

EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

A Joint Position Statement of

**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)***

Approved November 19, 2002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This position statement is endorsed by the Council of Chief State
School Officers and the American Academy of Pediatrics**

**The concepts in this position statement are supported by
the National Association of Elementary School Principals**

Introduction

Early childhood education has become part of a standards-based environment. More than 25 states have standards¹ describing desired results, outcomes, or learning expectations for children below kindergarten age; Head Start has developed a Child Outcomes Framework; and national organizations have developed content standards in areas such as early literacy and mathematics. This movement raises significant educational, ethical, developmental, programmatic, assessment, and policy issues. Rather than writing a new set of standards, in this position statement NAEYC and NAECS/SDE address those issues, describing four features that are essential if early learning standards are to be developmentally effective. The recommendations in this position statement are most relevant to young children of preschool or prekindergarten age, with and without disabilities, in group settings including state prekindergarten programs, community child care, family child care, and Head Start. However, the recommendations can guide the development and implementation of standards for younger and older children as well.

The Position

The first years of life are critical for later outcomes. Young children have an innate desire to learn. That desire can be supported or undermined by early experiences. High-quality early childhood education can promote intellectual, language, physical, social, and emotional development, creating school readiness and building a foundation for later academic and social competence. By defining the desired content and outcomes of young children's education, early learning standards can lead to greater opportunities for positive development and learning in these early years. The National

* This position is elaborated in the full version of the joint statement at www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/earlylearn.pdf

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) take the position that early learning standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive, high-quality system of services for young children, contributing to young children's educational experiences and to their future success. But these results can be achieved only if early learning standards (1) emphasize significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes; (2) are developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes; (3) use implementation and assessment strategies that are ethical and appropriate for young children; and (4) are accompanied by strong supports for early childhood programs, professionals, and families.

Because of the educational and developmental risks for vulnerable young children if standards are not well developed and implemented, the recommendations in this position statement are embedded in and refer to the principles set forth in NAEYC's code of ethical conduct. According to this code, early childhood professionals and others affecting young children's education must promote those practices that benefit young children, and they must refuse to participate in educational practices that harm young children. Thus, a test of the value of any standards effort is whether it promotes educationally and developmentally positive outcomes and whether it avoids penalizing or excluding children from needed services and supports.

Essential Features

A developmentally effective system of early learning standards must include four essential features:

1. Effective Early Learning Standards Emphasize Significant, Developmentally Appropriate Content and Outcomes

- Effective early learning standards give emphasis to **all domains** of early development and learning.
- The content and desired outcomes of effective early learning standards are **meaningful and important** to children's current well-being and later learning.
- Rather than relying on simplifications of standards for older children, the content and desired outcomes of effective early learning standards are **based on research about** the processes, sequences, and long-term consequences of **early learning and development**.
- Effective early learning standards create **appropriate expectations** by linking content and desired outcomes to specific ages or developmental periods.
- The content of effective early learning standards, and expectations for children's mastery of the standards, must **accommodate variations**—community, cultural, linguistic, and individual—that best support positive outcomes. To do so, early learning standards must encompass the widest possible range of children's life situations and experiences, including disabilities.

2. Effective Early Learning Standards Are Developed and Reviewed Through Informed, Inclusive Processes

- The process of developing and reviewing early learning standards relies on relevant, valid **sources of expertise**.

- The process of developing and reviewing early learning standards involves **multiple stakeholders**. Stakeholders may include community members, families, early childhood educators and special educators, and other professional groups. In all cases, those with specific expertise in early development and learning must be involved.
- Once early learning standards have been developed, standards developers and relevant professional associations ensure that standards are shared with all stakeholders, creating multiple opportunities for **discussion and exchange**.
- Early learning standards remain relevant and research based by using a systematic, interactive process for regular **review and revision**.

3. Early Learning Standards Gain Their Effectiveness Through Implementation and Assessment Practices That Support All Children's Development in Ethical, Appropriate Ways

- Effective early learning standards require equally effective **curriculum, classroom practices, and teaching strategies** that connect with young children's interests and abilities, and that promote positive development and learning.
- **Tools to assess young children's progress** must be clearly connected to important learning represented in the standards; must be technically, developmentally, and culturally valid; and must yield comprehensive, useful information.
- Information gained from **assessments** of young children's progress with respect to standards must be **used to benefit children**. Assessment and accountability systems should be used to 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

- Research-based standards for early childhood **program quality, and adequate resources** for high-quality programs, build environments where standards can be implemented effectively.
- Significant expansion of **professional development** is essential if all early childhood teachers and administrators are to gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to implement early learning standards.
- Early learning standards have the most positive effects if **families**—key partners in young children's learning—are provided with respectful communication and support.

¹ NCRESST defines *standards* as “the broadest of a family of terms referring to expectations for student learning.” This position statement uses the term *early learning standards* to describe expectations for the learning and development of *young* children. Narrower terms included in standards and early learning standards are *content standards* (“summary descriptions of what it is that students should know and/or be able to do within a particular discipline” [McREL]); *benchmarks* (“specific description of knowledge or skill that students should acquire by a particular point in their schooling” [McREL]—usually tied to a grade or age level); *performance standards* (“describes levels of student performance in respect to the knowledge or skill described in a single benchmark or a set of closely related benchmarks” [McREL]). Important, related standards that are not included in this position statement’s definition of early learning standards are *program standards*—expectations for the characteristics or quality of schools, child care centers, and other educational settings. It should be noted that Head Start uses the term *Performance Standards* in a way that is closer to the definition of program standards, describing expectations for the functioning of a Head Start program and not the accomplishments of children in the program. A working group of representatives from NAEYC, CCSO, ERIC, and other groups is developing a more complete glossary of terms related to standards, assessment, and accountability.