



## **Introduction to the New York State Next Generation Early Learning Standards**

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The task of revising the Early Learning Standards provided an opportunity to articulate a shared understanding of what young children can achieve with our support. Across New York State, educators, community members, researchers, and policymakers all advocated for what would be best for *all* children – developmentally appropriate expectations within a context that embraces children’s multiple identities and differing abilities. Standards represent a belief that equitable outcomes among diverse populations are possible when we focus our instruction and programming on who children are and what they need. Standards are only ideals, however, without the investment and dedication of the educators and parents, family members, and other adults in children’s lives. It is their work and protective care that empowers children to reach their fullest potential and makes real the Standards’ potential to equalize academic achievement for New York’s young children.

Articulating the New York State Standards for the youngest children in prekindergarten to third grade required particular attention to the nature of learning in early childhood. The members of the Early Learning Task Force, along with the hundreds of educators, early childhood professionals, and community members who provided feedback during the period of public comment advocated strongly for a clear articulation to key questions:

- Given the range in child development, is it appropriate to set Standards for young children?
- How can Standards protect developmentally appropriate expectations and practices?
- How can we support children with special learning needs?
- Are the same Standards applicable for diverse population groups among children?
- How can we support children who do not speak English?

As these key questions emerged repeatedly, the Early Learning Task Force recognized the need to begin by distinguishing between *standards* for learning and *standardization* of instruction.

### **Standards for Learning, not Standardization of Instruction**

The New York Early Learning Standards represent outcomes by grade level in an overall framework of a lifelong development of skills, dispositions and habits with regards to learning. Envisioning the practices of literate adults, we recognize how these practices are necessarily developed and nurtured over a lifetime, beginning in early childhood. For example, long before

children are reading conventionally, there is a continuum of emergent skills that are stimulated and reinforced as early as infancy. This occurs through reading or telling stories and exposing babies to books.<sup>1</sup> The Standards, then, serve to describe points along a continuum towards lifelong development.

In this continuum, we hold the same aspirations and goals for everyone; the outcomes described in the Standards are meant for all children, regardless of their circumstances. Standards do not solely define what the well-prepared or precocious child can achieve, but what can be achieved by all children through personalized instruction.

**Rather than prescribe a lockstep progression of lessons or curricula for all children in all settings, the Standards serve to articulate the expectations of what children can learn and do as a result of instruction that is *not* standardized, but personalized, differentiated, adapted, culturally and linguistically relevant, and context-based. While we may have the same learning objectives for all children, our means for meeting these objectives are highly responsive to the individual child.**

## Setting Standards for Young Children

The 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) states: “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.”<sup>2</sup> This is possible within a context of developmentally appropriate expectations and practices where the responsibility to meet Standards is not a burden placed on the child, but a professional framework for their educators.

There is considerable variability in development among children that mirrors the nature and quality of their early experiences.<sup>3</sup> Responsive to this variability, Standards are not intended as a rationale to either accelerate or postpone instruction; instead, they define the outcome for children to reach or *move towards* at their own pace.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Teale, W.H., Sulzby, E. (1992). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation; Fields, M., Groth, L., Spangler, K. (2004). *Let’s begin reading right: A developmental approach to emergent literacy*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Columbus, OH: Pearson Merrill Prentice-Hall

<sup>2</sup> NAEYC & NAECS/SDE. (2002). *Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success*. Washington DC: Author.

<sup>3</sup> National Research Council. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: the science of early childhood development*. EDs J.P. Shonkoff and D.A. Phillips. Washington DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>4</sup> Bagnato, S.J., McLean, M., Macy, M., Neisworth, J.T. (2011). Identifying instructional targets for early childhood via authentic assessment: Alignment of professional standards and practice-based evidence. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33(4), 243-253.

## Protecting Developmentally Appropriate Expectations and Practices

NAEYC defines “developmentally appropriate practices” (DAP) as a framework of principles that promote children’s learning and development.<sup>5</sup> In summary, these principles highlight the need for educators to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of child development and age-related characteristics;
- Understand the interrelated nature of developmental domains where learning in one area will influence another;
- Recognize how prior experiences as well cultural and social factors shape children’s behavior and approaches to learning;
- Develop strong, loving relationships with children and their families that enable personalizing instruction;
- Create opportunities for children to develop positive relationships with their peers;
- Design age appropriate experiences that both stimulate and gratify children’s natural curiosity and desire to understand their world; and
- Understand the importance of play in promoting learning.

Grounded in these same principles, the Standards seek to protect developmentally appropriate expectations and practices for all children prekindergarten to third grade, even as the curricula or instructional programs that support these principles are locally determined choices.

Students with Disabilities (SWD), like their typically developing peers, rely on developmentally appropriate practices to meet Standards. The Council of Exceptional Children lists one of its foundational imperatives for educators as, “Maintaining challenging expectations for individuals with exceptionalities to develop the highest possible learning outcomes and quality of life potential in ways that respect their dignity, culture, language, and background.”<sup>6</sup> Maintaining the same expectations for students with disabilities as we do for their typically developing peers is a means of protecting the right to a quality education. For these children, developmentally appropriate practices include additional services, supports, and accommodations within an individualized educational program (IEP). Special educators apply particular expertise in adapting instruction and services to enable children with disabilities to learn and grow along with their peers.

Inherent in the concept of developmentally appropriate practices is the commitment to consider children’s needs holistically. Adopting a “whole child” approach indicates that instruction and programming will address social-emotional and other concrete needs and

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<sup>5</sup> NAEYC. (2009). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. Washington DC: Author.

<sup>6</sup> Council for Exceptional Children. *Professional Standards and Practice and Positions*. Retrieved from <http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Professional-Policy-and-Positions>

development along with academic considerations.<sup>7</sup> Children’s histories and vulnerabilities will manifest in school; in response, educators organize instruction, programming, and service networks that will enhance the supports available to children. A hungry child is unlikely to meet Standards despite the best instruction; a whole child approach prioritizes a child’s need for food as part of developmentally appropriate practices. Likewise, in teaching the whole child, emphasis is placed on all developmental domains such as social-emotional functioning and physical well-being. The school environment becomes a place to learn prosocial behavior, to develop character, and to promote physical well-being, as much as it is a place to learn to read and write.

In the early childhood classroom, developmentally appropriate practices create the conditions for learning that stimulate an active, joyful engagement in young children. Children’s natural inclination to play represents an efficacious approach to learning in early childhood.<sup>8</sup> Self-directed play activities that allow children to examine, experiment, practice, and advance their skills, offer an ideal opportunity to observe competencies associated with the Standards.

Play is listed multiple times in the Standards. This is an intentional effort to remain within developmentally appropriate parameters that do not pit play against “academic” learning.

**It is also a reminder that passive approaches such as seat work, worksheets, scripted programs, and rote learning are antithetical to a play-based paradigm for learning.**

Instruction that is integrated, multisensory, and play-based, captures children’s imagination. Skills or content are not taught in isolation, but as essential components of lessons about the child’s world with attention paid to what may be relevant to his or her interests. Structured to offer children ample opportunity for self-expression through varied media, instruction in the early childhood classroom regularly employs art, music, performance, and imaginative play.

## **Standards and Diverse Populations**

The child population of the United States is the most racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse of all age groups.<sup>9</sup> Diverse populations are a natural, dynamic condition in the early childhood classroom. Demographic diversity also represents variety of experiences, beliefs, perspectives, preferences, observances, practices, behaviors, etc., that are integral to children’s identities. In the diverse classroom, educators are careful to honor and integrate

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<sup>7</sup> Slade, S., Griffith, D. (2013). The whole child approach to student success. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*, pp. 21-35.

<sup>8</sup> National Research Council (2001) *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Barbara T. Bowman, M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>9</sup> Frey, W. (2011). *America’s diverse future: Initial glimpses at the child population from the 2010 census*. Washington: Brookings Institution.

multicultural perspectives through materials, lesson plans, displays, and experiences that do not privilege any dominant group. They use culturally sustaining approaches to affirm children's identities and frame diversity in positive terms. Rather than making children blind to diversity, educators understand the importance of normalizing differences among human beings so as to establish a positive anti-bias environment that contributes to children's learning.<sup>10</sup>

As members of a greater society, educators also examine their own cultural perspective as they make decisions on behalf of children. Here too, educators pursue and develop the competence to create an environment that reflects, not just their own perspective, but that of the diverse groups represented in the classroom and in society, and adopt the values or dispositions that promote diversity as an asset for learning.

As educators work with children's families, they recognize the influence of culture in shaping child-rearing and parental involvement. They understand that culture also shapes what a parent expects from an educator. Educators hold themselves responsible to create opportunities to engage families in a shared effort to support their children's learning. If we are to create the conditions where all children can meet Standards, we begin by affirming their identities, respecting their heritage, and integrating their perspectives in the everyday activities that organize instruction.<sup>11</sup>

## **Standards and English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners**

Speaking English is not a precondition to meeting every standard. Children can demonstrate mastery of many of the skills outlined in the Standards bilingually or using their home languages. Children can, for example, *Develop and answer questions about key ideas and details in a text* (Standard 1R1) while speaking their home language, and then use additional resources (i.e. translation materials, word walls, etc.) to *Create a response to a text, author, theme or personal experience* (Standard 1W4). Rather than hinder progress towards the Standards, the home language is an invaluable resource to advance learning. Intentional, strategic use of children's home languages in the bilingual and the English language classroom can, for example, enhance student engagement, scaffold comprehension, support authentic assessment, and promote parental involvement.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Derman-Sparks, L., Olsen Edwards, J. (2012). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*, Second Edition Washington DC: NAEYC.

<sup>11</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research*, 32, 465; Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41, pp. 93-97.

<sup>12</sup> García, O., Ibarra Johnson, S., Seltzer, K. (2016). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging students' bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia: Caslon.

Research highlights many lifelong advantages associated with bilingualism.<sup>13</sup> The ultimate purpose of the learning standards would be to develop children's potential so they garner and sustain every possible advantage into adulthood. Promoting bilingualism and multilingualism as children develop proficiency in the English language is in keeping with that purpose.

## **Conclusion**

The Early Learning Standards represent a collective agreement among educators and collaborators of the age appropriate instructional goals for young children. They do not describe the limits children should reach, but the foundation to untold possibilities across a lifetime. Inherently optimistic, the Standards organize the work of teaching, as they build towards a vision of self-efficacy and empowerment that rewards children's innate capacity to learn.

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<sup>13</sup> Callahan, R.M., Gándara, P. (2014). *The bilingual advantage: Language, literacy and the U.S. labor market*. London: Multilingual Matters.