

# MAKING WAVES AT DCS



## It Might Look Like Play, But It's Really Work!

When an untrained observer walks into a preschool classroom at Bates during choice time, it might seem like a roomful of kids just playing: two students are making stamped valentines, three others are building block houses for plastic animals, and another group are pirates hiding a treasure chest. However, these preschoolers are actually executing a thought-out and communicated plan for their choice time. During a short planning session each morning, students decide and share their plan of which toys/tools they want to play with. This prior planning and communication minimizes disagreements over certain areas or toys, and provides the structure to help young students be successful. Following choice time, the group reviews how it went: if they stuck to their plan or would like to make changes for next choice time. And so, what might look like simply an hour of playtime is really students building organization, communication, and collaboration skills.

Bates School houses Jenkins ECLC's half-day and school day preschool programs. Dexter's early childhood classes use the [HighScope curriculum](#), where "children are encouraged to explore, interact, and exercise their creative imagination through purposeful play." Each room features interest areas: books, music, toys, house, blocks, art, writing and sand. These interest areas are filled a variety of open-ended materials. They stock the classroom with natural, found and recycled "real" play items. For example, the house area has real food boxes and bottles (emptied and sealed shut), plates and cups, cleaning tools (brooms, dustpans, etc.), actual car keys and cell phones (no batteries). Providing real-life items for play helps students recognize and value these items at home and outside the classroom.

The HighScope curriculum encourages teachers to be flexible with their lesson plans, allowing student interest to guide learning. In Katie Penix's 4-year-old classroom, students have recently been choosing to play with dinosaurs and blocks. Building on this interest, Penix and her co-teacher Lissa Pallo have incorporated dinosaurs and blocks into their small group work; students are counting dinosaurs and arranging blocks from smallest to largest. One student has shown an interest in clouds, so Penix and Pallo laminated named pictures of different cloud types and taped them to the window sill. Students looking out the window on a clear day can learn to recognize clouds based on these pictures.

Three & four year-old half-day preschool teachers Kim Hebbes and Sasha Cody also use this concept of student-driven interest to direct classroom learning. During snack-time earlier this year, a student held up his graham cracker and said, "This looks like the state of Colorado!" This comment started a discussion about what other states their snacks looked like, which states they have visited, and what our home state of Michigan looks like. The following day, a student brought in a map of Michigan, which all his classmates were eager to see. Hebbes

observed their growing interest and laminated a set of hand-held maps for her classroom, using them in activities such as “hiking” around the school building. Students have built cars with chairs and used the maps to “explore,” classroom walls are now filled with maps of the United States and world maps showing animal habitats, and students are continually exploring what can be learned from maps; all of these learning opportunities derived from that short snack-time conversation.

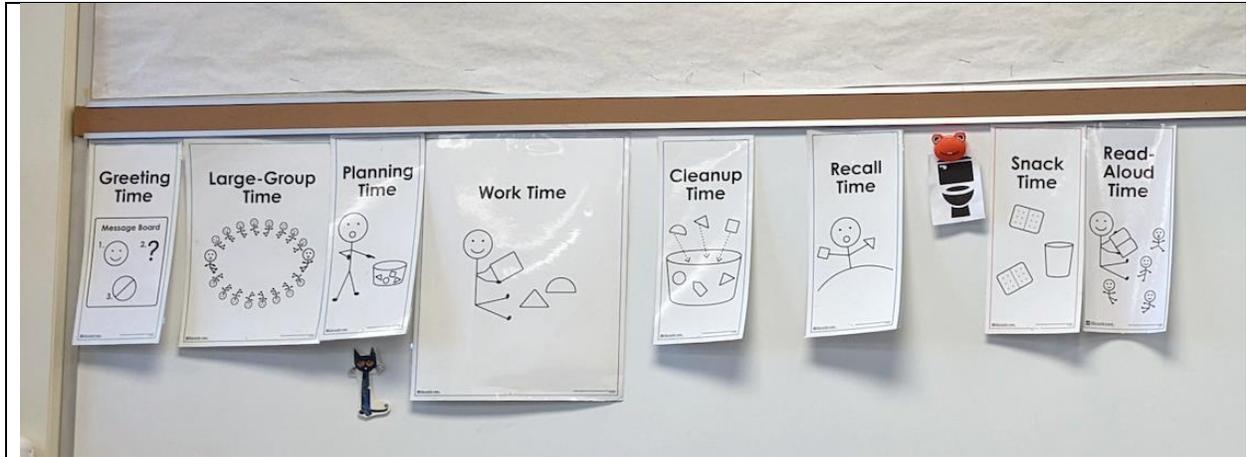
“It’s all about the connections,” Hebbes says, adding that snack time is usually where small conversations happen, building relationships among students and between students and teachers. “They love to tell stories,” she shares with a smile.

One important skill students learn in preschool is the initial recognition of letters. HighScope uses a system of learning letters called “Letter Links,” where each letter is associated with a picture that starts with that letter. Students begin by associating the first letter of their name with a certain picture. For example, a student named *Luke* has his name printed next to a picture of a *lion*. If multiple student names have the same first letter, each gets their own picture (e.g. *Luke Lion, Lizzie Lemon*). These name labels are on the student’s locker and around the classroom. As students associate the letter name with the picture, what the letter looks like and its sound, they begin to recognize it in other words around the room and when reading. They also learn each other’s symbols and letters.

Routine and structure are important in a young child’s development, helping them build stamina and healthy habits. Daily schedules are prominently displayed in each classroom so students know exactly what to expect each day. In Penix’s classroom, a second picture schedule drawn on the whiteboard is another learning opportunity, as students interpret and discuss the pictures to determine the day’s activities. Hebbes presents her classroom’s daily schedule visually with each activity on laminated pieces of paper cut to different widths. A thin sheet is a short activity, and a wider paper is a longer one, which helps students visually see where they are in the day and learn to tell time.

Each school day has a consistent schedule featuring large and small group time. Small group time can focus on anything from science, math, language, or social studies, to fine motor skills, art or social-emotional learning. Large group time is when the entire class meets to sing, play learning games, have parachute time, etc. Students in the four-year-old classroom attend school four days per week, from 8:10 a.m. to 3:10 p.m. Their day includes rest time, two snacks and lunch. In the half-day three and four year-old class, morning students attend five days per week and afternoon students attend Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

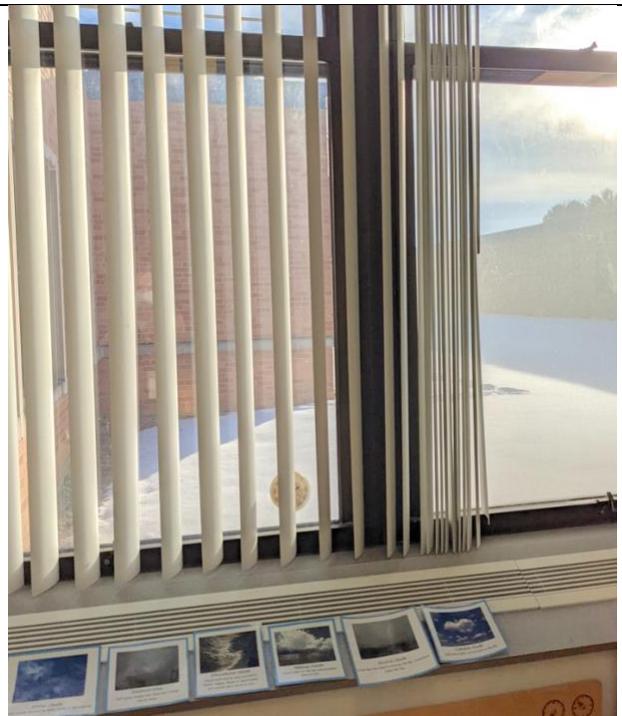
While preschool might seem like all fun and games, developmental and educational concepts are behind every activity during the day. The “plan-do-review” sequence helps children develop higher-level thinking, giving them a solid foundation for their school career. By engaging in active and interesting play in a structured setting, Dexter preschool students are gaining the skills and practices needed for future success.



VISUAL SCHEDULE



ACTIVITY PLAN



CLOUD PICS FOR REFERENCE



