

Early Learning Standards: Changing the Parlance and Practice of Early Childhood Education?

Those in the field of early childhood education have traditionally been leery of the notion of early learning standards. Many states, however, have adopted or are in the process of adopting such standards. Ms. Kagan and Ms. Scott-Little explore the effects of this movement and note the critical issues that remain to be addressed.

BY SHARON L. KAGAN AND CATHERINE SCOTT-LITTLE



PERHAPS more than any other formulation, the question "What should students know and be able to do?" has shaped both the parlance and practice of education over the past decade. Ushering in an era of standards and accountability, this widely intoned question has precipitated the most massive reform American education has experienced, with no part of the education system, including early childhood education, exempt. Our purpose here is to examine how this focus has affected young children — to address specifically the prevalence of standards, their nature, and their use as they relate to children who are just entering our schools.

To be fair, the issue of learning standards for young children did not come out of nowhere. Those who concentrate their efforts on young children have grappled with the correlates of "ready children" (and ready schools and communities). Decades of work by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) yielded detailed

descriptions of the domains of children's early learning and development, descriptions of ready schools, and outlines of appropriate assessment.¹ These documents and countless others, while not designed as early learning standards per se, have paved the intellectual way for the development of thoughtful early learning standards. Fueled by such work, by gubernatorial and legislative pressure, and by a strong belief in the power of standards to improve instruction and increase accountability, a movement toward early learning standards is well under way. How and why this movement emerged, what it looks like, and what challenges it faces are also our subjects here.

HOW AND WHY EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS EMERGED

Any discussion of early learning standards must begin by acknowledging a deep-seated and long-standing skepticism toward learning standards among the early childhood community. While the field has long had program standards (e.g., Head Start's performance standards) and while it has welcomed general descriptions of de-

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velopmental domains, specifications of learning or outcomes that could be attached to high-stakes assessments

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have been resoundingly rejected.² So deep has been the concern that major professional groups have promulgated position statements on inappropriate standards and assessment practices.³

There have been many legitimate reasons for these positions. First, years of scholarship have indicated that young children's development is anything but "standardized." Development during the preschool years unfolds unevenly, is highly individualized, and is characterized by growth spurts, developmental lags, and irregularity across developmental domains. Although normal and expected, such variation makes the development of standards and assessment not only difficult but, some would argue, unwise.

Second, children's development is strongly affected by what they experience in the world — interactions with their parents, exposure to literacy-rich environments, and experiences in preschools. Because these experiences vary widely, many question the utility, viability, and equity of standard expectations for young children, particularly if those standards are used

to assess the youngsters and perhaps screen them out of services for which they are labeled "unready."

Finally, there is widespread concern regarding the content of standards. Some fear that they will be more academic than developmental in orientation; others are concerned that the standards might favor certain domains and, therefore, slant the very fiber of early education.

Given this formidable and largely negative backdrop, how did standards for early learning develop? Because we were curious about this, we asked key informants in all 50 states to answer this and a series of other questions about early learning standards.⁴ Drawing from interviews with early childhood specialists in state departments of education and others, as well as an examination of the early learning standards documents developed by the states, our study sought to provide insight into the nature of the standards, how they were developed, and how they are being used.

We learned that, despite its historical distrust of the validity and utility of standards for early learning, the field of early childhood education has not escaped the pressures and demands for standards that have been placed on all aspects of public education. Because many states have begun to invest in early childhood services, state policy makers want to know what benefits their investments are yielding, so they are requesting standards and accountability reports for prekindergarten.

Several developments at the federal level have provided further impetus for states to develop early learning standards. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which requires states to have content and stu-

dent achievement standards in the subjects of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science for grades 3 through 12, exerted a heavy influence on the states and focused their attention on defining expectations for what children should learn before they enter kindergarten. The federal government has gone a step further and defined expected outcomes for Head Start children, and the Good Start, Grow Smart initiative calls for states to plan for the development of "voluntary early learning guidelines." So widespread is the early learning standards movement that the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in the State Departments of Education have issued a joint position statement to guide those who are developing standards.¹ Clearly, standards have moved front and center for early educators.

ALL ABOUT EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS

What are they? Early learning standards specify what young children should know and be able to do. Typically, they are designed to apply to children from ages 3 to 5 years old, although six states have developed standards to articulate expectations for the end of prekindergarten or beginning of kindergarten, and four states have developed early learning standards that include infants and toddlers. Sometimes the standards cover all domains of development and learning, although this varies widely. Often the standards are stand-alone documents, although sometimes they are accompanied by curricula, assessment instruments, or activity guides. Often they are called standards, although there is certainly great variety in the nomenclature used. Examples of oth-

er names for early learning standards include benchmarks, learning guidelines, building blocks, and frameworks. Indeed, the landscape of early learning standards in the United States today may be best characterized as one of great variation.

Who has them? Despite this variation, our study found that as of 2002, 27 states had developed documents that articulated expectations for young children's learning and development. Two of the states — Maine and Washington — had two separate sets of standards for children prior to kindergarten entry, so that our analysis of early learning standards was based on 29 sets of standards. (See Table 1 for a summary of the status of early learning standards in all 50 states.) Nineteen states had standards that were officially adopted or endorsed by a governing body or governmental agency. Eight states had developed and published standards but not officially adopted or endorsed them at

the time of our interviews. In addition, 12 states and the District of Columbia indicated that there was a process in place to develop standards, and 11 states indicated that they did not have standards and were not in the process of developing them. This last group offered a variety of reasons for not adopting standards. Their rationales were either practical (e.g., the state was already involved in many other early childhood initiatives), political (e.g., the state favored local control), or philosophical (e.g., the perceived potential harm to young children outweighed the potential benefits).

In states where standards exist, their development is fairly recent. Eighteen of the 29 sets of standards (recall that two states had two sets of standards) had been developed since 2000, with just a few pioneer states (Michigan, Texas, Vermont, and Washington) having early learning standards in place prior to 1996. Moreover, states have

TABLE 1.
Status of Early Learning Standards in States as of May 2002

Officially Adopted Standards	Not Officially Adopted Standards	Standards In Process	No Standards
Arkansas	California	Arizona†	Alabama
Connecticut	Colorado*	Delaware‡	Alaska
Florida	Louisiana	Hawaii‡	Idaho
Georgia†	Missouri*	Indiana‡	Iowa
Illinois	Ohio**	Kentucky‡	Kansas
Maine*†	Oklahoma	Nevada	Montana
Maryland	Pennsylvania	North Carolina	Nebraska
Massachusetts†	Rhode Island	Oregon	New Hampshire
Michigan		Tennessee	North Dakota
Minnesota		Virginia‡	South Dakota
Mississippi		Washington, D.C.	West Virginia
New Jersey**		Wisconsin	
New Mexico		Wyoming‡	
New York			
South Carolina*†			
Texas			
Utah†			
Vermont†			
Washington†			

*Standards addressing limited number of developmental/subject areas, with standards addressing additional developmental/subject areas in process.

**Current standards under revision.

†Two sets of standards in place or being developed.

‡Has completed and published standards since May 2002.

not stopped their work on standards and remain actively engaged in the processes of development and revision. Some states are developing standards for different age groups (e.g., infants and toddlers). Some — New Jersey, Ohio, and Utah — are revising existing standards. And some are broadening the domains in which they have standards. For example, South Carolina had prekindergarten standards in mathematics but was engaged in developing standards in language arts, science, fine arts, and social studies.

What do the standards look like? Our data indicate that the states have addressed a variety of developmental domains in their early learning standards. All states with standards, except South Carolina and Missouri, had developed standards that included more than one domain.

Seven states had standards that addressed the five domains identified by the NEGP: physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language and literacy, and cognition and general knowledge.⁶ The most commonly addressed domain was language and literacy, which was included in all but one of the documents. The domain of cognition and general knowledge was also widely included in the standards, with 27 of the 29 sets having standards in this area. Approaches toward learning was the least commonly included domain, with only seven states addressing this domain. The social and emotional domain was addressed by 19 sets of standards. It is interesting that several states had developed standards for subjects that have not traditionally been addressed in early care and education, such as technology, foreign languages, and

civic and social responsibility.

Continuity between preschool and primary grades has long been considered essential to children's development. Thus the relationship be-

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tween early learning standards for preschoolers and K-12 standards for older children is a critical element to which all states attended. Each of the respondents indicated that the early learning standards in his or her state were in some way linked to the state's K-12 standards. Examination of the documents, however, revealed varying degrees of linkage, ranging from early learning standards that were actually incorporated into the K-12 standards to two sets of standards that simply used a similar format. We classified 15 sets of standards as "directly linked" to a state's K-12 standards, seven sets as "moderately linked," and another seven sets as "minimally linked." Linkage in some states appears to be stronger in rhetoric than in reality.

Similarly, our analysis indicated that states were very concerned with accommodating cultural, linguistic, and community differences, but few

had developed strategies to address precisely how the standards should be used with children from different circumstances. Each of the respondents indicated that the standards were designed to apply to all children, including children from diverse backgrounds and children with disabilities. And a few states have provided guidance on how to use the standards with diverse populations. But only Texas provided specific guidance on how to use the standards with English-language learners. Several states indicated that they intended to translate the standards into other languages.

Who uses them? States vary in who makes use of the standards and in the degree to which such use is required. Eight states — Connecticut, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Washington

— have developed voluntary standards that they hope will be used in a variety of programs across the state. Taking the form of resources or guides, the standards are made available to a variety of providers of early care and education. These standards are regarded as a tool to help adults know what skills are important to children's development and what types of learning experiences might develop the skills.

The remaining sets of early learning standards have been developed for use in specific, publicly funded preschool programs, such as school readiness programs. States varied in the intensity of their mandates for the use of standards. Descriptions of use included "mandated," "required," "suggested," and "expected." In some cases, the nomenclature was quite precise, leaving no question regarding the intended use. In other cases, however, the language was imprecise, leaving

much judgment to local providers. Interestingly, in the states that mandated use in the publicly funded programs, there was also a hope that the standards would be used voluntarily by other early childhood programs, and so the standards documents were typically made available to other programs within the state.

How are they used? One of the major misgivings of the early childhood community with regard to standards relates to their potential misuse. Our data indicate that, in all cases, the standards were developed to improve instruction. The hope was that specifying expectations for children's development would enable teachers to be more purposeful in their teaching and would make children's preschool experiences more productive. Respondents to our survey also indicated that their states intended to use the standards to improve informal classroom assessments, to improve the skills and abilities with which children enter school, and to improve the overall quality of the early childhood program.

The states varied in how they planned to use the standards to improve instruction. Some focused on efforts to hold programs accountable for implementation of the standards. Two states — Illinois and Louisiana — intended to hold programs accountable for aligning their curricula with the standards. Four states — California, Maine, New Mexico, and Washington (in its Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program [ECEAP]) — planned to use the standards as the basis for a data collection system to determine whether children in the programs are making progress on the skills and characteristics articulated in the standards. Therefore, these programs will be evaluated according to the performance of children. Respondents from oth-

er states indicated that, although their state was not currently holding programs accountable for using the standards by collecting data on child outcomes, it was possible that such systems would be developed in the future.

Other states expressed interest in using standards as a platform for preservice and inservice education. To this end, states are aware that teachers must be given opportunities to understand how to implement a standards-based approach to the curriculum, how to use the data to align their plans with the needs of students, and how to interpret the data for parents. Some good examples exist. Higher education programs in Arkansas, Connecticut, Michigan, and New Jersey are using their states' early learning standards as part of their teacher preparation programs. Arkansas, Colorado, and Pennsylvania have each used a "train the trainer" model to provide support for programs that use their standards. Individuals receive train-

ing on the standards and are then expected to train local program staff. In Colorado, the early learning standards document is disseminated only to programs and to individuals who have completed training led by someone who has completed the state's train-the-trainer program. New Mexico and Rhode Island are using community-based agencies to provide training; Connecticut has established demonstration programs to show how the early learning standards can be used. All of these efforts, however, are exceptions to the rule. For the most part, states are merely making their standards available on their websites or through mass mailings and providing relatively limited training.

CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR THE EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS MOVEMENT

In most major endeavors designed to improve the condition of young children, there can be tremendous

benefits. But there are also some genuine, however unintended, pitfalls. To maximize the former and minimize the latter, we need to address the challenges head-on.

Challenges related to young children. Although respondents in every state indicated that their early learning standards would not be used to make high-stakes decisions about individual children, the possibility that a child's progress on skills and abilities articulated in the standards might be used to make placement decisions or to determine whether a child would go to kindergarten remains worrisome. To date, few states have instituted any safeguards against such a use of standards, so the concerns raised by the early childhood community regarding the misuse of standards persist.

Equally problematic, efforts to date have not dealt effectively with children with special circumstances — children with disabilities, children for whom English is not the primary language, and children with other experiences or characteristics associated with poor performance in school. While, as noted earlier, states have developed early learning standards with the aim of applying them to all children, specific guidance on how the standards should be applied in the case of children with special circumstances was noticeably absent from the interview responses and standards documents.

Challenges related to content. While many states did address all developmental dimensions in their standards, many did not. Conspicuous by their frequent absence were the domains of approaches toward learning and social and emotional development. There may be a number of reasons. First, these domains may simply not

have been priorities for the states, or the states may have intended to add them at a later date. Second, there may be less emphasis in these areas because the states have a tendency to align their early learning standards with those of K-12 education, which

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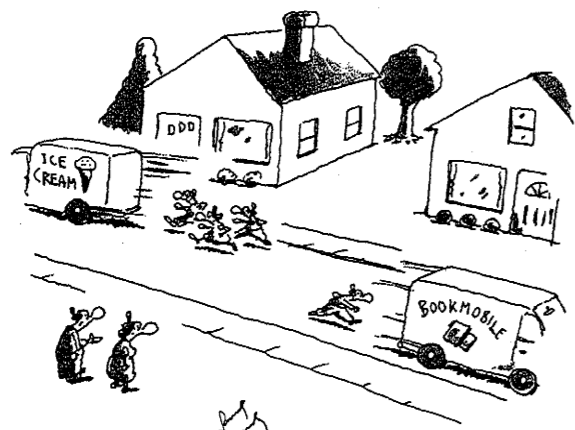
generally focus less intensely on these domains. Finally, these domains may have been given less attention because they are more difficult to operationalize.

No matter the reason, the trend is disturbing. In the comprehensive review of early childhood research, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine present compelling evidence that these domains are inextricably related to children's later development and success in school. The report goes on to note that "establishing relationships is the central task of the early childhood years." Given the potential for driving curricula through the use of standards, it stands to reason that states should be encouraged to address all the domains of child development.

Challenges related to intentions. Standards are being developed with one set of stated intentions, notably the improvement of instruction. However, our respondents indicated that they foresaw the possibility that the data collected from the standards might someday be used for accountability purposes. This is problematic on several grounds. First, it is ethically inappropriate to embark on standards development and implementation with one set of aims and subsequently use the standards for another purpose. It is also problematic operationally because the standards have been constructed with instructional improvement, not accountability, in mind. If the standards are to be used for accountability, there are procedures that should be used to reduce the burden on the children, to minimize costs, to save time, and to increase reliability. Neglecting to use these procedures compromises the purpose for which the standards were developed.

Moreover, if standards are designed to promote improved instruction, then more, and more sophisticated, professional development models need to be in place to support this intention. Today, a limited number of states are investing in professional development to accompany the standards, but more work is needed on issues related to observation and recording strategies, sequencing of activities, using assessment results to plan curriculum interventions, and using the assessments to report to parents.

Challenges related to alignment. Standards do not exist in a vacuum. They should be horizontally aligned with curriculum and with assessments that pertain to children of one age, and they should be vertically aligned so that continuity exists as children move



"I've been thinking, honey. Maybe we put too much emphasis on Ethan's academic performance."

from prekindergarten to kindergarten. While horizontal alignment within the early childhood field is the subject of a separate study currently in progress, work to date suggests that only a few states have undertaken the serious challenges associated with ensuring that the standards are not stand-alone documents but rather serve as a basis for pedagogical, curricular, and assessment reform within any given age group. Such horizontal alignment should be the goal. Yet given the fragmentation that characterizes early childhood education, it will not be easy to achieve. Different preschool programs have different curricula, assessments, and standards.

On the surface, because of their reported connections to K-12 standards, standards for early learning appear to be a viable way of addressing the vertical alignment of prekindergarten and kindergarten. However, as noted above, states varied in the nature and intensity of their alignment of early learning and K-12 standards. Whatever the intensity, the connection of early learning with K-12 standards raises serious issues. Are the early learning standards thought of as merely a downward extension of K-12 standards? Or are early learning standards taking into consideration the unique developmental orientations of preschoolers? Could early learning standards be extended upward to exert influence on K-12 standards? Can we reconcile a developmental orientation with one that is primarily academic? Will the establishment of early learning standards undermine the commitment of early educators to program components that address health, social services, and parent engagement? In other words, historic ambivalences and diverse interpretations are buried under labels like "alignment" and "linkage," which suggests that the implementation of

standards deserves at least as much attention and investment as their development.

Challenges related to pedagogy. Complicated questions in the abstract, these issues are even more complex in reality. At first blush, such alignment and linkages seem necessary and prudent. Yet, upon further examination, the standards/assessment/curriculum triad raises lingering questions about the very nature of early childhood pedagogy. For example, what is the appropriate balance between teacher intentionality and child initiation? What is the nature of effective observation in early childhood classrooms? What is the appropriate content of early childhood curricula? Long unanswered, these questions need serious attention before early childhood education can be regarded as the precursor to primary education.

Couple these ambiguities with the challenges of implementing any reform, and the magnitude of the impact of early learning standards becomes even more apparent. Using standards that are linked to pedagogy potentially represents a massive change for frontline staff members. To move forward, there must be a greater understanding of the attitudinal issues that need to be addressed to ensure the implementation of the standards. We also need to understand effective modes of technical support and assistance. Finally, and not inconsequentially, we need to be honest about the capacity of the states and the higher education institutions to deliver this kind of support.

Challenges related to programs and the early childhood system. Currently, the field of early childhood education is at a critical juncture. While many continue to advocate the ongoing proliferation of individual programs as a means of increasing children's access to services, others also

see that such an approach to policy has yielded a fragmented, ineffective delivery system. Therefore, they have come to advocate for a more systematic approach to the construction of early childhood policy.

The early learning standards movement lands squarely in the middle of the programs-versus-system debate and can potentially serve as a vehicle to resolve it. Early learning standards, if applied across programs, could be used as the basis for achieving positive developmental outcomes for children, irrespective of the program they are attending. The standards could be used as the basis for professional education programs that prepare personnel for many programs.

However, the standards seem to be doing the opposite today. Consider the following. If one believes that all the ages between birth and 5 are critical to child development, then standards should be developed along a continuum that embraces all ages within that span, with appropriate consideration for the unique characteristics of development at each age. To date, we have witnessed a focus on the development of standards for 3- to 5-year-olds or for those who are nearing entry into the public schools. Thus the standards have greater potential to be used as "gatekeepers" for kindergarten than as the basis for developmental pedagogy and instruction. Looking on the positive side, some states are developing standards for infants and toddlers, taking their special needs into consideration. But even these efforts will need to be carefully linked to the prekindergarten standards. A clear challenge for the field is how to develop early learning standards that will promote developmental and organizational continuity.

A second example of the nonsystemic use of standards can be seen in

their application. As we noted above, some states require the use of standards in certain programs and merely recommend their use in others, despite the fact that the programs serve children of the same age. This strategy, which is characteristic of the programmatic approach, means that children in one program (typically publicly funded) may have access to the potential benefits of standards, while children in another program next door will not. If the purpose of standards is to accelerate young children's positive learning outcomes, why would their use be limited to only some programs and children and not others?

The rationale proffered for this dual strategy is that the state can impose requirements only on programs that it funds. And here the unique history of early childhood education reappears and shapes the use of standards. Because, unlike K-12 education, early childhood education is neither compulsory nor fully publicly funded, the legality of imposing requirements on all programs is questioned. But other questions follow from this distinction between public and private funding. How can states foster equitable child outcomes when they allow inequitable program responsibility? How can equity for children and integrity for the early childhood system be advanced? Arguably, the presence of early learning standards for only some programs could exacerbate the divide that already exists between publicly funded and private early education programs.

A related challenge, also deeply rooted in the history of early childhood education, is the development of multiple sets of standards within a state. In many states, programs promulgate their own standards in addition to those that the state has developed. Throughout the nation, for

example, Head Start now requires the use of its child outcomes framework within its programs. These programs, however, rest within states and often use state funds to support some of their activities. The problem for programs, then, is to determine which set of standards to meet — those promulgated by the state or those advanced by programs such as Head Start. The situation is made still more complex when funding or other benefits are tied to the use of the standards.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, we have restricted our discussion to the practice and the parlance associated with the development and implementation of early learning standards. More deeply and more accurately, however, the movement for early learning standards raises critical questions that those concerned about the care and education of America's young children must address. Always tossed between health and human services and education, between the unstructured nature of early education and the structure of public education, early childhood education is at a pivotal point. The field is in transition, as it seeks to retain

its special focus while still aligning with the more formal education system.

Nothing highlights the state of early childhood education and the importance of the challenges it faces more poignantly than the issue of early learning standards. These standards are a true litmus test of the future direction of the field. While K-12 education, with its emphasis on standards and professionalization and with its stable funding, is increasingly pointing the way for early childhood education, early educators have no wish to sacrifice the traditional strengths of early care and education. The early learning standards movement must be judged, therefore, not only for its immediate consequences, but also with an eye toward its future impact on the field.

1. Sharon L. Kagan, Evelyn Moore, and Sue Bredekamp, *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, Goal 1 Technical Planning Group, 1995); and Lorrie Shepard, Sharon L. Kagan, and Emily Wurtz, *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, 1998).

2. Samuel J. Meisels, "High-Stakes Testing in Kindergarten," *Educational Leadership*, April 1989, pp. 16-22; Lorrie A. Shepard, "The Challenges

