

# The Common Core State Standards: Caution and Opportunity for Early Childhood Education



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RESEARCH



POLICY

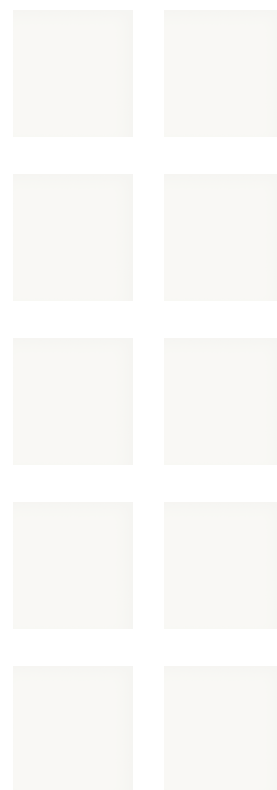


PRACTICE





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As of fall 2012, 45 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics. The development and adoption of these standards has drawn a great deal of debate in both the K-12 and early education fields. As states adopting the Core standards are moving towards implementation, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed this paper to provide a frame for this ongoing dialogue. This frame is built around the four central themes articulated in NAEYC's position statement on early learning standards. These themes have guided the development and implementation of learning standards in early childhood, and are used here to underscore the potential contributions that that early childhood field can continue to make in implementing learning standards for children as they enter school. In addition to providing a framework for dialogue, this paper encourages dialogue so that early childhood education can work in concert with K-12 education to ensure that learning standards for young children, before they enter school and as they progress through the early elementary years, are consistent with our accumulated knowledge and experience as a field. The paper closes with a summary of activities being undertaken by NAEYC and actions that may be taken by early educators to meet this goal.

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An earlier draft of this paper was reviewed by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek (Temple University), Sam Meisels (Erikson Institute), Ben Russell (Boston Public Schools), Jason Sachs (Boston Public Schools), and Kathy Thornburg (University of Missouri). Their extensive comments and questions greatly improved the quality of this paper. However, the content of this paper is solely the responsibility of NAEYC.



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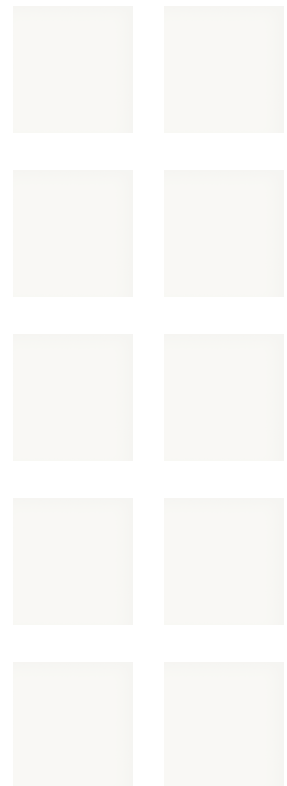


**T**he Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in partnership with Achieve. According to the CCSS Initiative website (<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>), the goal of the initiative is to:

provide teachers and parents with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn. Consistent standards will provide appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live...These standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K–12 education careers. (n.p.)

While the focus of the initiative is to ensure college and career readiness, the application of the project reaches across the K–12 spectrum.

The Common Core State Standards (commonly referred to as the “Common Core”) have begun to dominate the landscape in K–12 education and have attracted commentary from the early childhood education community as well. As states move toward implementation, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is launching an effort to consider both the concerns and opportunities being raised within the field. This paper outlines the reasons for NAEYC’s interest in the Common Core, and it attempts to provide a framework for the early education field to consider not only the aspects of the Common Core that may pose threats to early childhood education, but also those aspects that may provide early childhood education with the opportunity to exert its





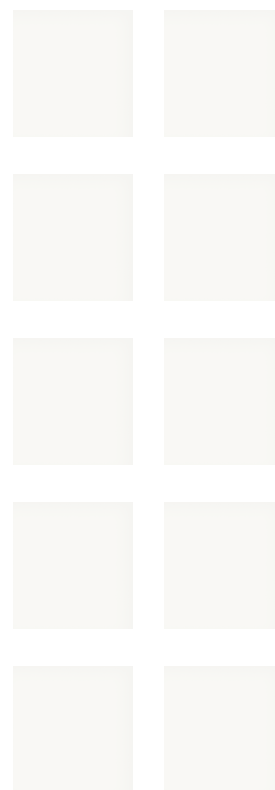
collected research and experience upward into K–12 education. NAEYC maintains that the establishment of clear, attainable learning goals is critical in ensuring that all children receive the highest quality of educational experiences.

## FOCUSING ON THE COMMON CORE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

**T**he Common Core is of particular interest to NAEYC for two reasons.<sup>1</sup> First, the application of the Common Core to K–3 overlaps with NAEYC’s interest in the latter years of early childhood during which children enter school and progress through the early elementary grades. For these children, the development and implementation of the Common Core will have a direct and immediate impact. Second, there is the potential for the Common Core to impact programs for young children prior to kindergarten entry. Together, these two systems capture the early years of children’s continuum of learning. Along this continuum there may be positive effects (e.g., providing consistent learning benchmarks for all children across the country) as well as negative effects (e.g., the potential for pressure on early childhood programs to focus more on English language arts and mathematics). Therefore, NAEYC is launching an effort to identify potential advantages and highlight potential dangers to early childhood education as the Common Core moves into implementation.

In April 2010, NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) issued a joint statement to coincide with the announcement of the CCSS Initiative.<sup>2</sup> While NAEYC applauded the launch of the Common Core and the inclusion of standards for kindergarten through third grade, several concerns and cautions were also noted. At the time, these concerns were primarily focused on the restricted range of domains included in the initial launch of the Common Core, which focused exclusively on language arts and mathematics (though the potential for standards in other academic areas was also indicated). In noting the limited range of attention, the statement issued by NAEYC and NAECS/SDE “expressed concern...that effort on only two content domains could result in the unintended consequence of narrowing curriculum and instructional practice to the detriment of student learning.” Of particular concern was the absence of social and emotional development and approaches to learning, although the lack of attention to the whole child was generally noted.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative has received criticism on these and a number of philosophical, political, and practical grounds. It is not the purpose here to revisit these. Instead, NAEYC recognizes that nearly all states (46 as of September 25, 2012) have committed to adopting the Common Core, so our focus is on ensuring that the implementation of the Common Core, especially its continued development, expansion, and evaluation, moves to address the





concerns of the NAEYC membership and the early childhood education field.

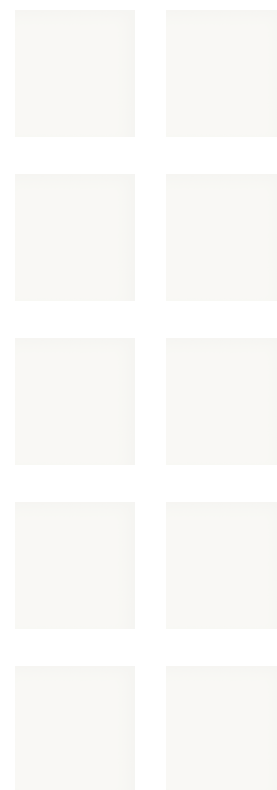
As states have adopted the Common Core, there has been growing discussion within the early childhood community about the “unintended consequences” noted in NAEYC’s initial response to the Common Core. These consequences include concerns about the allocation of time and resources to support the content of the Common Core relative to areas not included in these standards, and about the means by which schools will assess children’s progress in meeting the standards.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Common Core may also provide opportunities for the early childhood community to add to the discourse about educational reform and work to ensure that research and practical experience within the early childhood education field can, and should, contribute to the shape of the Common Core during the early years of schooling. The implementation of the Common Core provides a unique opportunity for the early childhood education field to be “present and vocal,” as Ryan and Goffin (2008) encourage, not just within early childhood education but also in the broader education system (see also Hyun 2003), through its promotion of the use of evidence-based best practices at all levels of education. At the same time, though, as Halpern (forthcoming) notes, more closely connecting early childhood education with traditional K–12 educational practices also poses threats to the central ideas in early education as the K–12 system exerts a downward pressure of increased academic focus and more narrowed instructional approaches. This threat also provides an opportunity, however, for early education to exert “upward pressure” toward the K–12 system by advocating for practices successfully used in early childhood education to be adopted into the K–12 space. This, of course, means advocating for the use of developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003), and it also allows for the opportunity to underscore the fundamental features of early childhood education, including the focus on the whole child and consideration of the larger social and cultural world in which the child lives.

## THE ROLE OF LEARNING STANDARDS IN EDUCATION

**N**AEYC has long promoted excellence in early childhood education for all young children from birth through age 8. Through its accreditation systems for programs serving young children and programs preparing teachers of young children, NAEYC has advanced a goal of equity in opportunity for all children to reduce or eliminate disparities in learning and educational outcomes. The Common Core initiative was launched to meet a similar goal—to ensure that *all* children are prepared for success in college at the completion of their K–12 education.

There is a long history of education reform in the United States that addresses disparities in achievement through the development of standards that, if universally applied, should produce equity in opportunities to learn (e.g., Harris & Herrington 2006). However, some experts question the effect





of variations in standards—and variations in how students’ proficiencies are identified through assessment—on explanations of students’ achievement (e.g., Reed 2009). Likewise, changes in standards and their assessment alone may not be adequate interventions to improve performance and close achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond 1994). Addressing uneven standards may set the stage for common expectations, but placing too much responsibility on uneven curriculum standards obscures disparities in other critical areas, including funding allocations for materials, opportunities to learn, and wide variation in teacher and school quality (e.g., Akiba, LeTendre, & Scribner 2007; Darling-Hammond 2006). Indeed, in the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2002) position statement concerning early learning standards, the content of the standards is considered to be only one piece of the larger early education system, which must be coupled with providing necessary supports to teachers (in training and ongoing learning opportunities, as well as developmentally appropriate curriculum materials) and valid assessment systems aligned to the standards to ensure that expectations for children’s learning are developmentally appropriate.

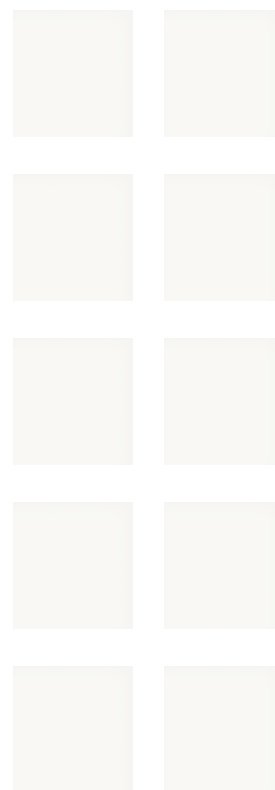
NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2002) support standards for young children, and the benefits of these standards extend into the early elementary years and beyond. For example, NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (2002, p. 4) note, “Clear, research based expectations for the content and desired results of early learning experiences can help focus curriculum and instruction, aiding teachers and families in providing appropriate, educationally beneficial opportunities for all children.” However, the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE statement articulates four conditions under which early learning standards should be developed and implemented. Comparing these conditions against the development and implementation of the Common Core may provide avenues for early education and K–12 education systems to become more closely aligned in purpose. Each of these four conditions is briefly summarized and discussed in connection with the Common Core in the sections that follow.

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### **1. Early learning standards should emphasize significant developmentally appropriate content and outcomes.**

The initial set of Common Core standards speaks to young children’s development in English language arts and mathematics, as previously noted. While there is movement toward common standards in other cognitive or academic domains (e.g., science, see <http://www.nextgenscience.org/>), there has not yet been systematic consideration given to critical domains outside of these areas. This is at odds with the importance given to six domains of child development included as part of the kindergarten entry assessments (KEAs) called for by the Race to the Top and Early Learning Challenge, as well as the early childhood education focus on the whole child.

Even within the limited domains covered by the Common Core, there is room to legitimately question the degree to which the standards are developmentally





appropriate. While there may be a research basis for their content, critical content and age validation of the Common Core has yet to be realized. Elements of the Common Core may represent changes in state standards, for example an increased focus on nonfiction text in earlier grades, the impact of which has yet to be fully explored. It is worth noting, as well, that although (at the time of this writing) the Common Core excludes domains other than English language arts and mathematics, their absence in the Common Core does not preclude states (or districts) from maintaining or adopting standards in other developmental areas, individually or in collaboration. However, these standards will not likely be common across states, which suggests that they will be variable both in their content and in the degree to which they align with the content in the Common Core. These standards should also be considered for their appropriateness.

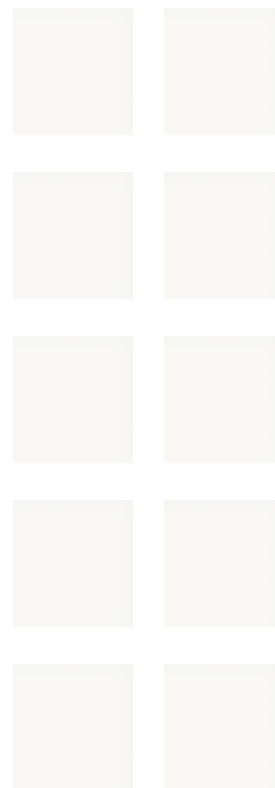
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## 2. Early learning standards are developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes.

The Common Core standards were developed at a remarkably fast pace that some early childhood professionals have criticized. The process of developing early learning standards calls upon multiple stakeholders with possibly differing points of view to consider the content of standards not only at the time of their launch but also as they are implemented over time. This allows standards to persist over time to become better at guiding opportunities to optimize children’s learning. Therefore, as states move toward implementation of the Common Core, experts in early education and K–12 education can ensure that the standards are continually reviewed for appropriateness to the diversity of children beginning public schooling, and for consistency with emerging research.

Some of the early critiques of the Common Core (e.g., Meisels 2011; Zubrzycki 2011) should be further developed and explored, and become the focus of critical analysis as states implement the Common Core. While there may have been a limited voice for early childhood education in the development of the Common Core, this voice can and should be encouraged and heard as part of an ongoing process of examination of the Common Core as it is implemented. If such an ongoing review process is not apparent, the early childhood education field can exert its voice by holding the developers and implementers accountable for such an ongoing review.

This is perhaps most critical at the points where the Common Core standards intersect with early learning standards. Aligning standards for K–12 with early learning standards presents a number of challenges, including the very real potential for “push-down,” where the K–12 standards may exert pressure on states to modify their oftentimes well-developed early learning standards to align with those for programs serving older children. The early childhood field should not allow for alignment to flow only downward but should advocate for the “push-up” of early childhood standards to inform ongoing development of K–12 standards, including those in areas not part of the Common Core.







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### 3. Early learning standards gain their effectiveness through implementation and assessment practices that support children’s development in ethical, appropriate ways.

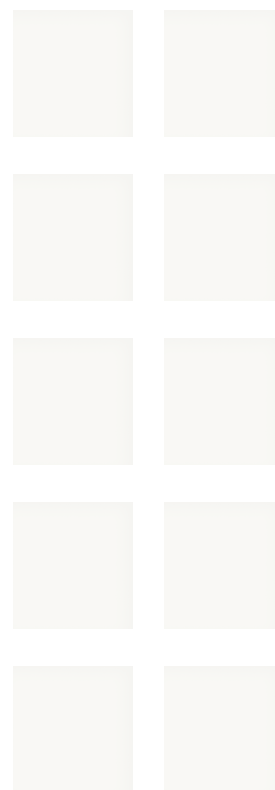
Learning standards, or content standards, provide the “what” of education, but they do not describe the “how” of education. The content standards set the goal toward which teaching and learning opportunities are directed for young children. The “how” of learning should be aligned to the content standard through our understanding of best practices to increase the chances of attaining the goal, even as the goal itself needs to be aligned with our knowledge of children’s learning processes. Likewise, content standards should inform how children’s learning is assessed so that children can show proficiency—this is often called performance standards for children. Setting the curriculum standards is but one piece of the educational enterprise, and work on other elements within the frame provided by the Common Core is only just beginning. Especially critical is maintaining methods of instruction that include a range of approaches—including the use of play as well as both small- and large-group instruction—that are considered to be developmentally appropriate for young children. Likewise, approaches to assessing young children and the appropriate use of assessment data will increasingly become concerns as the Common Core moves from design to implementation.

Standards are meant to ensure that we set high yet achievable goals for all children. As such, we are ethically bound to ensure that these standards (the “what”) and their implementation (the “how”) and their assessment are free from bias and are developmentally appropriate for all children entering school. The tremendous diversity among children, including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and those with disabilities, warrant special consideration in ensuring that the standards and their implementation and assessment work to close gaps and disparities rather than widen them. Likewise, assessment of progress in meeting standards should be governed by long-standing practices and beliefs that recognize the importance of appropriate assessment while also recognizing the challenges in building accountability systems for young children around high-stakes testing (e.g., NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2001, 2003; Snow & Von Hemel 2008).

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

Researchers in early education and in K–12 education point out that establishing appropriate and challenging content standards is one element of a high-performing education system, but these standards require a system of supports for implementation. As noted previously the Common Core provides the “what,” but its success in moving children toward college and work readiness relies upon a foundation of supports. Schools need to ensure that there is adequate time for implementation of the Common Core without jeopardizing time for activities that address children’s needs not included in the current





standards. Teachers need appropriate tools to address each standard, including aligned curricula and related resources; they may need additional training as well. Finally, families need to be provided with necessary information in order to be able to understand the learning goals established by the standards and identify roles that they may take to support their children's education.

## THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION VOICE IN THE COMMON CORE

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**B**ased upon the long history of early learning standards—and lessons learned by the early learning community throughout the course of their development and implementation—NAEYC urges early childhood education professionals to actively engage in the dialogue about the Common Core State Standards and their implementation. Critical to this dialogue will be informed voices who can join their deep understanding of standards in general, and early learning and Common Core standards in particular, with knowledge of research and practice in early childhood education. The early childhood education field is uniquely able to join this knowledge and experience with that provided by our colleagues working in K–12 education to ensure that the Common Core meets its goals of promoting college and career readiness for all children.

## WHAT IS NAEYC DOING?

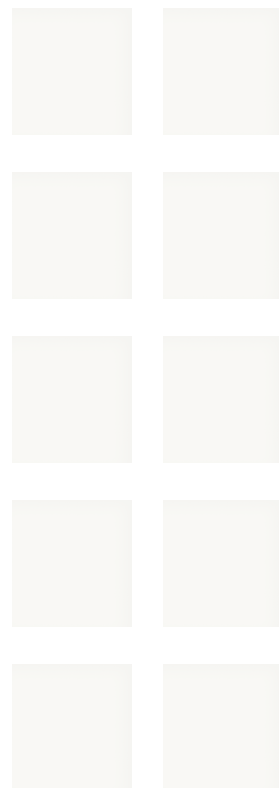
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**I**n the coming months, NAEYC will be undertaking a number of activities to encourage and support this dialogue. At our Annual Conference and National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, sessions developed by NAEYC staff as well as those submitted by experts in the field will be readily identified. A series of webinars is being developed by NAEYC, alone and in conjunction with other partnering organizations, to ensure that there is a clear understanding about the intent and content of the Common Core, as well as the possibility for thoughtful dialogue about potential concerns. Finally, NAEYC is developing a series of issue briefs that, we hope, will act to spark discussion within the early childhood education community about what we know (and do not know) about early childhood education and how we can create meaningful connections between what have historically been two separate education models: early childhood education and K–12 education.

## WHAT CAN I DO?

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**A**s the Common Core begins to be implemented, there are many potential opportunities for us in the early childhood education community to engage in the process with our colleagues in K–12 education. First, the early childhood education community should take advantage of all available opportunities to encourage those in K–12 education to consider the collected





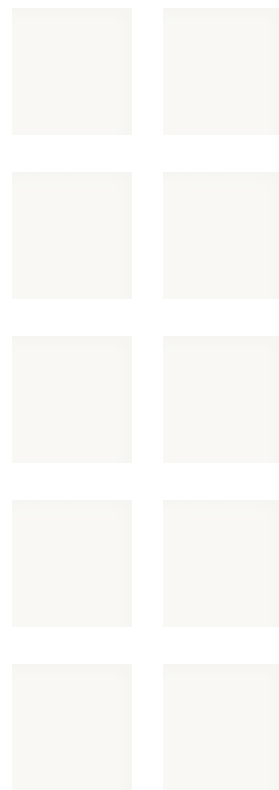
experience and research knowledge from the early childhood education field in the implementation of standards, including the view that content standards do not exist in isolation (as noted previously). Especially in states, districts, or schools where implementation of the Common Core threatens other areas of children’s development, the early childhood education community must share research on the importance of other domains of child development that are not only important in their own right but are also important because the interrelatedness of child development also supports children’s development in Common Core content areas. Early childhood education professionals, especially those already working within elementary school settings as teachers, administrators, or providers of teacher training or professional development, can work directly with those in the K–12 setting to bring fundamental early childhood education principles to be on implementing the Common Core, especially developmentally appropriate practice.

Those working in programs serving children before kindergarten should become familiar with the Common Core and other k-12 content standards as well as their early learning standards, not only to prepare children for school, but also to identify potential mismatches (or lack of alignment) that undermine the potential of early childhood education to nurture children’s learning and development. Professionals who are working in early childhood education policy and research can engage CCSSO, NGA, Achieve, and others nationally, within each state, and possibly within each district that has begun implementation by monitoring and commenting on developments through web updates, and participating in scientific and implementation meetings where possible.<sup>4</sup>

In this call for early childhood education to find its voice, it is also imperative to suggest that this voice should be as strong in its critical appraisal of the Common Core as it is in vocalizing its positives. Combining deep knowledge of early childhood education with an accurate understanding of the Common Core is critical in ensuring that the early childhood education field continues to work in support of the highest quality education for all children as they progress along the continuum of learning.

## CONCLUSION

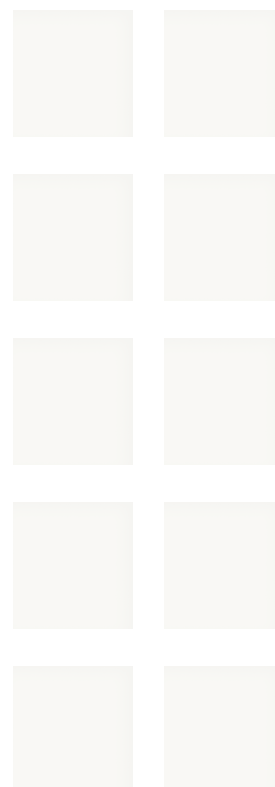
**O**ur goal, as always, is focused on providing the highest quality of early childhood educational experiences that are appropriate to children’s developmental status and respectful of diversity. There is much about the Common Core that can contribute to this goal, much that can be further enhanced with the guidance provided through experts in the early childhood education field, and perhaps some things that may arise as critical concerns that need immediate attention. The reality is that the Common Core State Standards are present in K–12 education. The early childhood education community can work to ensure that long-held ideals and evidence-based approaches to supporting the development of young children operate in concert with common standards to ensure equity in educational opportunity and achievement for all children.





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Kindergarten pupils Piper Stephan, left, and Delaney Lane read to each other at Triadelphia Ridge Elementary School in Glenelg, Md. Maryland is one of 46 states to adopt new common standards in math and English/language arts for K-12.

—Matt Roth for Education Week

Educators Walk a Tightrope between Academics and Young Children's Developmental Needs. *Education Week* 31 (13): 1, 20–21. [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/07/13prek\\_ep.h31.html?r=1461126056](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/07/13prek_ep.h31.html?r=1461126056).

## (ENDNOTES)

1 While generally associated with early childhood education, NAEYC focuses on programs serving children from birth to age 8. During this time children may encounter recognized systems of early childhood care and education which serve children from birth until school entry (sometimes referred to as 0–5) as well as the earliest years of K–12 education (referred to as K–3). Early childhood education is used to define programs that serve children until they enter school, but the early education field as represented by NAEYC also includes professionals working with, and programs designed for, children in the early elementary grades as well.

2 This statement is available at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/policy/NAEYC-NAECS-SDE-Core-Standards-Statement.pdf>.

3 Both of these concerns may also be fueled by provisions within federal education funding that give priority to adoption of the Common Core.

4 The key starting points in following developments related to the Common Core include the Common Core State Standards Initiative website (<http://www.corestandards.org>) and Achieve (<http://www.achieve.org/achieving-common-core>). Two groups working on developing assessments related to the Common Core are the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (<http://www.parcconline.org/achieving-common-core>) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (<http://www.smarterbalanced.org/k-12-education/common-core-state-standards-tools-resources/>).

