

Early learning standards define the desired outcomes and content of young children's education. Most states have developed such standards for children below kindergarten age.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) believe that *early learning standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive, high-quality system of services for young children*. But we caution that early learning standards support positive development and learning *only* if they:

- emphasize significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes;
- are developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes;
- are implemented and assessed in ways that support all young children's development; and
- are accompanied by strong supports for early childhood programs, professionals, and families.

These four elements are described in detail in "Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success," a joint position statement of NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (online at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/learning_standards). They are discussed briefly below.

1. Effective early learning standards emphasize significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes.

- All areas of early development and learning (including cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional) are emphasized in the standards.
- The content and desired outcomes are meaningful and important to children's current well-being and later learning.

Early Learning Standards in the States

The National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC) maintains an up-to-date record of the status of state early learning guidelines, with links to each state's website. Visit <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/good-start/elgwebsites.html>.

A survey of states' development and implementation of early learning standards (C. Scott-Little, J. Lesko, J. Martella, & P. Milburn, "Early Learning Standards: Results from a National Survey to Document Trends in State-Level Policies and Practices," *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 9(1), 2007, revealed that:

- almost every state had developed early learning standards for prekindergarten-age children;
 - 14 states had completed infant/toddler standards as of June 2006, and 8 more were in the process of developing such standards;
 - almost half of the states had some process to monitor programs' use of early learning standards; and
 - compared with the results of earlier surveys, more states have provided guidance about how to use the standards with children who have disabilities or with culturally and linguistically diverse children.
- Issues remain about the content of early learning standards, appropriate uses of the standards, and alignment with curriculum and K-12 learning standards. The paper, including the survey instrument, is online at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v9n1/little.html>.

- Early learning standards are not merely scaled-back versions of standards for older children. Instead, the standards are based on research about the processes, sequences, and long-term outcomes of early learning and development.
- Standards are linked to specific ages or developmental periods to ensure that the expectations are appropriate.
- Standards recognize and accommodate variations in children's cultures, languages, communities, and individual characteristics, abilities, and disabilities. This flexibility supports positive outcomes for *all* children.

2. Effective early learning standards are developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes.

- Relevant, valid sources of expertise are called on to help develop and review the standards.
- Multiple stakeholders are involved—community members, families, early childhood educators and special educators, and other professional groups.
- Once the standards are developed, they are shared and discussed with all stakeholders.
- Early learning standards are regularly reviewed and revised so they remain relevant and evidence-based.

3. Effective early learning standards are implemented and assessed in ways that support all young children's development.

- Curriculum, classroom practices, and teaching strategies support the standards by connecting with young children's interests and abilities to promote positive development and learning.
- Assessment instruments are clearly connected to important learning represented in the standards; are technically, developmentally, and culturally valid; and provide information that is comprehensive and useful.
- Information gained from assessments must benefit children. Assessment and accountability systems should improve practices and services and should not be used to rank, sort, or penalize young children.

4. Effective early learning standards require a foundation of support for early childhood programs, professionals, and families.

- Evidence-based program standards and adequate resources for high-quality programs create environments in which standards can be implemented effectively.
- Significant expansion of professional development is essential to help early childhood teachers and administrators implement the standards.
- Standards have the most positive effects if they are accompanied by respectful family communication and support.

Beyond Early Learning Standards: What Else Matters?

Early learning standards gain power only if they are connected to other essential ingredients of high-quality early childhood education. *Learn more about . . .*

- recommendations for early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation. See NAEYC and NAECS/SDE's 2003 position statement, online at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/cape.
- teaching strategies and other elements of developmentally appropriate practice. See C. Copple & S. Bredekamp (eds.), *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed., Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2009. Access the position statement online at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/dap.
- standards for early childhood programs and accreditation performance criteria, online at www.naeyc.org/academy/primary/standardsintro.
- standards for early childhood professional preparation programs as updated by NAEYC in 2009, online at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/ppp.
- implementation of professional standards. See M. Hyson (ed.), *Preparing Early Childhood Professionals: NAEYC's Standards for Programs*, Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2003.

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