneself and represents what he/she knows, thinks, believes and feels through visual arts). A brief example below will look at one component within a letter writing lesson which aligns with the Pre-K standards, incorporates the 4C's, and addresses the needs of students with disabilities.

- **Goal of Today's Lesson:**

Each student will write and/or identify their name and address, followed by which they will address their own envelope. (**Critical thinking, applying information to a new situation, print concepts**)

- **Prior Preparation for the Activity:**

The teachers reviewed what an address is used for, talked about each child's address by asking and cueing students on where they live, showed the students pieces of mail with the address highlighted and proposed questions; such as why do we need to put an address on the envelope and what will happen if we forget to put the address on the envelope? (**Critical thinking**) Students worked together in groups and talked about what they saw on the envelope. (**Communication**).

- **Today's Activity, including individualized modifications:**

Using this above information, students will begin to address their own envelope. As we know, not all students will be able to complete this independently. Some students will receive an envelope with a rectangular template drawn on the front, while others will be given a blank envelope. All students will be given a copy of their address. Some students will have a template with a partially completed address. Other students may have to only complete some letters ( A \_ \_ x). (**Print concepts**) For some, they will receive the envelope with it fully addressed but have certain letters highlighted, allowing staff to talk about letters and print. This individualized approach is a means of providing students the general education curriculum but also address the needs of each student, including individualized modifications found on a student's IEP (Individualized Education Program).



***This is small example of how to incorporate components of the Common Core into a lesson. Remember! We must ensure all students have access to the general education curriculum while addressing the needs of all students.***

## Getting Ready to Learn

As parents, we play a major role in preparing our children for their first educational experiences. Keeping in mind the expectations our children will face, let's think about what we can do as parents to prepare our littlest learners.

We are often asked: What does my child need to know for preschool and/or kindergarten? Here are a few tips on how you, as a parent, can prepare your child for their first educational experience. Each of these tips supports the components of the 4C's, as well as the foundational skills, aligned to the Pre-K standards of the Common Core.

- 1) **Routines**—Help your child to become familiar with routines around your home, including household expectations, which may include simple chores.
- 2) **Encourage your child to ask questions**—By encouraging your child to ask questions about things they do not understand, you will give your child the confidence they need to ask questions in school.
- 3) **Teach the importance of sharing and listening**—Giving your child many opportunities to practice sharing and taking turns will give your child a head start when entering the classroom in terms of working with peers. Listening is an equally important skill. Children should have multiple opportunities to practice how to listen effectively before entering the classroom for the first time. Practice listening skills by encouraging your child to look at who is talking, not interrupt the speaker, and to think about what is being said before responding.
- 4) **Enthusiasm Towards Learning**—Parents can set aside a little time each day to investigate the world with their preschooler and answer those endless questions. As you drive in your car or walk along in the park, point out your child's surroundings—the different trees or the various birds at the feeder. Demonstrate how things work. You will help your child develop beginning science skills—the ability to form a hypothesis, test it out, and come up with new questions and theories. The more kids notice, the more curious they will become. Then we will build upon that curiosity.

Looking for more copies of this bulletin? You can download it from our ECDC website or contact us.

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THEY TEACH US.*



Over 30 Years  
Caring for All Children

### Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

#### Workshops include:

- Including All Kids
- Parent Partnerships
- Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- Supporting Social Emotional Development
- Positive Guidance and Behavior Strategies
- Moving On: Transitioning Families (EI-CPSE) & (CPSE-CSE)
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
- Writing IEP Goals
- Getting Ready for Kindergarten

### Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional technical assistance center for the State Education Department providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy.

*ECDC services to families are  
free and confidential.*

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