

KENTUCKY SCHOOL UPDATES

PRIMARY SCHOOL

THE BASICS OF THE LAW

- Kentucky law requires schools to create **primary school programs** for all students kindergarten through grade three.
- The law lists the following **critical attributes** in further defining primary school:
 - ✓ **developmentally-appropriate educational practices** or teaching in ways children learn best according to their age and development
 - ✓ **multiage and multiability classrooms** or having children of different ages and abilities working together
 - ✓ **continuous progress** or allowing children to work and progress at their own pace, not having to wait for other children to catch up or be pressured because other children are waiting for them
 - ✓ **authentic assessment** or the ongoing documentation of what students actually learn and do in their day-to-day activities
 - ✓ **qualitative reporting methods** or letting parents know what students know and can do in a way that focuses on the growth and development of the whole child
 - ✓ **professional teamwork** or teachers and other staff members working together to help students learn
 - ✓ **positive parent involvement** or involving parents in positive ways to support student learning
- In a **primary school program**, the curriculum matches the individual student's ability without regard to a specific grade level. The program is intended to help **all** students progress at their own pace. That includes children who are gifted, have learning differences or disabilities, are at risk for educational failure, or who have no identified special learning needs.
- School councils (or the school if no council exists) determine the organization of the ungraded primary program including the extent to which multiage groups are necessary. This organization must be based on the critical attributes and the needs of individual students, including the special needs of first year, half-day (kindergarten) students. Changes in the law since 1992 have not altered the basic structure of the primary program or discontinued any of the seven attributes that are critical to implementation of the program.
- School districts are required to collect data on the number of students who take five years to complete the primary program and report it in the annual Demographic Survey. This information is included in the School Report Card.

WHAT'S NEW?

- ➔ Additional funding will be provided for professional development and a focus on improving reading and mathematics instruction.
- ➔ The state will provide full-day funding for a child five years old or younger, who has mastered academic and social kindergarten skills and should be enrolled in the full-day program to meet their educational needs. This provision was added by the legislature in 2006.

RESULTS

- **Reading Scores:** Test results on the reading portion of the Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT) have risen from 78.9 in 1999 to 87.1 in 2005. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) for students at the end of the primary program (formerly grade three) on reading show gains from an average of 50 in 1997 to 65 in 2005. Average fourth grade scores in reading on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) have risen from 213 in 1992 which was two points below the national average to 220 in 2005, three points above the national average. This may be a result of state and national emphasis on reading programs with supporting funds.
- **Mathematics Scores:** Test results in mathematics on the KCCT in grade five have risen from 57.7 in 1999 to 74.4 in 2005; CTBS scores have risen from 49 in 1997 to 67 in 2005; NAEP scores for fourth grade students have risen from 215 in 1992 which was 4 points below the national average to 231 in 2005 which is 6 points below the national average.
- An in-depth study of Kentucky primary programs conducted by the University of Kentucky, the Institute of Education Reform and the Kentucky Department of Education, *Characteristics and Attributes of Primary Programs and Practices*, was published February 2003. Following are some of its findings. Primary teachers in high performing and effective classrooms used more developmentally appropriate practices including:
 - ✓ promoting autonomy and responsibility in students;
 - ✓ promoting active learning;
 - ✓ using more hands-on materials;
 - ✓ including children in choices;
 - ✓ prompting children to discuss and explain their thinking;
 - ✓ supporting children in transition from one activity to another;
 - ✓ using more computer-based instruction;
 - ✓ engaging in extracurricular activities related to arts and humanities;
 - ✓ using systematic programs for addressing discipline and guidance issues;
 - ✓ individualizing instruction with support from parent volunteers, peer buddies, and strategies to address multiple intelligences;
 - ✓ used a greater diversity of student evaluation strategies

In addition, they:

- ✓ were provided more hours of paid planning, professional development and professional teamwork time;
- ✓ were more likely to have families involved in events dealing with transitions from preschool to primary and primary to grade four;
- ✓ were more likely to be involved by their principal in school-wide activities or responsibilities and were encouraged to assume responsibility for committee work or professional issues; and
- ✓ reported a greater number of children identified with learning disabilities and were knowledgeable about the IEP objectives of their students.


Primary teachers in low performing schools:


- ✓ used fewer hands-on materials;
- ✓ engaged in conversations that were more teacher directed with one-answer or memorized-answer questions;
- ✓ used ineffective classroom transitions;
- ✓ used more punitive discipline strategies (suspension and expulsion);
- ✓ had to purchase their own materials more often;
- ✓ had fewer health and safety resources available in their classrooms;
- ✓ were more likely to use observation as the primary form of student evaluation;
- ✓ were more likely to be involved by their principal in bus duties;
- ✓ were less knowledgeable about IEP objectives for students in their classrooms.


Teachers in this study identified eight characteristics that contribute to effective primary programs including: attitudes and dispositions, individualization (working to meet unique needs of each student), sound teaching strategies, high quality teachers and staff, active family involvement, discipline and guidance, leadership and communication.

- Researchers say the implementation of the primary program varies widely from school to school and classroom to classroom. Some teachers have implemented more of the seven critical attributes, and some have implemented them better than others. According to the Primary Demographic Survey conducted by the Department of Education, in 2002-03 about 47 percent of the elementary schools have gone back to separate classes for kindergarten through grade three and about 42 percent combine two age groups of students. About two percent combine all four age groups in multiage classrooms.


WHAT TO EXPECT


-  After many years of working to help every student reach Kentucky's learning standards, unacceptable gaps in achievement between various groups of students persist. Kentucky's Senate Bill 168 and the federal No Child Left Behind Law require schools to focus on closing those gaps. (See chapter on Assessment and Accountability.) Expect to see school councils review school assessment data more closely and focus on curriculum and instruction to see that every child succeeds.


 Each elementary school must implement the primary school program including all of the seven critical attributes. Because there is flexibility in how students are grouped, parents may notice wide variations from classroom to classroom, and school to school. As teachers and school councils work to improve student achievement, they may make adjustments to improve teaching and learning.


 Classrooms look different from the classrooms most adults experienced.

- ✓ Tables or desks are moved together, when appropriate, so children can work in small groups.
- ✓ Children may change groups frequently to meet their own learning needs.
- ✓ Hands-on material is used to help children learn academic skills and concepts.
- ✓ Reading areas are arranged where children might sit on the floor or on comfortable furniture.
- ✓ Students talk together and share things they are learning.
- ✓ Students are writing more.
- ✓ Learning centers are created around the basics of science, social studies, and so on.
- ✓ Children cooperate and work with each other in addition to working on their own individual assignments.
- ✓ Report cards look different and are more detailed.
- ✓ Children are encouraged to read lots of books; textbooks may be used less.

 Some schools are using the **Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP)**, a list of skills students should master in the primary program, as a guide and a report for parents. It is available on the department's Web site.

 Some schools have purchased a curricular program called **Different Ways of Knowing (DWoK)** which meets state guidelines and helps develop the primary program.

 Many schools qualify for and have received special reading grants to assist struggling readers.

 Decisions about when individual children should make the transition into fourth grade are made when parents, primary teachers, and fourth grade teachers meet to discuss their expectations about what children should know and be able to do. Some students may need to spend less than four years in primary, and some students may need an additional year.

Schools use the **Successful Completion of the Primary School Program** document to guide them in assuring that all students who leave the primary program are prepared for fourth grade work. This is available on the department's Web site.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

★ If you have a child in the primary program, arrange to **visit the classroom** to observe what is happening. **Attend** parent-teacher conferences and **ask** how your child is progressing, what his or her goals are for the year, what you can expect students to learn, and how you can help.

- ★ **Ask** to see a copy of your school's curriculum, primary policy, and the Successful Completion of the Primary School Program. **Ask** how the school is working to assure that when students leave the primary program they have the skills needed for fourth grade.
- ★ If your child needs another year in the primary program, **ask** what instructional strategies will be used to ensure your child will be ready to enter fourth grade.
- ★ If you have a preschool child, **attend** information sessions about the primary program and make arrangements to visit during the school year.
- ★ **Share a copy** of *Characteristics and Attributes of Primary Programs and Practices* with your school council, available from the Kentucky Department of Education. (See below.)
- ★ **Inform** other parents about the primary school program by obtaining copies of newspaper ads developed by the Partnership for Successful Schools and sharing them with other parents. See below for contact information.
- ★ **Request** information about *One-to-One: Practicing Reading with Students*, a training program designed to support volunteer efforts in elementary schools, available from the Partnership for Successful Schools. See below for contact information.
- ★ If you have a PTA/PTO, **ask for or plan a program** to help parents understand primary school programs. If you do not have a PTA/PTO, form one. Call the Kentucky PTA office for help at (502) 564-4378.
- ★ **Encourage** the PTA/PTO, parents, and community to help teachers supply their primary classrooms with a variety of materials for learning and **volunteer** as teacher's aide or tutor.
- ★ **Recognize** the contributions of teachers and administrators. Let them know you appreciate their work in primary school programs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

- **Kentucky Department of Education, Early Childhood/Primary School Program** at (502) 564-3064 and visit the Web site at <http://www.education.ky.gov/> and search for primary program
- **Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence**, P.O. Box 1658, Lexington, KY 40588-1658; (859) 233-9849 or (800) 928-2111; e-mail: admin@prichardcommittee.org or visit the Web site at <http://www.prichardcommittee.org/>.

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