FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Alliance Warning: Core Standards May Lead to a Plague of Kindergarten Tests

College Park, MD, June 8, 2010—The Alliance for Childhood today warned that states considering adopting the new academic core standards released on June 2 could set in motion a spate of inappropriate and harmful testing of young children.

The Alliance, a nonprofit partnership of researchers, educators, health professionals, and parents concerned with healthy child development, argues that the kindergarten standards in the Common Core State Standards Initiative fly in the face of well established knowledge about how young children learn and are based on “guesswork,” not science.

“The new ‘common core standards’ for kindergarten perpetuate a serious error that has dominated early education in recent years,” said Joan Almon, the Alliance’s director. “Most kindergartens now devote the bulk of their time to teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. And standardized testing and test prep have become daily activities in many kindergartens. But there’s no evidence that this approach has produced long-term success.”

The proposed kindergarten standards, on the whole, are not research-based, says the Alliance. “There is simply no definitive research showing that certain skills or bits of knowledge (such as counting to 100 or being able to read a certain number of words) if mastered in kindergarten will lead to later success in school,” according to a recent Alliance statement. “At best, these standards represent educated guesswork, not educational, cognitive, or developmental science.”

The new standards, which individual states may adopt if they choose, will worsen the pushing down into kindergarten of inappropriate learning goals that are better suited to older children, said Almon. Experience shows that such ill-conceived standards lead to teaching methods that thwart young children’s natural curiosity, interests, and energy. “In far too many kindergartens, the drilling and testing of literacy and math skills have banished active hands-on learning and the play-based teaching techniques that are time-tested and most effective,” said Edward Miller, senior researcher and co-author with Almon of the Alliance’s 2009 report, Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School.
“The new kindergarten standards will worsen this problem,” said Miller. “They focus on discrete content knowledge and ignore the well documented need for an integrated approach to young children’s cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The sheer number of standards being proposed—more than 90 for kindergartners—will require long hours of instruction if children are to achieve them.”

Recent research shows that tests have proliferated in kindergarten despite expert views that testing before age eight is highly unreliable and leads to unjustified and harmful labeling of children as failures. Play or “choice time” has been reduced to 20 to 30 minutes a day. In many kindergartens, there is no time for play at all.

There is one bright note in the standards document, however, said Almon.

“The writers of these new standards did get one thing right in relation to young children,” she said. “They brought themselves to actually use the word ‘play’—something that most other standards writers have scrupulously avoided.”

Almon noted that in the section called “What is not covered by the Standards,” it says, “[T]he use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document.”

The Alliance recommends that teachers and school administrators in states that choose to adopt the standards put this statement about play front and center as they develop ways to implement them. “When play and play-based learning are at the heart of education, young children master content much more deeply than when schools rely on didactic instruction,” said Almon.

“Hundreds of studies have shown the value of play in fostering physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of children,” said Miller. “Yet there has been a serious erosion of play-based learning in early education in recent years, and these new standards are likely to drive it even further out of classrooms.”

Instead there needs to be a public outcry in favor of play and play-based learning in kindergartens, said Almon. “Parents, in particular, need to express loudly the concerns that many are feeling.”

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1 See http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/introduction/key-design-considerations/.