

CHILD OUTCOME STANDARDS IN PRE-K PROGRAMS: WHAT ARE STANDARDS; WHAT IS NEEDED TO MAKE THEM WORK?

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Overview

The standards movement that has altered K-12 education across the nation is now being extended to early education. In addition to program standards that describe the characteristics of classrooms and curricula, most states have developed child outcome standards that define expectations for preschoolers' development and learning. Early childhood outcome standards are often given different names, such as building blocks, essential learning, desired results, developmental guidelines, or learning goals. All of these describe standards—the kinds of development and learning that should be taking place.

Nine Keys to Effective Prekindergarten Standards

Many of the conditions needed for successful standards-based reform apply to all grade levels, including prekindergarten. The article describes nine keys to effective standards that must be addressed to make child outcome standards appropriate and effective in the preschool years.

Standards should:

1. **Represent values that make sense to children's families and communities** – Standards define shared expectations and notions about what matters for children. In this way, standards represent the values of the people who set them.
2. **Be evidence-based** – They need to be based on the best evidence of what children can learn.
3. **Be comprehensive** - Comprehensive standards include content standards (defining the range of knowledge and skills that children should master) and performance standards (defining how it can be demonstrated that children have met the standards).
4. **Be specific, yet still allow flexibility as teachers implement them** – If a standard covers a broad area, it must be broken down into narrow benchmarks which should still allow for teacher flexibility in implementing different curricula.
5. **Allow for a coherent educational experience** – Standards should create a continuum that flows from prekindergarten through high school graduation or beyond.
6. **Make sense to teachers and help them with their day to day work** - Teachers should be able to align curriculum and classroom assessments with the standards. This alignment is crucial to the effectiveness of standards.
7. **Standards must be written in a way that makes it possible to assess whether they are being met in a classroom** - For standards to strengthen instruction and boost achievement they must be amenable to assessment. Learning programs must be able to document program and child outcome standards.
8. **Distinguish clearly between program standards and outcome standards**- Those who establish standards need to differentiate between standards that specify “inputs” (such as the number of hours children spend in an educational program, the qualifications of the teachers, or the materials and resources provided) and standards that indicate “outputs” (what children know and can do as a result of participation).
9. **Be designed in ways that offer benefits beyond strengthening accountability** – They should support curriculum development and focus attention on important aspects of children's growth and development

Conclusion

Preschool standards present special considerations related to both the nature of early development and learning and the characteristics of early childhood programs. If policymakers and early childhood

educators take an approach that reflects today's best understandings of early childhood development and high-quality early education, everyone stands to gain.

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