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## To Teach Kindergarten

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To Teach Kindergarten

by Heather Lydon

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For as long as I can remember, I have loved kids. There's nothing I enjoy more than being with children, whether I'm reading a book to them or baking cookies with them. Though kids take a lot of work, they're also a lot of fun. A career in teaching kindergarten is perfect for someone who loves kids and takes joy in watching them learn new things. This paper will describe much of what a career as a kindergarten teacher involves. The basics of the occupation will be explained, including the job description, salary, demand, job benefits, and the required education and training. Both the positive and the negative aspects of a kindergarten teaching career will be looked at as well. Major controversies surrounding this line of work will also be examined. This paper will have a focus on the job information pertaining to Illinois since I plan to live, attend school, and work in Illinois as an adult.

Growing up, I entertained a variety of career ambitions—I thought I wanted to be everything from an author to an architect. When I was thirteen, I decided that I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. I haven't changed my mind for a second since; in fact, my enthusiasm for the career has grown stronger over the years. I began taking childcare classes and spent a year and a half working with kids in a laboratory preschool. I loved every minute of it and I received good reviews from the preschool instructors, which gave me extra confidence. I spent my last semester of high school studying elementary teaching in an independent study program. These experiences were all positive and left me without any doubts that I wanted to teach kindergarten. Teaching appeals to me for a number of reasons. It is a stable job, in high-demand, and it has all the necessary benefits. The salary is good and there is ample paid vacation time. Also, I plan on having kids of my own someday, and once they enter school, my schedule will match closely with theirs. Teaching would give me plenty of time to spend with my family.

Most importantly, I love kids, I love creating lesson plans, and I love studying elementary education. Many people are surprised when they find out that I'm an education major. I'm on the quiet side, and quiet personalities don't usually match up with a teaching career, since teachers have to talk in front of their students all day. It's true that I get nervous when it comes to talking in front of people my own age. However, I spent a year and a half gaining experience in doing just that with preschoolers. I got up in front of large groups of preschoolers and taught or read to them consistently during that time, and it's very different from presenting things to classmates at school. With the preschoolers, I always had fun when I was up there. Teaching kindergarten is a very appealing career for me, and I look forward to the day when I'm working in my own kindergarten classroom.

The job description of a kindergarten teacher includes teaching as well as planning, evaluating, monitoring behavior, and more. Kindergarten teachers are responsible for preparing lessons plans which will teach students basic subjects and skills. These lessons should cover skills in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. Other job duties include organizing field trips, honing social skills, and discussing behavioral issues with parents ("Kindergarten Teacher" 4). In the past, kindergarten was more relaxed, but now "academics begin to take priority in kindergarten classrooms. Letter recognition, phonics, numbers, and awareness of nature and science... are taught primarily in kindergarten" ("Teachers" 2). There are state standards outlining what must be taught in kindergarten. In addition, teachers must "plan, evaluate, and assign lessons; prepare, administer, and grade tests...and maintain classroom discipline... Teachers also prepare report cards, and meet with

parents and school staff to discuss a student's academic progress" (3). These job duties can be time-consuming and demanding but all are of equal importance. A kindergarten teacher should also possess certain personality traits. In a survey asking children what they liked about their teachers, it was concluded that "the best teachers [are] given a high rating in...democratic spirit, kindness, consideration for the individual pupil, patience, wide interests,...interest in student's problems, and disposition" (Fine 29). These characteristics should come naturally to a kindergarten teacher, though they can be learned over time. Skills in teaching, planning, and communication, as well as having the right personality, are all part of the job.

Teaching is a job that comes with a good salary and a variety of benefits. The salary varies depending on "experience, employer, and location" ("Kindergarten Teacher" 4). As of 2004, the average first-year salary was \$31,828, while the average overall salary was \$49,678 (Wildovsky 21). However, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* reported that the "Median annual earnings...ranged from \$41,400 to \$45,920" ("Teachers" 7). In Illinois, the median wage is \$38,410, but depending on the town, the wage can go up or down about \$10,000 (*Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers*). From what I can gather, most elementary-level teachers earn an annual salary somewhere in the \$40,000's. There is also always room for salary growth, but it usually takes extra work on the teacher's behalf. Teachers can join unions to improve their pay and other work conditions. Salaries can also be improved through running extracurricular activities, acquiring a master's degree, obtaining tenure, or by teaching summer school ("Teachers" 8). Aside from a decent salary, teaching also offers many benefits. There is ample paid vacation time and "most teachers work the traditional 10-month school year with a 2-month vacation during the summer" (Teachers 2). Weekends and periodic days off are also given, as well as a spring and a winter break. Teachers are also provided with medical insurance and solid retirement plans. Other benefits, which vary by state, can also include paid training and education, leaves of absence and maternity leave, and paid sick leave ("Kindergarten Teacher" 2). The salary and benefits make teaching an attractive job.

The job outlook for elementary school teachers, including kindergarten, is mostly promising. The demand for teachers is high because of retirement and high teacher turnover, both of which open up extra job vacancies for new teachers (Wildovsky 9). Employment opportunities vary geographically, as some states are currently experiencing a shortage of qualified teachers, even to the extent of some choosing to "implement policies that will encourage more students to become teachers" (Teachers 7). The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* also notes that "job prospects should be better in inner cities and rural areas than in suburban districts" (7). Since I would prefer to work in the suburbs, this may limit my chances of finding a suburban teaching job. Although the job demand looks good, it is reported that "Overall student enrollments, a key factor in the demand for teachers, is projected to rise more slowly than in the past through 2012" (Fine 15). Despite the predicted decline in student enrollment, teaching is still a career that won't be disappearing any time soon, since retirements outweigh the slower enrollment growth (Teachers 1). In the Midwest (including Illinois), enrollment growth is "expected to hold relatively steady or decline" (Teachers 7). This may affect my own job opportunities once I'm looking for employment. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* also reports that teaching is becoming a more attractive job, and that teacher supply is predicted to increase because of the job prospects that are offered (7). Due to retirement and turnover rates, as well as the rising need for qualified teachers, the job outlook for a kindergarten teacher looks steady, despite possible location issues, declining student enrollment, and increasing job competition.

The required education to become a kindergarten teacher includes college and certification or licensing. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* explains that "public school teachers must have at least a bachelor's degree, complete an approved teacher education program, and be licensed" (1). This information aligns with another, more kindergarten-specific source, in which it is stated that "most kindergarten teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree and teacher certification or licensure if they work in public schools" (Kauerz 6). In addition, some states require continued

education in order to renew a teaching certificate. As far as college is concerned, it is reported that “if you plan to be an elementary teacher, about ¼ of your college education will be devoted to courses in education...These courses include the study of the growth and development of children, methods of teaching, child psychology,...and lesson planning” (Fine 41). All of these courses should successfully prepare a student for their eventual teaching career.

I plan on attending the Benedictine University School of Education next year. Benedictine is a teacher accredited school with approval from the Illinois State Board of Education, and “when a student successfully completes one of the eleven available programs, the University recommends to the State that the individual is entitled to receive a teaching certificate (pending passage of the Illinois tests)” (“Benedictine” 1). The fact that Benedictine is accredited makes the school a solid education choice. At Benedictine, the requirements for an elementary education degree mostly align with the school’s core requirements for an undergraduate degree. Aside from completing the required courses, “students must also complete an additional 18 semester hours in an academic discipline that prepares them for the teaching content in the middle grades” (“Benedictine” 1). Though every college is slightly different, “most programs require students to perform a student-teaching internship” (“Teachers” 5). This is true of Benedictine.

On the licensing and certification end of the spectrum, the specifics are less clear-cut. All teachers must be licensed or certified, but the “requirements for regular licenses to teach kindergarten through grade 12 vary by state” which makes a national standard difficult to determine (Teachers 4). This can also make it difficult to work in different states if the states have different teacher requirements. As of 2005, Illinois is the only state that requires kindergarten teachers to hold either an early childhood certificate or an elementary certificate (Kauerz 7). One or the other will satisfy the State Board of Education. Both forms of teacher certification in Illinois include a basic skills test, but not a subject-specific pedagogy test (Wildovsky 211). The basic skills test covers specific subject areas and general curriculum knowledge, as well as high-level reading skills, college-level mathematics, and analytical writing assignments. Teacher candidates must achieve a total score of at least 240 on the basic skills test in order to receive their state teaching certificate (Illinois State Board of Education). However, as mentioned earlier, what Illinois requires may not translate to what another state requires.

A recent topic of controversy concerning kindergarten is the debate over learning standards. Rather than being determined at a national level, learning standards are set by the states. Kindergarten often falls out of the loop, since it is not officially part of elementary or early childhood education. Kindergarten lands in the middle and is not always addressed. As of 2005, twelve states don’t have any standards for kindergarten. One of those states was, until recently, Illinois. Formal standards were only first introduced for the 2006 school year. The standards “are a mixture of the educational and practical, meant to maintain a fun and carefree environment while ensuring students get the academic preparation and life skills they need for the years ahead” (Rado 1). In English, the standards include reading ability, knowing the entire alphabet with phonemic awareness (letter sounds), knowledge of consonant-vowel-consonant words like “cat” and identifying high-frequency words such as “the.” For math, children must be able count to 100 and understand the “more than, less than, and equal to” concept. Science includes magnetism and weather concepts. Social studies involves learning about other cultures and about American government. In addition, children must learn about self-care tasks (such as washing their hands) and sharing (Rado 1-2). Some of these standards seem complex for five-year-olds, which is noted in Carlos Sadovi’s article, in which he reports that “Kindergarten originally was intended as a way to help pupils learn to socialize with others and grow accustomed to group settings without...too many demands” but now there is a stronger focus on academics (1). Some feel that these standards put too much pressure on students, while others think that the standards are necessary in order for today’s youth to keep up with the fast-paced world we live in. Even kindergarten teachers are in disagreement over whether the standards

are necessary or not.

The new learning standards leads into another kindergarten debate over assessment methods. In order to make sure that children learn everything that is required, standardized testing is now being done on six-year-olds. This has been a subject of protest among the parents of kindergarteners and some teachers. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that “to assess young children’s strengths, progress, and needs, [one should] use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate” and goes on to say that the “use of individually administered, norm-referenced tests [should be] limited” (1-2). These guidelines are rather vague, since there are no additional guidelines to distinguish what is and isn’t appropriate for testing. The president’s No Child Left Behind Act “calls for more accountability through test scores” which leaves some educators feeling that testing is required, though it appears to be only a suggestion at the kindergarten level (Sadovi 1). It is the general belief that formal testing should be minimal in kindergarten, though the decision is ultimately up to the different school districts, not the teachers.

The learning standards not only lead into a debate over testing but also over what the appropriate length of the kindergarten school day should be. Until recently, half-day kindergarten was the norm. But now, with the learning standard pressure, full-day kindergarten has become a popular option. For kindergarten teachers, a full-day schedule is the obvious solution to the problem of covering all of the standards thoroughly. But some argue that a full-day schedule is too much for five-to-six-year-old children to handle. Carlos Sadovi’s article “City Promoting Its All-Day Kindergartens” reports that “research...shows full-day classes better prepare pupils academically” and that “expanding the day not only gives teachers time to build on the academic learning...but also gives children time to play, which also helps them develop” (1-2) . Sadovi interviews many parents who are extremely happy with the results of putting their kids through full-day kindergarten (1-2). In Chicago, there has been a ten percent increase in full-day enrollment for the 2007 school year, and the school district wants to expand the full-day program (2). Illinois is one of seven states that has an explicit funding incentive to offer (but not require) the full-day schedule. Every state differs in how many hours constitute the term “full-day” but in Illinois, four hours is considered full-day (Kauerz 2-8). Full-day kindergarten is becoming more common, but time will tell whether I’ll end up teaching two half-day classes or one full-day class.

One final controversy surrounding kindergarten education is the entrance age. This, too, springs from the setting of learning standards. First of all, the age requirements for kindergarten vary from state to state. In Illinois, the cutoff date is September 1 (Kauerz 4). If a child turns five years old by September 1, they are eligible to begin attending kindergarten; however, there is no law requiring children to start kindergarten just because they reach the cutoff date. The decision to hold a child back, called “red-shirting,” is completely up to parents, who can also pull their kids out of kindergarten if the learning is too difficult for them. In the article “Postponing Kindergarten” by Nara Schoenberg, a preschool director notes that “kindergarten has become so demanding that some kids can’t keep up” which has resulted in a rise in red-shirting (3). Educators and parents argue over red-shirting because while some say that it puts kids at a disadvantage to fall behind, others believe that it gives the kids a chance to mature and work at a better pace. On a personal note, my six-year-old cousin, D.J, was held back from kindergarten last year. His birthday falls on August 31, just one day before the cutoff. Last year, D.J was extremely tiny for his age and he was very wild. D.J just started kindergarten this past September, and he is much bigger and calmer than he was a year ago. My aunt and uncle have no regrets over their decision to wait an extra year for D.J to start kindergarten. Though entrance age is a hot topic of discussion right now, it is still, and probably will remain, a personal decision for parents, not the government, to make.

In conclusion, teaching kindergarten is a great career choice for me, and for anyone else who loves working with kids. The job involves teaching basic concepts, disciplining, grading, and more. With the profession comes a good salary and equally good benefits. The job outlook is mixed,

depending on location, but for the most part demand for teachers will be stable for the next few years. Becoming a teacher involves obtaining a college education and becoming certified or licensed by the state. Some interesting controversies surround kindergarten, most of them springing from the recent setting of learning standards. Since I love kids and learning about elementary education, I believe that one day I will be a successful kindergarten teacher.

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