

State Early Learning Guidelines Roundtable
September 18, 2002
Summary of Key Themes

PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

The purpose of this meeting was to bring together states that are working on developing and implementing state early learning guidelines in order to advise the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the U. S. Department of Education (ED) on the processes involved in accomplishing these goals. The President's *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative recognizes the importance of collaboration among federal, state and local educational leadership and provides a framework for a stronger, more significant federal-State relationship to improve the quality and delivery of early childhood programs. Under this initiative, and drawing on expertise from its federal and state partners, the Child Care Bureau is charged with the task of providing information, technical assistance, and leadership in support of state efforts to develop Child Care and Development Fund State Plans that describe: (1) voluntary state early learning guidelines in language, literacy, and pre-reading skills that align with K-12 standards; (2) plans for professional development of early care and education teachers, child care providers, and administrators; and (3) coordination of early childhood programs.

The task of developing and implementing early learning guidelines is a challenging one because states are starting in different places. DHHS and ED hope to move all states forward by urging those without guidelines to form committees to start working on them, and those states with guidelines in place to start thinking about implementation and evaluation. The ten states present at this roundtable represented a sample of states that have done significant work on developing and executing state early learning guidelines.¹ The roundtable was an opportunity to hear about initiatives around the country and to get a composite picture of states' early learning guidelines activities. It was also an opportunity to hear different perspectives and challenges inherent in creating guidelines within different state contexts. DHHS was particularly interested in gathering recommendations that could be used to assist states in the process of developing their CCDF State Plans in ways that would support the President's *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative.

DISCUSSION

The meeting format was designed to solicit participants' experiences related to the process, context, and content development of their states' early learning guidelines. These notes summarize the topics and recommendations that states offered during the Roundtable. They were intended as advice to the federal agencies and to other states embarking on early learning guideline activities. They are not recommendations or the views of DHHS or ED.

¹ States represented at the meeting included Arkansas, California, Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, and Rhode Island.

Morning Session

ICEBREAKER

What one piece of advice would you share with another state about to embark on the creation of early childhood guidelines?

Process recommendations

- Include all representatives of the early childhood community, including parents, early educators and advocates, in partnerships or collaborations that create the guidelines. Make sure that all stakeholders are involved in creating the guidelines.
- Take the time to develop a strong collaborative team for creating the guidelines. Turf battles may present themselves; it will take time, trust, and open and constant communication to achieve buy-in and a true partnership. One state noted that their Departments of Education (DOE) and Health and Human Services (HHS) had a signed agreement outlining the resources and supports that each would contribute to the process. Strong collaborations can send a powerful message to legislators, among others.
- Use an outside facilitator for the collaborative teams creating the guidelines. Some states have used members of the higher education (university/college) community in the facilitator role.
- Have experts brief the guidelines task force on specific topics to inform the standards that are being created. For example, one state called in a Health Department expert to say what was already in the laws and regulations with regard to the issue of lead paint.
- Make the guidelines available for review by professionals and the public.
- Revise your guidelines continually in light of new information.
- Pilot the guidelines in several places in your state before taking them statewide.

Context recommendations

- Respect existing standards and expertise. Survey the environment and find out what already exists (e.g., licensing standards). Build upon existing resources to increase buy-in.
- Do not simply retrofit the guidelines for the upper grades (K-12) for preschool children. Guidelines for K-12 may be too specific or otherwise inappropriate for early childhood. Still, it is important to integrate the early childhood guidelines with the other existing guidelines in the state (e.g., Head Start, K-12).

Content recommendations

- Make the guidelines comprehensive and balanced. They should address all of the developmental domains, including health, social/emotional, literacy, cognition, and approaches to learning.

- Balance child-initiated and caregiver/teacher-initiated activities. All of the guidelines should focus on the child.
- Remember and honor the various settings that young children are in. Examples for guidelines should not all be classroom-based; they should include examples of good interactions happening in child care homes, and between kith and kin and children.

Linkages to professional development

- Connect the guidelines with professional development. Teaching practices should be closely aligned to the guidelines. About half of the states have teaching guidelines to go along with the early learning guidelines.

Issues that were debated/discussed

Process issues are significant. The federal agencies need to be aware that there is a huge difference between saying what should be done and doing it. Collaboration takes a lot of time and energy to get it right.

Professional development is a challenge. Caregivers come with a wide range of professional skills and preparations (e.g. high school diploma, Master's degree). States struggle to roll out the guidelines in a way that is inclusive.

DISCUSSION OF CONTEXT

What were the motivating factors for developing early childhood guidelines?

- State legislation
- A focus on school readiness and concern for how children were achieving at school (e.g., the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) Goal 1 that all children will arrive at school "ready to learn")
- The use of a statewide school readiness assessment
- A court-order
- Larger school reform efforts, such as building a continuum of services from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade
- The growth of public pre-kindergarten
- A key person or group (e.g., early childhood educators, advocacy groups, or a state superintendent)

Issues that were debated/discussed

- None noted for this section.

What were the constraints/challenges to developing guidelines?

- Misapprehension about standards. Collaborators in guidelines efforts need to clearly communicate what standards are and are not. They are not standardization.
- Concern by early childhood educators that the K-12 standards would influence early childhood practice in an unhelpful way. States can counteract the fear of K-12 system pushing down by encouraging early childhood educators to participate in the development of the guidelines.
- Fear of developing guidelines for early learning to the detriment of early social/emotional development. States can emphasize the importance of the relationship with teachers and caregivers.
- Tension among members of the task force on what the focus should be (i.e., “kids need to be ready” vs. “kids need to be kids”). Identifying the common ground among disparate views can help committee members pull together to work towards the common goal of helping children.
- Sometimes the effort to develop guidelines was cast as part of the phonics vs. whole language debate. Again, identifying common ground is helpful here.
- Fears of accountability and assessment. Once you have standards, you need to focus on accountability.
- Lack of involvement by some stakeholders
- Different terminology - States need to define pre-K, child care, etc. A common terminology helps people to communicate clearly and exert more influence, especially in the legislature.
- Concern about duplication of record-keeping.
- Concern about funding to develop and disseminate the standards.
- Concerns over English language learners.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- The system needs to be sensitive to linguistically and culturally diverse communities. The standards developed need to be inclusive rather than exclusive.
- Several tactics to address these constraints included:
 - getting all stakeholders to participate in the process
 - looking for a common goal (e.g., helping kids) to dissipate contentious debates
 - holding public meetings around the state
 - getting multiple tiers of feedback on the guidelines

Who instigated the process?

- For most states, the lead agency was the Department of Education, sometimes in collaboration with the Department of Human Services.
- The Governor was mentioned in several instances.

- Early Childhood Commission

Issues that were debated/discussed

- None noted for this section.

What resources were available?

- Some states drew on a well-defined process that had been used to develop K-12 standards.
- Most states used Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) quality dollars. Some states used State Education dollars allocated for K-12 standards. Another had a set-aside from the State's universal pre-K initiative.
- Human resources were considered the most important by several states. Having the commitment and buy-in from all the collaborative partners was key. Professional facilitators, state experts, representatives of the early childhood community, higher education, and public school specialists were considered key human resources. Some states had minimal staff but a lot of volunteers.

Issues that were discussed/debated

- There was a lot of volunteer time by teachers, parents, and community members. But at least one state offered a stipend to participants on their state task force. Offering a stipend showed respect for people's time and preparation for the meetings. Another state offers professional development credits to teachers for helping to develop the standards. Several states noted that offering financial or other incentives may help to retain a consistent membership on their task forces.
- Many states agreed that having a facilitator who is a non-stakeholder was helpful to the functioning of the guidelines task force.

DISCUSSION OF PROCESS

Who are the players?

Two states mentioned that 45-50 individuals/groups participated in creating their state's guidelines. Another state had 75 members in an advisory council. Another state indicated that 1,500 people commented on the guidelines through focus groups and public mailings.

Among the players mentioned were:

- Department of Education (including Special Ed, Title 1, regular preschool, Even Start, Early Childhood Administrator, Ed Superintendent)
- Department of Social Services (especially child care)
- Bureau of Licensing
- Classroom teachers
- Child care providers (*N.B.: Not clear if this category includes family child care homes and kith and kin, or just center-based providers. Follow-up with states may be necessary.*)
- Resource and Referral agencies
- Head Start Collaboration Offices
- Higher education institutions, technical colleges
- Professional organizations (e.g., higher ed, National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE))
- Department of Mental Health
- Parents as Teachers
- Foundations
- Advocacy groups
- State and national experts in early childhood development, language development, etc.
- Parents of preschool children
- Faith-based community
- Governor's office

Issues that were debated/discussed

- How can states facilitate more meaningful input by parents?
- How can states get the business community involved in the process? A council/advisory group from the business community might be useful. The business community is a source of financial support as well as advocacy.

What was the timeline for developing the guidelines?

- Timelines ranged from 5 months to 7 years, with the modal response being about 2 years. One state took 5 months to put together the initial framework, but after 7 years they are still working on the particulars. One state took 9 months, meeting two days a month, to develop their guidelines. Another said it took one year to develop their framework. Two states said it took 2 years to develop their guidelines, and another anticipates it will take them 2-2.5 years to finish theirs. One state reported that they have 18 months to complete grade-level indicators from pre-K through grade 12. One state said it took 3 years to put together their initial draft of standards.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- How can we truncate the timeline?
- States emphasized that developing the guidelines involves multiple steps, including developing a framework, getting feedback on that framework, revising the framework, and piloting it. For example, at least one state piloted its guidelines for 2 years before taking them statewide; this was in addition to the 2 years it took to develop the guidelines.
- Developing guidelines is also part of a larger timeline. Once guidelines are developed, states need to develop curriculum to teach teachers how to use the guidelines. Some states develop a training module to “train the trainers” on the guidelines. In addition, curriculum for and assessments of the children also need to be developed or selected. Some states have model schools or classrooms.
- There are a lot of changing players and changing contexts that affect the timeline for developing the guidelines. The guidelines are a “living document” that changes with changes in Administration and task force committee membership.
- At least one state found that an enforced deadline helped move the process along. In addition, several states emphasized the need to respect the process as it evolves in each state. It will take a different amount of time for each state, depending on each state’s unique circumstances/context.
- Several states noted that having other state guidelines as models has helped to speed up their own process. Head Start performance standards were also used as a base for state guidelines. In addition, having research available to back up the guidelines is important. Still, it takes time to translate the research to the practitioners.
- A state suggested incentives from the federal level to truncate the timeline. Many states are already using CCDF quality dollars towards the development of the guidelines.

What impacted the process for you?

- A change in Administration
- A legislature that was concerned with test scores
- Desire of the child care community to be a part of education
- Having everyone on the same page with regard to decisions about early childhood education (e.g., Governor, social services, superintendent)

Afternoon Session

DISCUSSION OF CONTENT

The afternoon session began with the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, Susan Neuman, providing a definition of “early learning guidelines” to which the state participants responded. The definition of “early learning guidelines” offered by the Assistant Secretary was that they *are measurable, assessable, research-based, and focus on what children should know and do. For the purposes of Good Start, Grow Smart, we are focused on language, literacy and numeracy.* Social-emotional aspects of learning are critical, but can be incorporated into other goals.

How should the term “early learning guidelines” be defined?

- The goal is to create and clearly articulate a *vision* of what children should know and be able to do in order to be successful when they enter school. Guidelines are voluntary, so there is no requirement or enforcement. Guidelines should be a blueprint as opposed to a mandate.
- With guidelines that provide a clear and specific vision, states can work to align professional development and child assessment.
- It is important that guidelines are research-based. For example, what does research say are precursors of being able to read in school?
- It is important to have specificity in guidelines. Research can specify and delineate skills that lay the groundwork for progress in the early elementary years.
- Start with developing guidelines, then move to issues of how to align with professional development and child assessments. Don’t try to do it all at once.
- Distinguish between competencies and processes (in terms of practices in early education settings) that could be used to arrive at these competencies. It is a challenge to articulate with sufficient specificity what the competencies are. There may be a range of possible practices (rather than one) that leads towards competencies in differing early care and education settings.
- Guidelines for early childhood learning should build towards guidelines/standards for kindergarten through later grades. In fact, laying out the ways in which early learning serves as a precursor to later learning (e.g., early narrative dictation as precursor to later writing skills) can underscore the importance of early learning.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- Should a guidelines document include both articulation of content (competencies children should attain) and processes (practices that could underlie development of these processes)? Some states argued that it was essential to stay focused on content alone, as there may be a wide range of appropriate practices to build towards those competencies. Others noted

that without linking competencies to the range of appropriate practices, there is a risk of encouraging instructional practices that may not be appropriate for young children. A number of states currently have guidelines documents that link outcomes that children should attain with teacher /caregiver practices that support progress towards the outcomes. Others have documents that focus on outcomes or competencies alone.

- Should guidelines for early learning focus on literacy, language and math, or also encompass socioemotional development? Health?

Was there a research base to your guidelines? If so, what?

- A key resource was the National Academy of Sciences volume on early literacy: *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998). Reviews of the evidence and position papers by NAEYC, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) were also useful.
- Researchers who were helpful in particular states included Herb Ginsburg, Sam Meisels, Steve Barnett, and Dorothy Strickland. In some instances, researchers were asked to come and give presentations in states, and in other instances, to review guidelines. This was seen as extremely helpful.
- Research carried out within specific states (and not only national research) was also extremely useful. Examples of state-specific research include data from a state school entry assessment and data from an observational study of practices to support early literacy in early care and education settings.
- Research resources were helpful not only at the stage of development of guidelines but also at the point of dissemination. For example, legislators in one state were very attentive to a presentation regarding the cost effectiveness of early learning.
- It would be extremely useful for the federal government to make available reviews of the research on specific aspects of early learning. This includes, but goes beyond, the research in early literacy. In particular, expertise in the research on early math and science learning is needed.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- States and federal representatives discussed the level of specificity that is needed (or that would be desirable) in guidelines, both as to competencies and practices. For example, is it sufficient to point to singing and rhyming activities in the classroom, or does the research point to the need for more specific information about activities carried out in these contexts (such as saying things very slowly, and stretching out sounds so that children can hear and practice letter sounds)?

Do the guidelines span multiple domains of early development?

- Virtually all states described guidelines that cover multiple domains. In some instances, these were downward revisions of guidelines for K-12. In other instances, the guidelines were based on earlier reviews of the evidence on school readiness (e.g., in *Neurons to Neighborhoods*). In most cases, guidelines covered social and emotional development as well as language, literacy and math. Some states prioritized the domains and worked on developing guidelines for domains one at a time.
- A key issue that emerged was the interrelatedness of domains of early learning that are closely linked in early development. Areas of development interact and influence each other. For example, a story read to children can have number concepts in it, fostering both early literacy and math concepts. Children can be learning to share and cooperate while participating in an activity center with science materials. At least five states mentioned establishing “guiding principles” that articulated the interrelatedness among domains of development.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- Is it potentially overwhelming to focus on multiple domains at the same time in guidelines? Would it help to focus on a few, while acknowledging that the domains of development are interrelated?

DISCUSSION OF DISSEMINATION & ENFORCEMENT

Are the guidelines tied to funding, licensing, etc.?

- A number of states have linked credentialing and continuing education coursework to the guidelines. Courses are designed around specific aspects of the guidelines. For example, there might be a course specifically on early literacy.
- States noted that including representatives from higher education in the development of the guidelines helped align aspects of professional development (e.g., nature of coursework offered for degrees or credentials) with the guidelines once these became available.
- Some states provide coursework giving an overview of the guidelines themselves. A certificate is sometimes specifically tied to completion of a course on the guidelines.
- Guidelines can be applied within a parenting education framework as well. They can be aligned with caregiver training across a range of different caregivers/educators, including home-based care providers and parents. For example, the curriculum for Parents as Teachers has been revised in light of new early learning guidelines. Parents of children in early care and education settings can also be given packets of information suggesting ways to complement early learning activities

that are occurring in early education and care settings with learning activities at home.

- Another way in which guidelines can be seen as pertinent to parents is in their role as consumers of early education for their children. Knowledge of the guidelines can help parents assess whether appropriate early learning is occurring in care settings they are considering for their children.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- States questioned the extent to which training on guidelines will have lasting effects on early learning practices, given the large turnover in the early care and education workforce.
- Tiered reimbursement was noted as an important vehicle for delivering financial incentives. However, higher reimbursement rates are most often tied to broad accreditation, rather than mastery of guidelines or completion of coursework of direct relevance to specific early learning guidelines. States are linking reimbursement rates to completion of coursework related to the guidelines.
- One state mentioned that their early learning guidelines were tied to multiple standards (Head Start performance standards, child care licensing, and NAEYC accreditation, among others). This state is struggling with how to oversee, administratively, the adherence to multiple standards. Do local programs need to jump through four sets of hoops (i.e., monitoring tools for Head Start, NAEYC, licensing, and early learning guidelines)? They are grappling with the question of whether the monitoring tools used by each organization would be considered a valid assessment for the other organizations' purposes.
- It was noted repeatedly that the quality set aside of the Child Care and Development Fund is an important resource for providing training related to the guidelines. The quality set aside was also noted as a source of funding for the initial development of the guidelines. The importance of this funding for development and implementation of the guidelines was underscored.

How are you disseminating the guidelines?

- A well-grounded and articulated set of guidelines does not assure that the guidelines will serve as a basis for practice in a state. Dissemination efforts are central.
- Some states have selected pilot sites to receive extensive professional development in implementing the guidelines. This helps assure that when guidelines are implemented statewide, the most effective process will be followed for dissemination.
- Other states have "curriculum mentors" in schools who can speak about the guidelines and what they mean for educational practices.

- Some states have used regional sessions to introduce and train on the guidelines; others have used satellite training that was interactive.
- Links with higher education were noted as central to effective dissemination so that guidelines come to be reflected in coursework for early childhood certification programs.
- Presentations on the early learning guidelines were sometimes given in state legislatures.

Issues that were discussed/debated

- Guidelines need to be specific and technical enough to provide a basis for effective practices. However, effective dissemination depends on guidelines that are articulated in a way that is widely accessible to educators/care providers, parents, legislators, etc.
- A key issue is how to disseminate and implement guidelines with home-based care providers and parents.

DISCUSSION OF BENEFITS OF VOLUNTARY GUIDELINES

About 42 or 43 states have preschool guidelines; about 5 or 6 are mandatory.

To whom do the guidelines in your state apply?

- Almost all states said that their guidelines were voluntary and were intended to be used by anyone serving young children (several states focus guidelines on 4-year-olds), but only a few states mandated the guidelines' use.
- Of the states that mandated the use of guidelines, those who were required to use them included public preschool teachers, Head Start and child care centers that were part of community partnerships, and any program receiving public funding. No state mentioned that family child care centers were required to use the guidelines.
- Susan Neuman said that the federal agencies are encouraging voluntary guidelines for 3 and 4 year olds. They would like to see guidelines that are appropriate in every context.

Do you have an evaluation or assessment tool or system to monitor the effects of your states' guidelines?

- Because the guidelines are largely voluntary (they may be mandatory for state-funded programs like pre-kindergarten), having an assessment system for children in early care and education that is linked to the guidelines in content is a great help in seeing that the guidelines are addressed. Programs see that it is in their best interest to adhere to the voluntary guidelines because the assessment tools are linked to them.
- Some states indicated alignment of guidelines with systems of assessment in early care and education. For example, Work Sampling has both helped

to inform the development of guidelines in some states, and served as an assessment tool.

- Several states made sure to align their early learning guidelines with Head Start performance standards and assessment systems.

Issues that were debated/discussed

- None noted for this section.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF VOLUNTARY EARLY LEARNING GUIDELINES

(Note: See also earlier ICEBREAKER session for further recommendations)

- Ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the development of the guidelines. Provide ample time to create a well-functioning team.
- Providing a financial incentive to those participating in the development of guidelines helps assure their sustained participation.
- Have representatives from higher education represented in the group developing guidelines. This helps in later developing education and training for care providers that are in alignment with the guidelines.
- The assistance of a professional facilitator who is not a stakeholder greatly helps the functioning of the group that is developing the guidelines.
- The process of developing guidelines may be accelerated if the federal government provided incentives to the states.
- The federal government should provide a summary of the research base for the kinds of competencies the guidelines are articulating.
- It is important to acknowledge that states are at very different points in terms of the development of guidelines. Help states identify how far along in this process they have come (for example, through a set of questions about what has been accomplished thus far). States could then determine what steps would be taken to move further along the continuum (taking into account current status).
- Initial work could be done to help states characterize their stage of development with respect to guidelines. A preliminary description of possible phases of development of guidelines emerged at the meeting: Buy in phase; writing of preliminary set of guidelines; feedback and revision; dissemination; piloting guidelines in selected locations; training in use of guidelines; curriculum development in keeping with guidelines; selection or development of assessments for children in keeping with guidelines.
- Provide examples of preliminary or final sets of state guidelines to those states that are in the earlier stages of developing their guidelines as potential models for their own set of guidelines.
- Financial incentives within states are often provided through tiered reimbursement. However, the higher reimbursement rates are often tied to accreditation, rather than linked specifically to training or

education tied to guidelines. States are seeking ways to create a tighter link between incentives such as tiered reimbursement and early learning guidelines.

- Guidance is needed in how guidelines should address competencies and educational practices for children who are not English speakers, as well as for children with special needs.
- Make funding available for an evaluation of how guidelines in a state are being implemented, and whether and how they are affecting educational practices.
- Create a website where states could exchange information on effective practices in developing and implementing guidelines. Cross-state communication in other forms would also be helpful, such as state-to-state (peer-to-peer) technical assistance. Vehicles for this sharing of ideas and technical assistance include videoconferences or periodic meetings.