



Young Learners School

Building a Greater Texas, One Student at a Time

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Origins

Since 2001, the Young Learners School has operated as a charter school sponsored by the Houston Independent School District (HISD), and as of 2007-2008 serves 1,890 children. The founder of the school, Dr. Spyros Catechis, a school psychologist, came up with the idea for a high-quality, collaborative model of pre-kindergarten for three and four year-old children based on a concern regarding the relatively few options available for young children who struggle. According to Dr. Catechis, young children, especially those who live in poverty, need schools that focus on school readiness and self-concept building. In addition, children need good teachers that really believe children can be successful. Young Learners School, therefore, represents a response to his concerns, and an opportunity to bring a school to where children already are. Young Learners School, a "school on wheels," sends highly-trained, certified teachers out into the community to ensure that children have high-quality learning options.

Mission & Vision

According to Young Learners, its mission is:

To provide pre-kindergarten access to eligible children while preparing them to enter kindergarten on a comparable level with their peers through a unique collaborative model between school districts, Head Start, the community, and licensed child care centers.

Its vision is:

A greater community where all children are provided with premiere early childhood education and services.

How It Works

Given the rising number of young children who are eligible for public school pre-k, and the fact that many school districts do not have the facilities and capacity to satisfy the demand for high-quality services, collaboration models provide one option where children can be served in public

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schools, Head Start centers, and private, licensed child care settings.

As a charter school, Young Learners, through a contract with HISD, identifies children who are eligible for public school pre-k but who are being served in non-public school settings. This identification process allows the school district to “count” these children for funding purposes, and enables it to apply for additional pre-k dollars through the public school finance system administered through the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

When the children, who must be three or four years-old, are identified the district transfers most of these dollars to the Young Learners School that allows it to hire teachers who are either certified, or who are actively seeking certification. In addition, the district provides the school with state-adopted curriculum materials, including textbooks.

Once Young Learners recruits the necessary teachers, it trains them and sends them off to local Head Start and licensed child care centers to serve and work with young children and families in mostly half-day programs. In addition, by fusing TEA pre-k curriculum guidelines with Head Start guidelines and the needs of local licensed child care centers, Young Learners fosters a collaborative model that respects and satisfies the needs of local communities.

Academic Program

Following the TEA pre-kindergarten curriculum guidelines, and primarily using the

locally adopted *Scholastic* curriculum, the Young Learners School delivers high-quality instructional services through certified teams of teachers. By incorporating both bilingual and special education services into its instructional approach, the Young Learners instructional teams are able to meet the needs of a diverse group of children. All teachers receive specialized training and professional development throughout each year to ensure high-quality instructional delivery. In addition, teachers and other leaders frequently collaborate to study child performance through data analysis, and they use this information to ensure that instruction is effective and developmentally appropriate.

Due to the fact that many of the children served by Young Learners participate in federally funded Head Start programs, the academic approach fostered by Young Learners “melds educational, social, and health services to students and families from communities of greatest need.”

A Unique Group of Teachers

In order to provide families and children with high-quality early learning experiences, the most important factor to consider is the interactions that occur between teacher and child. Young Learners attracts teachers from all over the world who serve primarily in Head Start settings but also in licensed child care centers. One teacher was a chemical engineer from Colombia, South America who recently received the HISD Alternative Department Charter School Teacher of the Year Award. Another teacher was a former crisis caseworker from New Orleans who

served in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, while another was a former architect in Mexico.

Teachers from other countries who serve in Young Learner classrooms typically receive their early childhood certification through an alternative program offered through the local education regional service center.



The teachers at Young Learners are passionate about the children they work with. They describe the environments they work in as a “school family.” Since many of the children they serve come with a variety of needs, the teachers express the need to make every moment teachable. For example, one teacher asked a student to name an object that she held in her hand. The student did not know what a toothbrush was so the teacher used the opportunity to explain why taking care of teeth was so important. Another teacher talked about children not knowing what “I love you” means, and therefore seized on the opportunity to work with the child to help promote learning at the “heart” level.

The teachers at Young Learners use many innovative techniques to promote the healthy development and learning of the children they serve. The teachers emphasize the importance of variation in the types of activities they engage in. For example, while there is always the need for routines, rules, and constant reminders, the teachers relish in the opportunity to teach children words, sounds, and number concepts through games, singing, and rhyming. In addition, they use manipulatives to apply concepts during center time, and during “circle time” the children gather around the teacher to focus on group

instruction. Through using whole group and individual child interventions, the teachers at Young Learners expose their students to stimulating learning environments that are not only developmentally appropriate, but also serve to prepare them for kindergarten and first grade.

How Success and Growth is Measured

Since the teachers at Young Learners are constantly in motion and applying a variety of techniques to ensure that every child learns and grows, they are also interested in ensuring that the strategies they use are effective. The use of feedback and data, therefore, is very important to the teachers and helps them to monitor child progress and adjust instruction as necessary. In order to measure and follow student progress the teachers use a variety of assessment tools. They use locally developed assessments that give them instant feedback about student growth and areas for improvement, and they also use more formal assessments such as the TPRI and “Get Ready to Read.” Some of the teachers participate in the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) and also use the assessments associated with the model and incorporate hand-held progress monitoring tools to take multiple “snapshots” of child development. The teachers also use the DIAL and SOS tests to capture additional insights, and they maintain portfolios of student work in conjunction with local Head Start teachers. Each child also has a behavior log that details social-emotional growth and the interventions used to assist each child.

How Are the Children Doing?

The children at Young Learners are obviously benefiting from the curriculum, great teachers, and instructional support specialists that care for them. Some of the assessments previously mentioned are charted to monitor child well-being. Young Learners uses three color codes (green, yellow, and red) to track each child’s learning growth, and each of these colors represents a different level of success (Discovery, Exploring, Connecting). The Discovery stage (red) represents a

category where the students require more intensive interventions, while the Connecting (green) stage indicates that children are making appropriate and constant learning gains.



In 2006-2007, 61% of all children at Young Learners were at the Connecting stage on the Get Ready to Read assessment, and 34% were

at the Exploring stage. Only 5% were in the Discovery stage. More importantly, it is clear when one looks at the historical data that Young Learners maintains for its students that students are on the move. They are learning and growing, and working towards mastery. This is not only occurring in academic realms but equally so in the realms of the heart and emotions. Children are not only learning letters and numbers, but they are learning about themselves and how to relate to the world and other people around them.

For More Information

To learn more about the powerful work being accomplished through the Young Learners School, please call (713) 784-1215 or visit www.younglearners.org.