

Preface

One evening, my twin daughters, Katie and Bridget, were sitting around the kitchen table, studying for the next day's social studies test on "Communities" in their primary-grade classroom. They took turns responding as I asked questions. Katie felt especially well prepared because her teacher had loaned her the teacher's guide, since there weren't enough books for all the students in the class. When I asked the final question from the book, "What do communities use school buildings for in the evening when school is over?" Katie beamed and jumped out of her chair: "I know that one—I remember—*Answers may vary!*" Bridget looked at her quizzically and said, "Uh, uh, no—that's not right."

It took me a moment to realize what had happened. I sat in disbelief as I realized that my daughter had memorized exactly what the teacher's guide had written under this question: "Answers may vary." There wasn't just one right answer; there could be several correct answers. I asked Katie if she knew what her answer meant. Katie was obviously disappointed in my response; her face fell. She had known the answer word-for-word, but that didn't seem good enough. It was one of those peak moments for me in my teaching (and parenting) career, and I vowed to try to make sure that my students would understand what they were learning and that it would have meaning for them.

—Gera

Reflecting on that experience, we decided that if we ever wrote a book, *Answers May Vary* should be the title. As we started this book, we agreed that *Answers May Vary* wouldn't be the best title for this work, but that our goal for this book would be to share ideas that would capture children's imaginations, help them become engaged in their learning, and truly understand concepts.

A New Era in Education

Today, we are facing a new era in education. Standards have become a way of life in the educational world. When we first saw some of the kindergarten-through-12th-grade standards the children were expected to learn, we were concerned that some of the expectations for children in the younger grades did not seem to be developmentally appropriate. When we attended national conferences and heard them talk about having standards in preschool, our first reaction was negative. We didn't want the inappropriate standards we were seeing passed down to preschool. We listened as the discussion at

national conferences and in the professional journals seemed to progress from “Should we have standards in preschool?” to “How do we make sure that our preschool standards are high quality and developmentally and culturally appropriate?”

When our state began working on its preschool standards, we were asked to help lead the effort. Although it seemed to be one more thing to add to a long list we already were having trouble keeping up with, we agreed. We knew we would have little room to complain if we hadn’t done our part. We also knew we could have an influence in making sure that the standards were appropriate for preschool children and could lead to meaningful learning. As we wrote the standards, we were committed to making sure that those who read them would get the message that children from age 3 to 5 learn best through play and hands-on activities. This book will share that same message.

The Aim and Organization of This Book

The book is designed to provide support for preschool and prekindergarten teachers, early childhood special educators, child care providers, parents, and all who work with preschool-aged children, as well as those preparing to teach young children. Throughout the book, we occasionally use the words *classroom* or *room*, but we use these terms to refer to any place where children from age 3 to 5 learn and grow. Our work is based on the research in the field and documents from national organizations, including the following: National Association for the Education of Young Children; National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education; International Reading Association; National Council of Teachers of English; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics; National Science Education Association; National Council for the Social Studies; National Association for Sport and Physical Education; and Consortium of National Arts Education Associations.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of preschool standards and how they can be met in developmentally appropriate ways through engaging, hands-on activities. Chapter 2 discusses the importance of relationships and describes how to set up the environment with engaging interest areas that will help children meet the standards. Chapters 3 through 9 present ideas on how to help children reach standards in each major curriculum area. These chapters contain suggestions for designing the environment; implementing engaging projects, experiences, and activities; supporting bilingual learners; and working with children’s individual needs. These activities are designed for children from 3 to 5 years of age. Curriculum areas are discussed separately to correspond with preschool standards, but, in practice, these areas are all interrelated. The final chapter ties the information together, provides ideas for sample projects that will help children reach preschool standards, and offers suggestions to support children’s transition to kindergarten. Information about children’s books and songs, as well as other references mentioned throughout the chapters, are included in the Resources section at the end of the book.

Throughout the chapters, we have included samples of standards. These standards are actual preschool standards for South Dakota. Most states’ standards may be found at each State Department of Education Web site and the National Childcare Information Center Web site. Although standards vary somewhat from state to state, the ideas and suggestions provided in this book can help all children progress toward meeting standards and building a strong foundation for a lifetime of learning.