

Standing at a Crossroads

Next Steps to Maximize the Potential Benefits of Early Learning Standards

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In her remarks during the opening session of the conference, Barbara Bowman pointed out that early learning standards are necessary, particularly for children at risk for later difficulties in school. Without standards to define expectations for what children should know and be able to do before kindergarten, individual teachers or programs are left to decide for themselves what children should learn, and these decisions may or may not be age-appropriate or equitable. I believe early learning standards are not only necessary but also beneficial for the field.

Every state either has or is developing early learning standards (also known as early learning guidelines) for prekindergarten children. I've learned from research and from my own experiences that the process of developing early learning standards is in itself beneficial—in many states, the process has engaged a wide variety of stakeholders, facilitated cross-discipline discussions, and helped us as educators think through what we really want for children. Furthermore, as is evident from recent data from the Council of Chief State School Officers ECEA SCASS (Early Childhood Education Assessment, State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards), many states are developing and implementing new professional development initiatives, providing resources to programs, and developing materials for parents, based on early learning standards (Scott-Little et al. 2006).

The advent of early learning standards generally has been a positive development within the field. However, as we stand at a crossroads our next steps are crucial to ensure that we capitalize on the potential benefits of early learning standards and minimize the potential dangers that concern many of us. At this point in time, the crux of the issue is this: How can we effectively implement standards-based education in a manner that validates what we know and value from the traditions of early care and education and, at the same time, moves us forward to provide more intentional and higher quality educational experiences for children?

Based on the discussions I have heard during this NAEYC National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, my own research, and my own experiences working with states, I propose that we must do four

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things to move forward in our efforts to responsibly and responsibly implement early learning standards. We must

- refine,
- align and combine,
- bring everyone along, and
- listen and learn.

Refine the content of early learning standards

By design, early learning standards are intended to be the foundation upon which many other elements of early care and education are built. They define expectations for what we want children to learn and how we want them to develop. As such, they should be the basis for decisions we make about curricula, assessments, professional development, and expectations

for teachers' daily practice. Given the important role standards can play in early care and education, it is critical that we get the content "right"—that the standards are age appropriate, inclusive, and holistic.

Looking back, it's incredible to see how quickly early learning standards have developed. Less than five years ago, only a handful of states had early learning standards (and some had vowed they never would). Today, virtually every state has early learning standards. As leaders charged with the task of developing early learning standards, we started the process the best way we knew how—involving a wide range of stakeholders, looking at resource documents, and considering the kindergarten standards in our own states. As a field, we thoughtfully took our first steps into the world of standards-based education.

Now that early learning standards are in place, it is time to critically review the documents. Does the content include everything that it should? Are the standards worded appropriately? Have we done the best we can to make sure the standards are fair and inclusive of children from different circumstances? Now that we have our first (or second or third or fourth) document, it's time to systematically examine the content to see if refinements are needed.

Three steps can be helpful in the refinement process.

1. Implement a content validation process

In many states we wrote early learning standards based on what early childhood educators know about children and best practice. We asked expert reviewers and colleagues in the field to review the content, and we made revisions based on their feedback. Most early learning standards, however, have not undergone a formal content validation process in which the content is systematically reviewed based on research to determine if it is age appropriate and developmentally significant. In my work with Sharon Lynn Kagan and Victoria Stebbins Frelow (of Teachers College at Columbia

University) we conducted formal content analyses on almost 40 early learning standards documents, and found that some state standards do not address all areas of children's development and learning that research says are important. For instance, important aspects of children's physical, social-emotional, and early literacy development were not included in some states' standards (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow 2005, 2006). Furthermore, Kagan's work with UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] illustrates the importance of such a validation process and suggests that developing countries may be ahead of us in this area (Kagan & Britto 2005). To refine the content of standards, we must undertake formal validation processes.

It is still critical that we look carefully at whether standards are truly inclusive. Do they reflect the values of various communities, particularly those of color? Do they address the needs of children with disabilities and children learning English as a second language?

2. Consider feedback from users

In many states the standards documents were published before teachers (that is, adults working with young children in child care, family child care homes, and public school settings) had an opportunity to actually use them. For numerous reasons, most states did not have the opportunity to pilot the standards (the state of Rhode Island—a notable exception—piloted early learning guidelines extensively in programs before finalizing the content of its standards).

Now that the published documents have been used in the field, it's time to systematically look at feedback from teachers using the documents to refine the content of early learning standards. Do teachers agree that the standards address the "right" content? Do the expectations in the standards seem appropriate across various communities and types of programs within the state? Is the wording clear and easy to understand and use? Unless we collect this type of feedback through focus groups, surveys, and other systematic ways, states will miss out on the benefit of teachers' experiences in refining the standards.



3. Address cultural, linguistic, and ability-level diversity

Back in 2001 when Sharon Lynn Kagan, Victoria Frelow, and I (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow 2003a, b) began studying early learning standards, we asked respondents from state departments of education, child care administrators, and AEYC [Association for the Education of Young Children] representatives from each state whether their early learning standards were inclusive. The resounding answer was "Yes! Our standards are for all children." Yet respondents couldn't tell us specifically how their standards addressed the needs of various populations of children. States have made some progress in this area, but it is still critical that we look carefully at whether standards are truly inclusive. Do they reflect the values of various

communities, particularly those of color? Do they address the needs of children with disabilities and children learning English as a second language? These are tough issues that will take much thought and discussion in the next phase of our journey with early learning standards.

Align and combine

It's also time to systematically look at how early learning standards fit within the context of early care and education. Does the content of the standards match what our curricula say we should be teaching? Are our assessments consistent with the content of the standards? Do the things we expect teachers to know and be able to do align with what we expect children to know and be able to do?



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States have begun to conduct various types of analyses to examine alignment. While there is no precise formula for alignment analyses, results from the various processes often suggest that early learning standards and other documents are not in total alignment (Kagan et al. 2006). Sometimes areas addressed in the standards are not addressed in the curriculum, or vice versa. For example, a program might be required to follow standards that call for children to learn about the jobs of community

helpers, yet the program's curriculum and learning activities do not address this topic. Occasionally the age level targeted by the standards differs from the age level targeted by assessments. Sometimes what is included in prekindergarten standards doesn't match what is included in kindergarten standards. In summary, we just can't assume that early learning standards align with other features of the early care and education system. We must systematically examine state standards to identify any areas that are misaligned.

As part of alignment analyses, we must prioritize which early learning standards are truly important. We should examine which areas we feel are most important and ensure that they are addressed in early learning standards, curricula, and assessments. Standards that include a plethora of specific expectations for children's learning and development are a testament to the developers' desire to be comprehensive but may not promote best practices. Teachers may end up playing "trivial pursuit" (focusing on the individual standards and losing sight of the big picture), feeling overburdened, and taking a mechanistic teaching approach (following the

standards as a series of topics to be covered or checked off rather than using them as a guide for meaningful learning activities). The alignment processes can be an opportunity to focus on what's really important, perhaps combining or eliminating standards that do not address developmentally significant content.

Bring everyone along

The implementation of early learning standards, in my opinion, is an equity issue. It is not fair for some children to have teachers who are knowledgeable about standards that specify what children should know and be able to do before kindergarten, while other children attend programs in which their teachers have no idea about what knowledge and abilities to promote. It is crucial that all programs and providers are part of the implementation of early learning standards. We must bring everyone along.

States have done a great job of including representatives from diverse programs and perspectives in the process of developing early learning standards. Perhaps that was the easiest part of the process. As we move to implementation, we must figure out how best to support the use of standards across settings. Currently state-funded prekindergarten programs are most commonly required to use the early learning standards, and they are the most common target for professional development on the standards (Scott-Little et al. 2006). Those who develop the standards have little say about whether other programs use the standards, although in almost every state the developers hope they do. We must move

beyond *hoping* that programs will use them. This will require

Continued collaborative leadership: The same type of collaborative leadership approach used for standards development should continue, becoming the core of cross-program outreach, training, and other supports. Now that we have early learning standards, we should not each return to our respective programs and focus only on how we will implement them in our separate corner of the world.

Coordinated outreach: States need a coordinated, cross-program plan to guide efforts to disseminate the standards, provide training, and support the use of the documents. Specific implementation strategies will vary across programs and settings; what works in state-funded school-based prekindergarten programs will not work in family child care homes. However, when we design outreach efforts, we must ensure that we are systematically thinking across programs and settings.

Infrastructure supports: To support the use of early learning standards, we must look for opportunities to capitalize on what is already in place within



the early care and education system. How can we put cross-program requirements and supports within early care and education systems into place to promote the use of early learning standards? For instance, quality rating mechanisms can require programs to address their state's early learning standards. Professional development requirements (such as renewal credits) can include stipulations that teachers attend training related to the standards. Incentives available through various sources such as child care quality initiatives might include rewards for programs that study and implement early learning standards. We must be creative, looking for opportunities within the early care and education system to support the use of standards across programs.

Listen and learn

The final step that I believe we need to take to successfully implement early learning standards is to listen carefully to the field and to learn from what we hear. In talking to colleagues from different states about their early learning standards, I hear many positive comments. The rollout of standards has led to positive developments, such as new trainings. High-quality standards promote good practice, and teachers are very receptive. Still, it's time for us to move beyond anecdotal listening to systematic listening, learning how we as a field can best navigate the new territory of standards-based education. To do so, we must listen to at least three primary groups: teachers, students and graduates of our higher education systems (and the persons who employ our graduates), and ourselves as early childhood professionals.

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Listening to teachers

Standards-based education and recent moves toward accountability for early care and education programs are a huge mind shift for the field. Teachers are being asked to be more intentional about what they are teaching, more formal about how they go about the teaching process, and more deliberate about how they document children's learning. This is new territory for the field in general and for teachers in particular. *Negotiating Standards in the Primary Classroom* by Carol Anne Wien (2004) is an excellent resource that sheds light on how teachers may respond in a standards-based system. Two research studies I have been involved with have yielded lessons related to what teachers think about new expectations for their practices. I would like to share some of the lessons I have learned from listening to teachers' thoughts on standards and accountability requirements.

In working with two graduate students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro on a qualitative study of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers' views on the use of early learning standards (Scott-Little, Choplin, & Weisner 2006), we have found that many teachers feel confused and overburdened by standards requirements. However, teachers who are provided with ongoing support from a supervisor or other administrator within their program report that standards validate their practice, are helpful in planning for children, and are useful for communicating with principals and other teachers about the importance of what they are teaching. In short, teachers feel more professional and more effective when they have support for the use of standards. Training on content, opportunities to have informal conversations with colleagues, and documents showing how the standards align or fit

with other requirements are helpful in promoting teachers' use of early learning standards. Furthermore, teachers working in programs in which the administrators value the use of standards and provide such supports report that they are more likely to use the standards.

Second, the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the South Carolina Department of Education, and faculty from two universities within the University of South Carolina system have examined teachers' attitudes toward a classroom evaluation process using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised (ECERS-R) to collect data on classroom quality. While one might expect teachers to have a negative attitude toward this type of accountability process, the survey revealed that teachers were surprisingly supportive (Brown et al. 2006). When given training and support to prepare for the evaluations, teachers reported that the process was beneficial and that their classrooms were of higher quality after the evaluations. What's more, they continued the use of the improved practices even after the process was no longer required. They indicated that informal meetings with colleagues to talk about how best to prepare for the evaluations, training on the evaluation instrument, and additional resources for their classrooms were key to helping them prepare for the evaluations.

In short, I hear teachers saying that they think these new developments in our field can be helpful and, with appropriate supports, implemented successfully. Teachers value formal training and informal opportunities to process these new requirements with colleagues as the means for improving their practice and meeting accountability requirements.

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Listening to constituents of higher education systems

Higher education programs have a particularly important role to play in helping early childhood teachers connect with standards, but not all institutions or faculty are fully engaged in the process of preparing teachers for today's classrooms. At this conference [NAEYC's National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development] and other gatherings, I have heard wonderful examples of teacher education programs embracing early learning standards and making them part of their program of study. However, as a teacher educator myself, I also realize that some higher education programs are

not even aware of the existence of early learning standards. Informal conversations with administrators who employ graduates of teacher education programs suggest there is work to be done to ensure that teacher preparation programs are effective and relevant in the current standards-based education climate. Some early care and education programs pay for

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staff to take university courses, yet still have to provide professional development because the courses do not address requirements in their programs. Some administrators implement in-service professional development systems rather than rely on higher education institutions that are slow to respond to new developments in standards, curricula requirements, and other areas.

I challenge institutions of higher education to listen to what is needed in today's world and respond in ways that prepare graduates to teach successfully. Listen to the programs in which graduates often are employed; hold focus groups with program administrators, have coffee with the prekindergarten program director in the county, see what knowledge and skills teachers need to be successful. Listen to graduates—what do they say prepared them well for teaching and what do they wish they had learned? Ask what particular areas present challenges for them “in the real world.” Are they familiar with federal and state requirements? Are they learning about early learning standards? Most important, do they know how to implement developmentally appropriate practice in settings that require more formal approaches to documenting what children have learned, and do they know how to defend their practice if faced with an administrator who does not know about or agree with principles of developmentally appropriate practice?

I know that following these suggestions may require some changes in courses and programs of study, and I also know the challenges associated with making changes in institutions of higher education. However, if we aren't responsive to the changing requirements of early care and education, we do a disservice to our students, the programs in which they will be employed, children, and ourselves.

Listening to ourselves

Finally, as early care and education professionals, we must listen to ourselves—to our own gut feelings about what is needed. Think about what bothers you most about changes in the field and then get involved to do something about them. If the federal government is driving practices in a direction that you don't agree with, become an advocate for change. For example, with the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act and recent calls for suspension of the Head Start National Reporting System, we may have opportunities to influence federal policy in a positive way. Have we as a field done all we can do to encourage federal policy makers to establish accountability requirements that lead to positive classroom practices? Do certain state-level policy developments worry you? Have you done all you can as a change agent?

I see examples of state-level policies that run counter to what many in the early care and education field believe is in the best interest of children and the programs in which they are enrolled. I also see instances of early care and education professionals mobilizing to change the policy requirements or working to implement the requirements in a way that best serves children. Finally, if you are worried about what teachers will do with standards, by the lack of representation of communities of color in your state's standards, or by any other issue related to standards implementation, get involved with teacher training and support, volunteer to help revise and refine the content of the standards, or participate in some other way. We must listen to ourselves, identify our concerns, and become engaged in a process to shape policy and practice to capitalize on the potential benefits—and minimize potential dangers—of the standards-based education movement.

By building on our heritage, we have the opportunity to demonstrate for ourselves and for the K–12 education system how standards-based education can be implemented in a developmentally appropriate way.

Conclusion

Early learning standards are not inconsistent with developmentally appropriate practice. Standards require us to be more intentional about what we teach but do not mean that we should all be teaching the same way. Standards do not equal standardization; they define *what* we should be teaching, not *how*. However, for standards to be implemented in a developmentally appropriate way that meets the needs of individual children, their use does require some very sophisticated thought on the part of the field in general and teachers in particular.

Personally, I welcome the opportunity to build on the traditions of early care and education and, at the same time, to look for ways to capitalize on what standards can offer to increase professionalism and improve quality and equity. By building on our heritage, we have the opportunity to demonstrate for ourselves and for the K–12 education system how standards-based education can be implemented in a developmentally appropriate way. The important first steps are to refine the content of early learning standards, align the standards with other elements of the early education system, make sure we bring everyone along in this effort, and listen throughout the process to make sure we are responsive to the needs of children, teachers, programs, and ourselves.

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