



National Child Care Information Center

A service of the Child Care Bureau

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DEVELOPING EARLY LEARNING GUIDELINES Decision Points and Options

Groups developing early learning guidelines face a number of critical decisions early in the decision-making process. These decisions have implications for subsequent options and decisions. This document identifies key areas of decision-making States may face in this process.

Age Range to which the Guidelines Apply

The *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative asks States to develop early learning guidelines applicable to children ages 3–5. Many States are interested in guidelines that apply to children ages birth to 5 years or, as in the case of California, birth to 14 years.

■ *Options*

The options include writing the guidelines for just one target age group (e.g., 4-year-olds), a grouping of several years (e.g., 3- to 5-year-olds), or writing them for narrower groupings of children within a broader range (e.g., within a birth to 5 age range, writing guidelines for birth to 18-month-olds, 19-36-month-olds, etc.). These options raise decision trade-offs around the breadth of the guidelines versus the depth to which they provide guidance, and the resources needed to implement the chosen option.

■ *Breadth versus depth*

The broader the category for which the guidelines are written (e.g., 3–5 year-olds), the more general the guidelines. The more tailored the guidelines are to a particular age range, the more specific the guidelines, benchmarks, and examples are likely to be.

For example, Colorado’s guidelines are written for preschoolers ages 2 ½ to 5. One mathematical standard for “sorting” reads, “Preschool learners count objects, sorting, organizing and comparing groups of objects.” In contrast, Florida’s mathematical standard for sorting, written for 3 year-olds reads, “Sorts objects into subgroups that vary by one attribute,” a more specific description of the same knowledge base.

■ *Use of resources*

Expect a more time- and resource-consuming process for guidelines applicable to more than one age range. A broader age range leads to identification of developmental sequences that must be agreed upon by the various groups developing the guidelines. There may also be a need to access additional expertise and review a wider range of research in order to develop guidelines for multiple age groups.

Intended Audience

Good Start, Grow Smart calls for States to develop early learning guidelines that will be applicable to a variety of child care settings. Early care and education settings can include family, friend and neighbor care, family child care, and center-based care, as well as private schools, public prekindergarten programs, and Head Start/Early Head Start programs.

Options

Many current State guidelines were crafted as part of the State’s prekindergarten program and are consequently targeted to classroom teachers. States must decide whether to remain consistent with the language and references to activities that are commonly used by classroom teachers, or to use language that is inclusive of a wider range of providers, including parents.

Speaking the language of teachers

Ohio’s *Early Learning Content Standards*, developed for public prekindergarten programs by the Department of Education, comprehensively covers a variety of domains and subskills within each domain. For example, in the English Language Arts domain, benchmarks are identified for 22 sets of subskills. The State is now developing materials to facilitate implementation of the early learning guidelines in a broader range of settings.

Reaching out broadly through the guidelines

Minnesota’s *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* uses guidelines that are broadly defined and each is accompanied by suggestions for strategies that family members, teachers and caregivers, community members, and policymakers can use to support children’s learning and development

States face decisions on the breadth and depth of domains to cover, what and how language and common terms are used, and whether to include examples to further clarify the targeted skills in the early learning guidelines. These decisions have implications for the implementation of the guidelines and the types of materials needed to be developed for parents, providers, and policymakers.

Alignment with K-12

The *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative highlights the importance of aligning early learning guidelines with the State’s K-12 standards to facilitate smooth transitions between early care and education and formal schooling.

Options

Many States have aligned their early learning guidelines with K-12 standards by using the same domains and language similar to that in the K-12 standards. Another approach is to use the same domains and language in the early learning guidelines as the K-12 standards while adding domains more typically associated with younger children (e.g., “approaches to learning” or “social-emotional”).

Yet another approach is to identify the K-12 standards and provide explanatory language that makes the link between the K-12 indicators and guidelines that are developmentally appropriate for younger children. For example, the *Building Blocks to Colorado’s Content Standards* identifies each of the K-12 standards while also including the “Early Childhood Foundation” for each K-12 standard.

The issues raised by these options include the explicitness of the alignment with K-12 standards, the appropriateness of the language and domains for young children, and the clarity of the intended use and purpose of the guidelines.

■ ***Explicitness of the alignment***

Use of the same domains and language can help the reader understand the progression of child development. Additionally, the links between sets of standards may facilitate greater dialogue with K-12 staff and consistent use of terminology with parents.

■ ***Appropriateness for young children***

Early care and education specialists may be concerned that the use of the same language and domains represents a push down of the curriculum rather than clearly outlining the differences between early childhood and school-age development.

■ ***Clarity of the intended use and purpose***

Many States have established guiding principles describing the philosophy, purpose, and intended use of guidelines for young children. The *Rhode Island Early Learning Standards*, for example, feature the role of play as the first “Learning Goal and Definition” for each domain.

Domains

The *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative asks States to develop early learning guidelines in language, literacy, pre-reading, and mathematical concepts. However, given the research which underscores the importance of an integrated and comprehensive view of early learning and development, many States have chosen to develop guidelines in multiple domains.

■ ***Options***

One decision is whether to use the same domains as found in the K-12 standards. Another is whether to develop early learning guidelines only in the domains identified in the *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative. A third decision is whether to develop guidelines across all domains at once, and, if not, how to sequence that development.

These decisions impact the States’ goals for early care and education, timelines, and available resources.

■ ***State goals for early care and education***

Early learning guidelines in some States have been developed in response to school readiness legislation or initiatives. In these cases, the domains may be driven by legislative mandates. For example, Florida’s *School Readiness Performance Standards* covers the domains identified by the National Education Goals Panel on Early Childhood. Missouri chose to focus on literacy guidelines first, developing the *Missouri Pre-K Literacy Standards*, and subsequently develop standards in other domains.

■ ***Timeline and Resources***

The development of guidelines, including researching, garnering feedback, and reaching consensus, is a complex process requiring multiple activity phases. The decision regarding which domains to cover impacts how quickly information is disseminated to the early care and education community, and what strategies are developed to support implementation in a wide

variety of settings. The process is resource intensive and will likely necessitate partnering with other early care and education stakeholders to strategically use resources and share responsibilities.

Applicability to All Settings

The *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative envisions early learning guidelines which will be applicable to the care and education of children in all settings, including center-based, family child care, and through the use of family, friends and neighbors.

Options

One approach to making the early learning guidelines applicable across settings and understandable to parents and providers is to use language these audiences are likely to understand. A second is to provide examples of the developmental indicators in different domains that clearly indicate how these outcomes and related activities apply across different settings. A third approach is to create supporting materials (e.g., written, video) specifically for certain kinds of providers or settings.

The key issue is communication with all potential providers so that early learning guidelines are used effectively in the full range of care settings for all children.

Communication

Many States seek the input of parents and providers on guidelines committees to ensure that the guidelines are inclusive of all perspectives. States have also developed posters, videos, and other support materials to inform particular audiences on how to use the early learning guidelines. For example, Arkansas has developed a booklet series, *Picture This*, designed to bring key early guidelines information to parents and providers.

Inclusion

Many States' early learning guidelines discuss their use with children with special needs, English-language learners, and others. Some give examples of how to use adaptive materials or links to specialized services or individualized education plans. In California, the *Desired Results Access Project* is developing materials for parents and providers to support the use of the early learning guidelines with children with special needs.

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