



Preschool Policy Facts

NIEER

National Institute for Early
Education Research

120 Albany Street, Suite 500
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Tel (732) 932-4350 Fax (732) 932-4360

www.nieer.org

THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS
Advancing Quality Pre-Kindergarten for All

Child Outcome Standards in Pre-K Programs: What Are Standards; What Is Needed To Make Them Work?

by Elena Bodrova, Deborah Leong and Rima Shore

Although there has been a reluctance to use the word “standards” in the early childhood field, the standards movement that has altered K-12 education is being extended to early education. Program standards describe the characteristics of classrooms and curricula and child outcome standards define expectations for preschoolers’ development and learning.

Child outcome standards geared to young children are often given different names, such as building blocks, essential learning, desired results, learning and development guidelines, or learning goals. However, all of these describe the same thing—the kinds of development and learning that should be taking place.

Prekindergarten standards should take into account today’s best understanding of how young children develop and learn.

Policy Recommendations:

- Because standards reflect the values of the people who set them, collaboration with families and communities is a key to the successful design and implementation of preschool standards.
- Standards documents should distinguish clearly between program standards and child outcome standards.
- Outcome standards need to be written in ways that take into account the unique ways that young children develop and learn, considering all aspects of school readiness identified by the National Education Goal Panel.
- Standards that address physical health, social-emotional development, and approaches to learning need to have as much emphasis and specificity as those that address cognitive and language development.
- Standards should allow for a coherent educational experience. Preschool standards should allow continuity with kindergarten standards, but not at the expense of attention to physical and social-emotional development.
- Standards should be written in ways that allow for appropriate, effective assessment. Assessment policies and practices should go beyond accountability to foster program improvement.

What Are Standards?

Standards are statements of guidance and expectations applying to key areas of early education. *Program standards* describe such overarching components as resources, activities and instruction programs and are aimed primarily at administrators. Within program standards, there are subsets. One is *classroom standards* that identify classroom characteristics such as the maximum number of children in a classroom and allowable ratio of adults to children. Another is *teaching and curriculum standards*, which provide guidance for teachers on classroom activities, such as literature to which children should be exposed as well as other desirable learning situations.

A second, often comprehensive category is *child outcome standards*, which address the knowledge and skills children should acquire by the end of the school year. Subsets of these include *content standards*, which define the knowledge and skills children should acquire, as well as habits and dispositions they should develop. *Performance standards* offer guidance on how it can be demonstrated that children have met the *content standards*.

Impact of K-12 Standards

High-profile studies such as those conducted by the Education Commission of the United States and a longitudinal study of at-risk children in Title I schools have identified gains in student achievement and school quality in the K-12 setting. Given these findings, educators and parents may expect an emphasis on early learning standards to produce similar improvements. However, an analysis of existing prekindergarten standards documents and a review of the standards movement reveal that the impact of standards in the preschool setting depends on a range of conditions being met, including the policy and implementation issues addressed in this fact sheet.

Nine Keys to Effective Prekindergarten Standards

If child outcome standards are to be effective and appropriate for preschool-aged children, they should:

- 1. Represent values that make sense to children's families and communities.** Standards identify knowledge and skills teachers should spend time on, and as such embody shared expectations and notions about what matters for children. When young children are involved, there is special concern about values underlying outcome standards. It is important to engage families and communities in discussions that help to shape preschool standards.
- 2. Be based on sound evidence.** Standards are sets of detailed explanations and illustrations of what children should know and be able to do in a particular area by a specific time in a child's education. These need to be based on the best evidence of what young children can learn and on research showing that particular outcome standards can contribute to positive outcomes for the children for whom they are intended.
- 3. Be comprehensive and cover the full range of knowledge and skills.** Standards should encompass all the major branches of knowledge that contribute to children's capacity to reason, create, communicate, solve problems and maintain their health. They should include content standards (defining the range of knowledge and skills children should master) and performance standards (defining how it can be demonstrated children have met the standards.)
- 4. Be specific, yet allow flexibility as teachers implement them.** When standards cover a broad area of learning or development, they should be broken down into more specific benchmarks. The benchmarks should, however not be so specific as to prevent teachers from having flexibility in application. Preschool outcomes, for instance, need to be stated in terms of skills rather than activities.
- 5. Allow for a coherent educational experience.** When there are too many outcome standards, education becomes fragmented as teachers jump from one area to the next, never spending enough time to offer the range of experiences young children need. Those who set outcome standards should avoid the tendency to overload. Coherence also means standards for one grade or level should align with the next to create a continuum — ideally from prekindergarten through high school.
- 6. Make sense to teachers and help them with their day-to-day work.** Teachers should be able to orient the educational experiences they offer to the skills and content specified in child outcome standards. For this to happen, the content of the standards must be developmentally appropriate and specific enough to allow teachers to know what is expected of their students. Alignment of curriculum and classroom assessments is crucial to the effectiveness of standards.
- 7. Be written in a way that makes it possible to assess whether they are being met in a classroom.** Schools and programs should document both program and child outcome standards so they provide a basis for assessment. Assessments need to be fair and technically sound and assessment policies relating to children with special needs and English language learners should be clearly set out.
- 8. Distinguish clearly between program standards and outcome standards.** Those who establish standards need to differentiate between standards that specify "inputs" (such as number of hours children spend in an educational program, qualifications of teachers or materials and resources provided) and standards that indicate "outputs" (what children know and can do as a result of program participation).
- 9. Be designed in ways that offer benefits beyond strengthening accountability.** Researchers have noted that child outcome standards "have potential benefits beyond addressing pressures for increased accountability." For example, they can support curriculum development and focus attention on important aspects of children's growth and development.