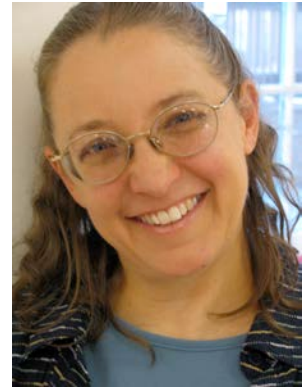


Director's Corner: Leadership & Management



The **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** has identified 10 accreditation standards that represent the quality of early childhood programs. The sets of measurable criteria for each standard were created by a blue-ribbon panel of early childhood experts and are based on the latest early childhood research. In this year's Director's Corner columns, I plan to share the Children's School's unique approach to meeting each standard to help everyone in our learning community more clearly understand the intentional design of our laboratory school as we progress through the **NAEYC Accreditation Renewal** process this year. I also hope that this series of articles demonstrates the value of our school's integration into Carnegie Mellon University, an entire community that strives collaboratively for excellence and innovation.

NAEYC's standard for **Leadership and Management** requires schools to implement strong personnel, fiscal, and program management policies so that all children, families, and staff have high-quality experiences. CMU encourages the same practices and provides many resources for us.

- We begin with a **mission statement** that is distinctive to our laboratory school objectives, together with a diverse **leadership team** that facilitates our progress in a climate of mutual trust, collaboration, and inclusion.
- Our own administrative team handles the required **strategic planning, staffing, and program design** for our unique open classroom model, but we receive significant support for the required **technology systems, governance, insurance, human resources**, and contracts with **expert consults** from the broader university community through central campus services.
- The University's finance management professionals guide us in the use of their systems to ensure that we meet all of the criteria for **sound fiscal accountability and long range financial planning**, with **sufficient resources** for excellence in all aspects of our mission, even those that are unique at CMU, such as support for our participation in the PA Educational Improvement Tax Credit program.
- Assistance from CMU's Environmental Health and Safety team, Security professionals, Emergency Medical Technicians, and Nutritionist provide many of the resources necessary for developing the necessary policies and procedures related to **health, nutrition, and safety**. March's article will focus on these issues, as well as those related to our school facilities.
- Similarly, the majority of our **personnel policies**, including those related to hiring, orientation, and benefits, are managed via the campus Human Resources Department, with excellent consultation available for the personnel work that I do as the director. My design of our annual **professional review** process and **professional development** program also benefits from diverse campus colleagues, such as those in the central Learning and Development department, the Counseling and Psychological Services team, etc.
- Finally, Carnegie Mellon's leaders model an inclusive continuous quality improvement process that inspires our **annual school evaluation**, which is then reported to the Psychology department chair, staff, and families to encourage broad involvement and accountability in the **enhancement process**.

As we take the final steps in our Accreditation Renewal Process this year, we are ever more aware of the many ways that the university supports our work, and we are inspired to continue providing excellent and innovative services for all of our constituents.



Director's Corner: Relationships Matter



Several of NAEYC's ten accreditation standards highlight the importance of *relationships as a foundation for quality early care and education*. Standard #1 is actually called "**Relationships**" and includes criteria regarding promoting positive relationships between educators and families, between educators and children, and between children and peers. Standard #7 is called "**Families**", but the emphasis of all the related criteria is on establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships with the diverse families we serve so that together we can support each individual child's development. Because our laboratory school is thoroughly integrated into the university community, we cultivate an even broader view of relationships that includes all of the learners involved in our educational system. As with Leadership and Management (see October 2012), our affiliation with Carnegie Mellon affords innovative approaches to building strong relationships as a foundation of excellence.

- We begin with the belief that all of our interactions and communication should focus on building a consistently warm, respectful, and positive emotional climate for our entire school community, so we aim to set that tone in all of our routines and conversations from greeting through dismissal, with children, families, undergraduates and facilities workers, within the school and elsewhere on campus.
- From our web site design and our initial application forms to our newsletters and emails with enrolled families, we attempt to communicate clearly a broad welcome to diverse families and children and a deep interest in getting to know and understand the family structure, cultural background, child-rearing practices, etc. so that we can foster strong reciprocal relationships.
- With families, we emphasize close home – school connections through a variety of communication mechanisms so that we can support each child's growth in the self-regulation and social skills that will help with functioning comfortably and building friendships in a classroom community that feels secure and is responsive to everyone's needs. CMU's *Message from Me* project is helping involve our children in the communication directly, as well as sharing that technology with neighboring centers.
- Our "open door" policy invites families to connect in ways that fit their styles, interests, and schedules, whether that means simply attending the whole school events, or joining committees to help plan ways for families to connect with each other and enhance the school program. We also solicit input about our programs in multiple ways so that we can continually improve our work.
- For all families, we discuss their children's development in detail and provide resources for community involvement and school transitions. When needed, we can arrange for language translation and help families connect with services to help with unique challenges regarding physical and mental health, individual learning support or counseling, etc.
- When conflicts arise, we seek to utilize direct, honest, and sensitive communication to help us develop an effective solution. We listen carefully and reflect frequently so that we can discern assumptions that may be biasing our perspectives and work toward solutions that counter discrimination and collaboratively address persistent challenges.



In all of these ways, we seek to develop close partnerships with children and families, as well as with the university and Pittsburgh communities to create the best learning opportunities for everyone in our busy laboratory school. We invite your input and involvement as together we strive for excellence.

Director's Corner: Teachers are the Key

Reviewing the daily classroom messages, visiting the school, and participating in Parent / Teacher conferences all give parents an opportunity to witness the **central role of teachers in their children's education**. NAEYC recognizes the importance of high quality teaching by dedicating two standards in the national accreditation system to teaching practices and teacher professional development.

Standard #3 (**Teaching**) focuses on using effective developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate teaching approaches. Standard #6 (**Teachers**)



ensures that accredited programs build a teaching team that has the educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment necessary to promote children's learning and development and to support families' diverse needs and interests. We are fortunate to be embedded in a university culture that continually strives for best practices in all aspects of the education process and also provides the human resources support for all campus employees. This context enhances our laboratory school's ability to both lead and innovate in the realm of early childhood teaching.

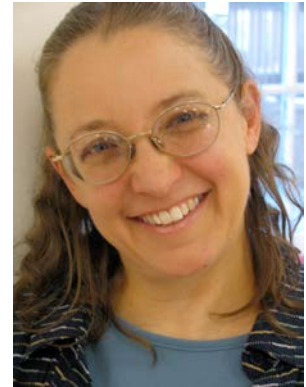


- Naturally, we begin with recruitment and retention of effective educators who share our passion for building a caring learning community that is responsive to children's and adults' interests and needs, designing a rich learning environment, and promoting meaningful learning that helps everyone deepen their conceptual understanding of relevant topics and strengthen skills in all domains.
- The CMU human resources system helps us search broadly for educators with relevant college degrees and experience, provides excellent benefits and continuing education resources, and offers coaching for our administrators so that we can best integrate our staff as a team and support each individual's unique personal and professional growth.
- We have the freedom to plan our school calendar and schedules such that we can both fulfill our laboratory school responsibilities and design the best professional development for our staff. Both TIME and RESOURCES are essential. Having nearly two weeks at the beginning and end of each school year to focus on professional growth, plus weekly team planning and staff development time enables us to meet and exceed the accreditation requirements. We can provide the fundamentals for staff orientation, health and safety training, and seminars in ethics, child development, assessment, special needs, etc. In addition, we can effectively utilize opportunities to learn via active involvement in collaborative advancement projects. For example, instead of simply taking a seminar on issues related to diversity, we can engage our staff in a book study on dual language learners and initiate an international practicum experience with Korean colleagues.
- Our schedule and excellent staff/child ratio also afford opportunities for individuals, teams, and the whole staff to reflectively focus on continual quality improvement. We are privileged to share our educators as leaders in the field, serving on local and national boards, mentoring pre-service teachers, collaborating on research projects, speaking and writing for national audiences, etc. In these ways, we invest in the quality of our educators and strengthen the whole team's ability to foster the best possible learning experiences for everyone involved in our laboratory school.



Director's Corner: Curriculum

NAEYC's standard for **Curriculum** provides a broad overview listing the essential components of a quality early childhood program. The standard does NOT require centers to adopt a packaged curriculum or prescribe one particular educational approach, so centers are free to design their programs based on diverse philosophies, as long as their purposeful design fits the NAEYC criteria. This balance of a structured curriculum framework with the flexibility for intellectual freedom fits well with Carnegie Mellon's unifying motto of "My heart is in the work" and sets the stage for a laboratory school community in which all learners can engage in and contribute to meaningful learning.

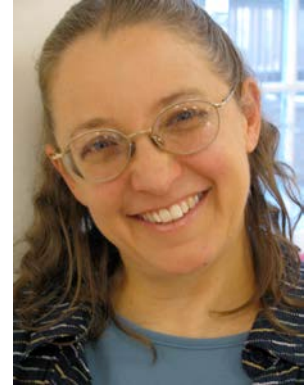


- Our curriculum framework is based on **six sets of learning objectives** that cover the full range of development and are based on early childhood development theories. You can download these objectives for Self-Esteem & Independence, Interaction & Cooperation, Communication, Discovery & Exploration, Physical Capabilities, Health & Safety, and Artistic Expression & Appreciation from our web site in the "Program" section under "Six Basic Learning Goals".
- **Every aspect of our program** is intentionally designed to foster children's development relative to our specified objectives, including our classroom arrangement, choice of materials, schedules and routines, teaching strategies, etc. In addition, our choice of **interdisciplinary thematic curriculum** allows us to facilitate broad skill building across all domains while also promoting deep exploration of relevant, real-world topics, such as our upcoming whole school study of *Water* or other recent whole school units on *Healthy Mind & Body*, *Building*, or *Theatre Arts*. We choose topics to both deepen conceptual development (e.g., studying Desert Habitats after the Water Unit in the Preschool) and to broaden children's exposure (e.g., exploring Russian Culture in the Kindergarten where several children have Russian heritage but all can benefit from comparing and contrasting cultures).
- Using the framework of developmental objectives in the context of thematic studies makes our curriculum **adaptable** to a range of children's ability levels and **responsive** to diverse child and family experiences, interests and values. Choosing the themes for the year in advance allows educators to locate quality resources and **proactively plan** to incorporate the wealth of campus and community assets into the unit, while leaving significant openness in the unit design to **integrate children's ideas and emerging interests** as the unit progresses. When planning the specific activities within a unit, we balance both the **grouping of children** – including individual, small group and large group activities – and the **style of guidance** – including child-guided play, inquiry, and creative expression, as well as teacher-guided lessons and activities.
- In all of these ways, we are laying **essential cognitive foundations** for the literacy, math, science, social studies, and arts that will be more formally taught in elementary school and beyond. We directly teach and then repeatedly practice the use of **essential tools for learning**, beginning with basic gross and fine motor skills and cognitive methods for problem solving and inquiry and then gradually introducing physical tools and technologies (e.g., simple machines, cooking utensils, woodworking tools, computers, and other digital media), all with proactive attention to appropriate health and safety issues. Being affiliated with Carnegie Mellon and active in the Pittsburgh early education community provides our educators with a **rich network of experts** willing to support our children's learning by contributing their time and resources to our thematic studies, all with the goal of designing the most authentic experiences possible for young children in innovative ways that we can share with other educators as part of our laboratory school outreach.



Director's Corner: Assessment

The NAEYC standard for **Assessment** advocates ongoing authentic observations and evaluations of a child's learning and development, as well as communicating the child's progress to the family. As with the curriculum standard, there is no requirement that we utilize a particular type of assessment or standardized test, so we are free to design a system that fits our developmental goals and our thematic approach to curriculum. We **ARE** required to demonstrate, through our overall program portfolio and our individual classroom portfolios, that our assessment system is an organized and integral part of our program and document that it meets the accepted reliability and validity criteria for early childhood assessments.



Interestingly, assessment is the one standard in the whole NAEYC system for which our affiliation with Carnegie Mellon University has little direct benefit. In fact, **NONE of the data collected by researchers** conducting studies in our laboratory school can be shared with school personnel in a way that would identify individual children, both for confidentiality reasons and because many of the measures used in the studies are only in the development stage and might, therefore, not be valid or reliable assessments.

- The Children's School focuses assessment on describing the developmental progress of individual children so that we can best **adapt our program to capitalize on the strengths and interests** of our unique groups each year and help our wide range of children progress. Occasionally, we **identify areas of weakness** that might require referrals for diagnostic testing to determine whether the child would benefit from therapeutic intervention. Most often, such intervention would involve speech / language therapy, occupational therapy, etc., that is either done in the context of school or on an outpatient basis elsewhere.
- To gather our assessment data, we utilize a variety of **natural classroom activities that are both interesting and familiar to the children**, often in the context of a routine or game. For example, observations of children sharing at circle time provides teachers with information about their verbal communication skills, their ability to interact with peers who ask questions or offer ideas, etc. During a game of bingo in which one child is the "caller" during each round, the teacher can assess the caller's comfort in a leadership role, knowledge of the numbers or letters on the cards, and ability to coach other children who may not see the called item on their cards. To assess many gross motor skills at one time, a teacher might arrange an obstacle course that involves climbing up and down steps, crawling through a tunnel, hopping from one hoop to another, walking across a balance beam, and so on. Because the tasks are familiar and easily adaptable, they can be used effectively with children who are dual language learners, as well as those who have special needs.
- We **discuss assessment information with families** most formally during parent / teacher conferences when we review each developmental domain and describe our observations, along with sharing photos and children's creations. We always informally welcome parent input regarding their view of the child's strengths and weaknesses, but we formalized that process this year by using the Ages & Stages questionnaires. With this more reciprocal approach to evaluating children's progress, we are better able to partner in planning next steps for home and school emphasis designed to challenge the strong areas and alleviate the difficulties.
- Overall, our approach to assessment resonates well with Carnegie Mellon's emphasis on **continuous quality improvement** in the context of commitment to collaborative and reflective efforts that result in teaching and learning excellence.



Director's Corner: Health & Safety

The NAEYC standards for **Health** and **Physical Environment** include detailed quality specifications for promoting the nutrition and health of children, protecting children and staff from injury and illness, and providing a safe and healthy physical environment. Basically, the standards advocate designing welcoming, accessible, and developmentally-appropriate indoor and outdoor environments, with sufficient space for the number of children (35 sq. ft. indoors, 75 sq. ft. outdoors), safe and well-maintained equipment, materials, and furnishings, adequate supervision by sight and sound, clear, ADA accessible pathways, and secure boundaries, with access to safe drinking water and adequate toileting facilities and protection from environmental hazards ranging from extreme temperature and harmful sun exposure, to insects, smoke, pollution, asbestos, lead, etc. NAEYC also advocates designing environments for children and adults that are aesthetically pleasing, comfortable, naturally lighted, and well-ventilated, with spaces designated for individual belongings and clearly arranged for individual, small group, and whole group interactions.



- Best practices in these aspects of early childhood education begin with training, which we provide for all of our staff members, plus as many substitute teachers and support staff as are available to attend. Each year, we provide Pediatric First Aid / CPR training, including “standard precautions” regarding bloodborne pathogens, the “5 Rights of Medication Administration”, and “SafeServ” food safety training. Through the Environmental Health and Safety Department, Carnegie Mellon also provides our annual Fire Safety training and consultation any time we have questions or concerns.
- NAEYC also requires that we contract with health, nutrition, and playground safety consultants who periodically observe our facilities and practices to determine whether we are following the recommendations for record-keeping, maintaining first aid and emergency supplies, handwashing & diapering procedures, cleaning and sanitation frequency, choking prevention, managing allergies and other special medical conditions, etc. and to make recommendations for improvement.
- Because we are part of the university community, Carnegie Mellon provides our security, building maintenance, cleaning, grounds-keeping, routine safety checks, hazard responses (e.g., pest management, unusual smell investigation, etc.). Though we pay for renovations to our kitchen and playground, the project management, bidding, etc. goes through the university Facilities Management Services department, and the insurance and liability policies are maintained by the university.
- On our Administrative Team, Miss Hancock serves as the primary liaison with the trainers, consultants, and university personnel for all aspects of meeting the Health and Physical Environment standards. Our teaching teams focus on the daily classroom procedures for health and safety, and they are also responsible for designing the classroom environment with varied materials that are organized for children’s independent use, created and rotated to align with our thematic studies, and adapted to the children’s interests and developmental levels.



In all of these ways, we seek to provide an effective learning environment as a context for all of the relationships, teaching, curriculum and assessment, etc. that I have described in prior articles this year. When classes are in session, much of this proactive preparation and intentional design is invisible, but it is essential to our quality program. Thanks to all who support our efforts!

Director's Corner: Community Relations

As we draw near to the end of our NAEYC Accreditation Renewal year, I reflect on the Children's School's approach to the final quality standard, **#8 Community Relationships**, and the many reciprocal benefits of our integration into the Carnegie Mellon learning community.



NAEYC's standard for Community Relationships includes three levels of relationships: 1) raising awareness and accessing community resources available to educators and families for promoting young children's health and well-being, 2) partnering with community agencies to share diverse cultural and arts resources with the children during school and to encourage families to access them within the community, and 3) "acting as a citizen in the neighborhood and the early childhood community" to contribute our resources - including expertise - to local, state, and national early childhood enhancement and advocacy efforts, particularly for quality professional development.

- We work closely with Carnegie Mellon's Police and Environmental Health & Safety departments regarding security and fire safety issues, and we partner with the university nutritionist regarding our food handling procedures and snack menus. We have also built relationships with the health center (which provides free flu shots to our staff annually), counseling center for referrals as needed, and athletics department (for events such as the pool tour and family swim at our recent Family Festival).
- For families, Mrs. Rosenblum shares a broad list of Pittsburgh resources at the start of the school year or when a family is new to town, Miss Hancock coordinates resources on school choices and transitions, busing, and scholarship funding, and Dr. Carver helps connect families with resources for developmental diagnostics and therapy, as well as dealing with family challenges, grief, etc.
- The Carnegie Mellon campus and Schenley Park provide numerous opportunities for enhancing our program via walking field trips, collaboration on children's programs such as the recent Martin Luther King Jr. event, access to arts performances (such as the recent ballroom dancing demonstration in the Red Room), and opportunities for inspiration by interaction with undergraduate designers (see the Undergraduate Spotlight page).
- In addition to sharing information about university events intended for families (such as the upcoming carnival), we also utilize our newsletter and email distribution list to notify our families of interesting community events. Our Family Social Organization also plans group outings!
- Our citizenship efforts are among the strongest aspects of the Children's School. From our reciprocal relationships with the Psychology Department, Cyert Center, and local schools sending practicum students to us, we have educators in leadership roles at the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children, the International Association of Laboratory Schools, and the National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers (see article about recent conferences).
- Because CMU provides so many infrastructure resources for our school, we have a generous professional development budget, including funding a "floater" teacher so that there is coverage for staff to participate in conferences, collaborative projects, etc. Grant funding for research projects for which we are consultants and collaborators also supports an administrative team with more depth and breadth than most early childhood programs.



As you can imagine, building and extending these relationships increases our exposure to resources and opportunities, which then enhances our efforts and effectiveness connecting with the community.

Director's Corner: Hearts in the Work

As we near the end of our **NAEYC Accreditation renewal year**, we await the decision of the "Academy" regarding our status. We have intentionally reviewed all of our philosophies, programs, policies, and practices, beginning with last spring's family and staff evaluation, job description and handbook reviews, etc. and continuing throughout the summer and fall to complete portfolio documentation of our excellence and innovation relative to the 10 sets of quality standards (some 400+ items). We had our 2-day Assessor Site Visit on March 7th and 8th, and then took a much-needed spring break. We hope to be communicating the good news of our 5-year renewal within the next month or so.



So what now?

- Of course, there are the sighs of relief and the pause to catch our breath after a busy year. We also acknowledge the many individuals who dedicated energy, effort, and expertise while completing the required tasks, particularly the administrative team, the educators, and the Carnegie Mellon facilities management staff. Many professionals from the Dietrich College and various central offices also supported our work by providing documentation of university practices relative to the standards. Heartfelt thanks to everyone for your contributions on our behalf!



- Assuming good news from the Academy, we will follow a fairly straightforward process of maintaining our standards, conducting the required schedule of staff training, health and safety consultation and drills, enhancing any areas noted by the assessor as needing improvement, and submitting annual reports of our progress relative to the standards. Then in 2017, we will update all of our documentation for the next cycle of accreditation renewal.

- Best of all, we now have a sense of freedom to follow our passions as we focus on quality improvements unconstrained by the accreditation system. In the tradition of Andrew Carnegie, our hearts are in the work, so we continually strive to creatively enhance our work with researchers, university students, children, families, practicing educators, and pre-service teachers. Our amazing team of lifelong learners will chart the course for the next phase of our journey during our two weeks of professional development in May. We will seek input from all of our constituents and specifically invite families to contribute their ideas through the online survey to be sent this week via email.



Best wishes for a safe and relaxing summer! We encourage you to share your experiences with us via postcards, journals, photos, etc. and look forward to welcoming many of you back in the fall. For those of you making transitions to other schools, good luck and please keep in touch.

You'll always be part of the Children's School family!