

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/resources/position_statements/position_statement.pdf). 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

A survey of states' development of early learning standards (C. Scott-Little, S. Kagan, & V.S. Frelow, *Standards for Preschool Children's Learning and Development: Who Has Them, How Were They Developed, and How Are They Used?* Greensboro, NC: SERVE, 2003) reveals that

- almost 40 states have or are developing child-based outcomes standards;
- all but one of the states include language and literacy development in the standards;
- social-emotional development and "approaches to learning" are the areas least commonly included in standards; and
- the documents give little guidance about how the standards can be adapted for children with disabilities or for culturally and linguistically diverse children.

The complete survey is online at www.serve.org/_downloads/full2print.doc.

- 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. Access the document online at www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/positions_intro.asp.
- recommended teaching strategies and other elements of developmentally appropriate practice. See S. Bredekamp & C. Copple, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, rev. ed., Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1997. Access the document online at http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psdap98.pdf.
- standards for early childhood programs and accreditation performance criteria. Go to www.naeyc.org/accreditation/nextera.asp.
- standards for professional preparation of early childhood educators. See M. Hyson, *Early Childhood Professional Preparation: NAEYC's Standards for Programs*, Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2003. The professional standards document also is online at http://www.naeyc.org/profdev/prev_review/prev_2001.asp.

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