

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Pre-K Standards Said to Slight Social, Emotional Skills

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Thirty-six states now have standards for what children should know and be able to do before they enter kindergarten, particularly in literacy and other academic areas. But many of those documents don't give the same level of attention to other aspects of development, such as social and emotional skills and physical growth, according to the latest findings of a three-year study of states' early-learning standards.

"Overall, standards tend to emphasize language and cognition over other areas," Catherine Scott-Little, one of the authors of the study, said here last month at a conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "We didn't want to compare states, but we wanted to look at what's been emphasized."

The report comes as standards for preschoolers are increasing in importance. If states continue on their current course, 45 of them will have early-learning standards in another year or two.

Although a draft of the study, which was co-written by Sharon Lynn Kagan, a professor of early-childhood policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, was released at the June 20-23 gathering of early-childhood educators, the results are awaiting final approval from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences.

### Delving Deeper

The researchers' earlier report, issued last year, provided an overview of which states were writing early-learning standards.

With the second phase of the project, the authors sought to delve deeper into the standards documents to see what is being included and what is being left out, Ms. Scott-Little, an assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, told the group gathered for the NAEYC's 13th annual professional-development institute.

As a guideline for examining the standards, the authors used the 1995 definition of school readiness written by the now-defunct National Education Goals Panel—a description that is still widely accepted in the early-childhood field.

The document describes five dimensions of children's development: physical well-being and motor skills; social and emotional; language; cognition and general knowledge; and approaches to learning, which means such characteristics as showing curiosity and taking initiative.

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In addition to looking at whether all five dimensions were covered in the states' documents, the researchers examined how deep the standards writers went in each area.

Across all the standards documents included in the report, which does not name specific states, 38.5 percent of the standards focused on cognitive skills or general knowledge, with language development a close second at 31.7 percent.

The percentages of standards devoted to the other three areas were considerably lower: Twelve percent focused on social and emotional development, 9.3 percent concentrated on approaches to learning, and 8.4 percent covered physical and motor development.

When looking at depth, the researchers gauged the percentage of standards items within each of the dimensions. For example, in the cognition and general-knowledge category, 44 percent of the standards focused on mathematical or logical knowledge, and 36.7 percent focused on knowledge of the physical world.

The review shows that some areas of development have been "virtually ignored," Ms. Scott-Little said, such as physical growth, relationships with adults, and speaking and listening.

### **Wide Variation**

Ms. Kagan and Ms. Scott-Little also found tremendous variety in the number of actual standards statements that states are writing—ranging from 50 to more than 370.

And they looked at what factors in the states might have influenced the final products. For instance, in states where policymakers required standards, instead of those where the process was voluntary, the documents were significantly less likely to include items relating to approaches to learning. And in states with a greater link between preschool and K-12 standards, significantly less attention is given to physical and motor skills and social and emotional development.

Regardless, some educators who attended the session here maintained that the notion of writing expectations for preschoolers is out of step with their understanding of child development.

"Young children are not standardized," one woman said following the presentation.

Ms. Kagan agreed, adding that in the process of writing such standards, early-childhood educators run the risk of "misunderstanding nearly a century of research" on how young children learn.