Continuous Quality Improvement and the NAEYC Academy

Strength and Momentum

A Commitment to Improvement

One of the hallmarks of NAEYC Accreditation of Programs for Young Children is its focus on continuous quality improvement. Just as ongoing improvement is expected from programs engaged in accreditation, NAEYC strives to continually improve the accreditation system itself.

Following a review of NAEYC’s process, it made changes in 2011 that streamline the accreditation process while retaining the rigor that makes NAEYC the gold standard for excellence in early childhood programs. NAEYC is pleased that, as a result of these changes, gaining accreditation will be more accessible for programs.

We want to share with you our process for making improvements to what is the country’s strongest and most reliable accreditation system. The latest process examination is consistent with the 25-year history of NAEYC’s accreditation system, which is periodically formally reviewed to ensure that the accreditation process and criteria reflect current research and knowledge of effective practice in early childhood education. A major criteria review was completed in 2005 as part of the larger effort known as accreditation reinvention. The findings from the recent Criteria Review, completed in 2010, fueled the 2011 improvement measures and will continue to drive enhancements to the accreditation system in the coming years.

Continuing Excellence

The results of the 2010 Criteria Review, as outlined in Lessons Learned and a Vision for Continued Success: 2010 Criteria Review Summary and Recommendations for Next Steps, reaffirm the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria as the gold standard of high-quality practice in programs serving young children. The 10 Standards capture core elements of program quality, and the accreditation criteria associated with each standard represent statements of best practice to guide program quality improvement.

“...The data are clear in the Boston Public Schools. Students who attend our preschool and kindergarten classrooms that are NAEYC accredited perform significantly better than students who do not attend accredited programs. NAEYC Accreditation appears particularly helpful in improving our kindergarten classrooms.

— Jason Sachs
Director, Department of Early Childhood Education of Boston Public Schools
Evaluating the System

The following strategies were used throughout the 2010 Criteria Review process to seek information on both the accreditation criteria and the accreditation process.

- **Field Input.** Feedback from the early childhood community was collected online and through structured discussions guided by NAEYC and stakeholders throughout the country.
- **Expert Review.** The NAEYC Governing Board commissioned Walter S. Gilliam of Yale University to conduct an independent review of the NAEYC Academy’s accreditation system, focusing on the assessment process used to reach accreditation decisions.
- **Analysis of Program Performance Data.** NAEYC conducted field tests and analyzed the resulting data to identify criteria that are especially predictive of overall program quality.
- **Literature Review.** NAEYC reviewed recent research findings to identify updates that are needed to ensure the accreditation criteria reflect current research and knowledge of effective practice.

Initiating Improvements

The 2010 Criteria Review results identified three key goals to help NAEYC improve its accreditation system:

1. Streamline the process, including the number of criteria used to assess programs, to make it less burdensome to achieve, maintain, or regain accreditation.
2. Increase the transparency of the accreditation process.
3. Provide more support to programs engaged in the accreditation process.

NAEYC has been initiating interim improvements to make progress toward these goals since 2010. Detailed information on interim system improvements can be found within 2010 Year in Review: Accomplishments and 2011 Mid-year Review—Accomplishments.

Identifying Long-Term Goals

The NAEYC Academy has identified long-term system improvements as a result of the 2010 Criteria Review. NAEYC is continuing to work toward a fully transparent assessment tool that reduces the specific number of criteria on which programs must prepare to be assessed. Additionally, the NAEYC Academy will develop tools that help all programs improve their practices, regardless of their participation in NAEYC Accreditation. Such tools will support a broad range of quality improvement systems, like state QRIS and other systems at the local, state, and national level.

Looking Strategically to the Future

Programs engaged in NAEYC Accreditation bring the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards to life. They offer a living laboratory in which to explore critical issues related to the provision of high-quality early childhood education. Data collected during accreditation site visits provide the NAEYC Academy the opportunity to collect meaningful data as programs are observed bringing evidence-based standards to life. The analysis of this data is published in a series of Trend Briefs, which tells the story of successful approaches used by high-quality programs and connects the findings to early childhood research trends. Moving forward, NAEYC plans to use the lessons learned from the Academy’s interaction with programs to provide enhanced resources to the early childhood field and collaborate with other quality improvement systems throughout the nation. This strategy will help the Association fulfill its core mission to promote excellence in early childhood education for all young children.

As we celebrate the fifth anniversary of reinvention, NAEYC is strategically positioned to be a major contributor to the nation’s quality improvement efforts in early care and education.

— Linda Hassan Anderson
Senior Director, NAEYC Academy