

# KERA UPDATE

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## Primary Problems, Kentucky's Ungraded Primary

For the first time since the 1992-93 school year, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has provided by-age data on the enrollment of Ungraded Primary students in Kentucky's tutorial and remedial program, called the Extended School Services (ESS). The new data provides strong clues that Primary, which is the multi-age amalgam of what used to be Kindergarten to third grade, indeed has pervasive and disturbing problems.

Statewide, regular term enrollment in ESS averaged over all grades rose 70% between the first year of data collection in the 1991-92 school term and the 1999-2000 term. By contrast, ESS use in the Primary years has grown far less. In the Primary 2 Year (P2), generally equivalent to the old 1st grade, ESS rose a mere 24% during the same period. And, ESS went up only 57% in 2nd grade and 61% in 3rd grade.

In sharp contrast, 4th grade ESS has skyrocketed. In the 1991-92 school year,

only 9,115 fourth graders received ESS. By 1999-2000, the figure was 17,693 — up 94%.

Now, fourth grade is not part of Primary. Kentucky's fourth graders are in a more traditional, and accountable, classroom setting. In fact, except for very minor testing in the last year of Primary, 4th grade is the first time students are held accountable with the Kentucky assessment program.

Clearly, use of ESS in Primary has consistently lagged behind the overall state average. But, is this really bad, and why is this happening?

The whole idea of Primary is to allow each child to start the school experience and “get up to speed” at his or her own rate. During this time, the sense of failing is supposed to be prevented by using small groups of children arranged by subject and ability so that a child who is strong in math but weaker in reading, for example, can be

placed in work groups with other students at similar levels of development. The goal is for all of these children to continue to make progress, even if slightly different learning rates resulted.

Clearly, if things were functioning properly, ESS would be used extensively in those work groups where progress was slower. That would give these students extra help to improve

performance so they could hopefully catch up and enter 4th grade on time.

But, Primary obviously isn't working this way. Instead, it appears Primary teachers are not properly identifying students who need extra help. Too many students are being promoted from Primary without the necessary development. It then falls on 4th grade teachers to make the tough call that these kids are behind and need lots of extra help.

Developmentally, waiting to 4th grade to make these decisions simply delays too long. For example, an excellent body of scientific research is now available on reading instruction. See results from the recently convened National Reading Panel and the long-term efforts of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This scientifically conducted research shows that if students are not taught to read well by 3rd grade, that it is unlikely they will ever become good readers. It seems a developmental window in the human brain closes after this time in a child's life. So, by not catching problems until 4th grade, Kentucky is really missing the boat on helping thousands of our young citizens to become good readers.

We simply must do better.

One answer could be to cut Primary back to a K to grade 2 program. If 3rd grade was a more traditional and accountable classroom, we might catch faltering kids while they are still in that developmental window where help might really work.

But, we may have to face the possibility that Primary just isn't working, and elimination is needed. One thing is certain, we need some answers — quickly!

**Enrollment and Percent Change in Kentucky Extended School Services, By Grade, 1991-92 and 1999-2000 School Years**

