

Assessing Early Childhood Programs' Compliance with NAEYC's New Early Childhood Program Standards

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Development of suggested accreditation performance criteria nears completion. As a result, the work of creating the new accreditation assessment tools can begin in earnest. This work includes defining what it means for early childhood programs serving children from birth through kindergarten to be in compliance with each of NAEYC's new early childhood program standards.

NAEYC's future accreditation system is being designed as a standard for high-quality early childhood programs. Development of the new accreditation assessment instruments and defining what it means for programs to be in compliance with NAEYC's new early childhood program standards are critical next steps toward supporting this goal. The goal can be reached in a number of different ways, however, and NAEYC and the Commission on NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria want to be informed by a broad range of thinking.

The questions posed below are not new. They were presented in earlier issues of this journal (see *Young Children*, November 2003, p. 67, and January 2004, pp. 80–81). They are presented again because

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this work is still evolving and because your input is so essential to the process. The Association and the program standards/criteria commission are seeking responses to the following questions and issues:

1. A critical first question is, *How should compliance with a program standard be defined?*

- Should *compliance with a standard* mean compliance with every criterion under that standard?
- Should NAEYC adopt a percentage requirement: for example, a program must meet 90 percent of the criteria under any standard to be in compliance? If yes, what is your recommendation for that percentage? Should the percentage differ for different program standards?
- Should certain criteria be met absolutely? If yes, which ones would you recommend be required?

2. NAEYC is considering a variety of approaches to measuring compliance:

(a) One approach is to consider each program standard as describing a *system of services*. This approach is similar to that used in Head Start's review process. To determine compliance with this approach, staff need to decide if an early childhood program has in place a system that supports meeting all of the criteria for a standard and that also can sustain compliance over time. Assessing an early childhood program's compliance with each program standard in this way can help staff to think about their responsibilities in new

Working Definitions of Terms

A *performance category* identifies an area of functioning related to a specific NAEYC early childhood program standard and its accreditation performance criteria. Collectively, performance categories provide a professional taxonomy of the essential features of an excellent early childhood program.

An *early childhood program standard* is a global, evidence- and value-based statement that identifies performance expectations for an area of functioning in excellent early childhood programs.

An *accreditation performance criterion* is an evidence-based statement that defines a discrete expectation for program practice. Collectively, accreditation performance criteria make operational the early childhood program standard with which they are associated. (NOTE: Performance may be reliably documented and verified either through observation of behavior or document review.)

An *accreditation strand* provides an organizational structure for NAEYC's accreditation performance criteria. The accreditation performance criteria will be organized by five strands:

- One universal strand includes criteria that are applicable to all NAEYC-accredited programs (regardless of the developmental level of children served).
- Four strands address specialized accreditation criteria for programs serving: infants, toddlers and twos, preschoolers, and kindergartners.
- NAEYC-accredited programs must address, at minimum, accreditation performance criteria tied to two accreditation strands: the universal strand and at least one of the specialized strands.

ways by taking the big-picture view. This approach may be hard for a program to implement because it requires users to think about how the pieces of a program fit together to meet children's interests and

needs. This emphasis is more big picture and less concrete in its focus on the daily performance of teachers and administrators.

- Is a system-of-services approach appealing? If so, in what way? Would it work in your program?
- What are its disadvantages?

(b) A second approach to measuring compliance with each program standard is to construct scales ranging from 1 to 5 or 1 to 7 and ask staff to rate their program along the scale (for example, from *poor* to *excellent*). Since many early childhood educators know the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and similar measures, this scale-type approach has the advantage of being familiar. Several criteria could be combined to form each scale. This approach requires considerable training for consistent implementation, however, and programs may not have the expertise and/or resources to provide such training.

- What is appealing about this rating scale approach? Would it work in your program?
- What are its disadvantages?

(c) A third approach is to measure a program's compliance with *each* criterion. A scale developed for this

purpose might look like a checklist, similar to the assessment tools currently used by programs during the self-study process. This kind of tool demonstrates the importance of every criterion (an advantage), but, as is currently the case, would likely be very long (a disadvantage).

- What is appealing about this checklist approach? Would it work in your program?
- What are its disadvantages?

3. NAEYC's process of accreditation will continue to have these three steps:

self-study—during which staff systematically examine their program and use the results for self-improvement;

self-assessment—during which staff summarize their program's level of compliance with accreditation criteria and indicate readiness for an accreditation visit; and

external review process—at which time NAEYC assessors visit a program to observe the program's performance on the accreditation criteria.

- The measurement tools could be the same or could differ for each of these steps. Of the three assessment proposals described in question two,

which approach do you think is best for each of the three steps?

4. If NAEYC were to ask early childhood programs to examine each criterion for the self-study and then to use only a subset of these criteria for the self-assessment submitted to the NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation:

- Could you identify some criteria that are more valuable than others?
- Would it make a difference to your program if some criteria counted more than others?

In responding to these questions, please give your rationale, which will assist us in better understanding your view and its relationship to other views received. Your thoughts and reasoning can be shared with the Association and the commission at program/standards_criteria@naeyc.org or mailed to NAEYC Program Standards/Criteria, 1509 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426.

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