

What Should They be Learning in Preschool? The Development of Preschool Content Standards in Hawai'i

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In the past, early childhood programs provided either full day care for young children whose parents were employed, or part day enrichment experiences for families who did not need care for their children while they worked. Gradually these two strands (care and education) began to merge into the field we now call early childhood education and care (or early care and education). Before the 1960s no one worried very much about what children were learning in early childhood programs. Early childhood educators were well aware of important social and emotional growth that took place in the early years, but little was known or had been written about children's thinking. In 1961 J. McVicker Hunt's influential book *Intelligence and Experience* made the case that important cognitive development occurred in the early years. Until that time it was assumed that "real school" began only when children entered first grade. Even kindergarten was just preparation for later schooling.

The realization that many children were entering kindergarten without the experiences they needed to be successful in school led to the creation of the Head Start program in 1964. This program, part of the War On Poverty, raised the question of the nature of appropriate learning experiences for young children who were at risk for school failure. Some educators believed that child-centered curriculum based on play would provide the needed preparation for school success while others called for a curriculum based on school-related knowledge and skills. The U.S. government sponsored research in order to assess the impact of different educational approaches on the development and learning of low-income children. Educational models were developed and research conducted to see how effective the different models were in preparing children for school success. No one approach was determined to be most effective though the studies found that a clearly defined curriculum with adequate resources and materials and well trained teachers were essential components of successful programs.

Because of the current movement for educational accountability, interest in young children's learning has again become a national concern. Today the focus is on readiness—what young children need to know and be able to do to successfully negotiate school expectations. This new

concern has led to the widespread development of early learning standards. In this article we describe the context for the development of early learning standards, define them, and describe work that has been done in Hawai'i on the development and implementation of standards for programs for four-year-olds.

One of the first recommendations of the National Education Goals Panel (1997) was the development of content standards that would help states and school districts ensure that worthwhile subject matter was being provided. Content standards define what knowledge, skills, and attitudes should be taught. They address goals and objectives for each subject area for each grade and were originally developed by professional associations that focused on a school content area (the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the International Reading Association, and others). States then developed their own standards, based upon national standards but tailored them to their own populations and educational priorities. Accompanying performance (or achievement) standards describe how students are to be assessed in order to determine the extent to which the content has been acquired. Some form of standards is now a feature of every public school in the United States.

Early Learning Standards

The research on brain development that has been reported for the last decade has confirmed that the early years are an essential time for the development of the intellect. This awareness combined with the current movement for accountability in schools has resulted in renewed attention to the preschool curriculum. Parents want their children to be successful when they enter kindergarten. Elementary school administrators and teachers are increasingly concerned with how children's preschool experiences will help them to meet kindergarten expectations. For this reason many states are developing early learning standards. Early learning standards are intended to assist preschool teachers and administrators in shaping meaningful and well-rounded daily programs for children in order to help prepare them for later school

success. They include examples of what most children are able to do at a particular age when exposed to appropriate learning experiences.

A recent position statement (2003) from 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 that, "... standards can help practitioners and policy makers create a clear focus on what is truly important in early education..." (66). They identify essential features (criteria) for developing, adopting, and using early learning standards.

A survey of early learning standards (Kagan, Scott-Little & Stebbins Frelow, 2003) indicates that in 2003, 39 states had, or were in the process of developing, early learning standards. These standards are intended to improve instruction in preschool and increase the likelihood that children will be ready to do what is expected of them in the kindergarten. The majority of these standards were developed for use by state-funded early childhood programs though some are intended for community preschools as well. States vary greatly in the focus of their standards. Some address only literacy, or literacy and mathematics; others address all domains of development. They also vary in the extent to which use of the standards is mandatory and in which settings they are required. Authors of the survey caution that early care and education professionals and policy makers must work together to ensure the effective development and use of standards so that they lead to positive outcomes for children (58).

The Development of Early Learning Standards in Hawai'i

As part of its statewide effort to help all children enter school ready to succeed, the School Readiness Task Force (see the article by Alex Harris in this issue) recommended that early learning standards be developed to guide curriculum in Hawai'i's preschools. In 2002 the Assessment Work Group of the School Readiness Task Force began to explore their development. They created definitions and guidelines for the development of standards that were incorporated into the School Readiness Task Force master plan. One decision was to call Hawai'i's early learning standards *content standards* to emphasize that they describe the experiences that should be provided for young children in early care and education programs. Since it is extremely difficult to accurately assess young children's learning, the Assessment Work Group fo-

cused their efforts on the development of content standards and did not develop accompanying performance standards.

In most states early learning standards are connected to K-12 standards. In many places they are "back-mapped" i.e. based directly on elementary school standards that are revised for programs for young children. The Assessment Work Group chose not to use back-mapping in the development of Hawai'i's standards. Instead, they decided that the preschool content standards would be based on desirable outcomes for four-year-olds, which would be linked to the corresponding Hawai'i Department of Education (HDOE) K-12 standards where these were applicable. This means that Hawai'i's standards are based on appropriate content for preschool children rather than on watered-down elementary school content. Since preschool and elementary school content are different, not every one of early childhood standards developed is reflected in the HDOE standards.

The first attempt to create content standards for Hawai'i preschools was initiated in 2001 to meet the needs of teachers in Department of Education special education preschools who were required to base Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) on standards designed for kindergarten through grade 3. Phyllis Ida, Preschool Special Education Resource Specialist, drafted preschool standards to assist the special education teachers in her district. Her work was introduced to the Assessment Work Group, and they decided that it would become the foundation for the development of the Hawai'i Preschool Content Standards.

In 2002 a sub-committee of the Assessment Work Group was convened to work on the development of statewide early learning standards. Standards from other states were collected and analyzed and a survey of teachers in private and public preschools was conducted to provide input on the possible content and organization of Hawai'i's standards. The first version of Hawai'i's Preschool Content Standards was drafted and submitted to the Assessment Work Group whose members were invited to comment.

Further editing was done¹ and a second draft was circulated to early childhood educators in the community and sent for external review to experts in early childhood curriculum.² The third and final version of the Hawai'i Preschool Content Standards was completed based on feedback from the community and the invited experts. These were submitted to the assessment sub-committee for their endorsement. The School Readiness Task Force approved them in December 2002.

The Hawai'i Standards

Hawai'i's Preschool Content Standards are intended to provide guidance for preschool administrators and teachers who wish to offer a well-rounded daily program for young children. They describe the opportunities that should be offered to children and give examples of what four-year-olds should be able to do when they are exposed to these learning experiences. The standards allow for a wide range of abilities and backgrounds in children and can be used in all kinds of early care and education programs—both public and private. They are not to be used as curriculum (the planned learning experiences designed by teachers to meet the needs of a specific group of children). Instead, they are to be used as guidelines for selecting curriculum that is meaningful and appropriate.

Nor are the Hawai'i Preschool Content Standards designed for child assessment (*the process of observing and recording what children do and what they produce, as the basis for educational decision-making.*) Rather, the standards are guidelines that offer a common frame of reference on early childhood curriculum. As well as helping teachers to provide better educational experiences for young children, they help to identify a range of developmental outcomes that can be used to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and program. Assessment of each child's progress can then be accomplished through multidimensional assessment approaches that include anecdotal records, work samples, and portfolios. Because they are linked to the corresponding Hawai'i Department of Education K–12 standards, they strengthen the connections between early childhood and K–12 education communities.

The standards are organized into three sections. The introduction to each section explains its purpose, scope, and structure. The second section, Guiding Principles, provides the context for the document, describing what early childhood programs should be like and how young children learn best. The third section, Content Standards, describes opportunities that should be provided in preschools to support children's acquisition of important attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

The standards are organized into five developmental domains, two of which are further divided into subject areas. They are

I. Physical Development, Health, and Safety

II. Personal and Social Development

III. Communication, Language Development, and Literacy

IV. Cognitive Development

Symbolic Play

Mathematics

Science

Social Studies

V. Creative Development

Art

Music

Creative Movement/Drama

Aesthetic Appreciation

All of the described domains and subject areas belong in every program for four-year-olds, with each of the standards leading to worthwhile learning experiences. Early childhood teachers are cautioned to remember that domains and subject areas are educator's categories for organizing school content. Children experience the world as a whole and don't make these distinctions. Since there are, in reality, no clear lines of demarcation between domains and subject areas, the content standards and performance indicators overlap each other.

The standards are written in three columns. The first shows the *Content Standards*—the opportunities that teachers and programs should provide to help children develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The second column, *Example Performance Indicators*, indicates some of the ways in which children demonstrate their acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes addressed in the standards. Because children's play provides valuable information about their learning, play examples are included as indicators. Preschool teachers can tell what children are learning as they observe their play, talk and listen to children and their families, and look at children's products (e.g. block buildings, artwork, emergent writing). The exemplars are not comprehensive lists of things each child must accomplish. There are many other ways, in addition to those listed, for children to show what they are learning.

The third column contains the *Hawai'i Department of Education General Learner Outcomes (GLOs) and Content and Performance Standards (HCPS II)* that best correspond to each preschool standard. This information is intended to help preschool teachers better understand what children will be expected to learn in the future, and to help elementary school personnel know what children have experienced in

CONTENT STANDARDS Preschool programs provide children with opportunities to:	EXAMPLE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS Some things a child does to demonstrate competency:	Hawai'i DOE GLOs and Content and Performance Standards
Standard 6: Show interest in writing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw, scribble, and pretend to write. • Ask how to write a word or a letter. • Ask adult to write what he/she says. 	Language Arts: Writing Write using various forms to communicate for a variety of purposes and audiences.

preschool. An example of this format relating to writing is from Domain III: Communication, Language Development, and Literacy.

Dissemination and Training

Dissemination and training on use of the standards is now well underway. Since they were adopted, 7,000 copies of the Standards have been printed and nearly 4,500 disseminated. The staff of the Good Beginnings Alliance has developed training on the standards and responds to training requests from all islands. A series of trainings have been developed to meet the variety of needs, which include Sequence Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS) teams of the Hawai'i Department of Education, special education preschools and Parent Child Networking Centers (PCNC's), Native Hawaiian programs, Hawai'i's Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) projects, preschool teachers and directors, family literacy programs, and community programs such as health centers. Training in the standards has also been conducted frequently in parent and child interactive programs, such as community-based playgroups (alternative choice to preschools). Training for playgroup program staff helps them to use the standards in developing the activities they provide for the children as well as supports their work in parent education and in transitioning children from informal to formal school settings.

Good Beginnings is also working to partner with statewide early education organizations in training to use the standards. The staff of People Attentive to Children (PATCH) has developed training for providers in preschools and family child care on how to use the standards in developing curriculum. KCAA Preschools, Hawai'i's largest multi-site preschool agency has aligned their program's curriculum to the standards and offers training in using the standards for their staff and the early childhood community. Workshops on the standards have also been presented on all islands at

conferences sponsored by the Hawai'i Association for the Education of Young Children (HAEYC), at professional meetings, and in many community preschools.

Work on adoption and endorsement is in the planning stages. To date, the Hawai'i State Board of Education has adopted the standards for use in the Department of Education's special education preschools. Aha Punana Leo (Hawaiian Immersion Preschools) has formally adopted the Standards for utilization in their Native Hawai'i early childhood programs statewide. The Hawai'i Association for the Education of Young Children incorporates the use of the standards in the support they provide in program improvement for accreditation. A number of other groups are working to infuse the standards into their programs.

Other work in progress includes incorporation of the standards into field based training and curriculum courses in early childhood higher education programs in Hawai'i and creating materials for training trainers to teach about the standards. Finally, consistent with the recommendation in the NAEYC/NAECS/SDE position paper statement that "standards remain relevant and research based by using a systematic, interactive process for regular review and revision," a process needs to be put in place to insure that review and revision of the standards occurs on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Hawai'i's Preschool Content Standards are the result of a long process. They are consistent with guidelines set forth in the NAEYC-NAECS/SDE position statement (2003), which lists essential features of early learning standards.

Effective early learning standards emphasize significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes.

The Hawai'i standards include all domains of development, the content has been selected because it is worthwhile,

developmentally appropriate, and designed to help children in later learning.

“Effective early learning standards are developed and reviewed through an informed and inclusive process.”

The Hawai‘i standards are based on input from many sources and are well researched and grounded in current child development theory. They include community input, research on standards documents developed nationally, in Hawai‘i and in other states; input from members of the School Readiness Task Force and its work groups; and extensive review by early childhood experts in Hawai‘i and on the mainland.

The Hawai‘i Preschool Content Standards will help preschools to provide meaningful and appropriate learning experiences and should, thereby, improve the likelihood that young children in Hawai‘i will enter school as enthusiastic learners who are ready for success in kindergarten.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Stephanie Feeney, Eva Moravcik, Donna Grace, Betsy Brandt, and Randy Hitz.
- ² External reviewers were Robert Peters, Headmaster of Hanahau‘oli school in Honolulu (preschool content and articulation from preschool to kindergarten); Marjorie Fields, University of Alaska Southeast (literacy and social/emotional development); Christine Chaille, Portland State University (science); Juanita Copley, University of Houston (math), Jennifer Herring and Betty Lou Williams, University of Hawaii at Manoa (art).

