Building Strong Foundations for Early Learning

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S GUIDE TO HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Building Strong Foundations for Early Learning:

The U.S. Department of Education's Guide to High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs

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I. INTRODUCTION

Educators, researchers, and policymakers now acknowledge the importance of early childhood education for all preschool children. An accumulation of research recognizes that young children have a much greater capacity to learn than has previously been recognized. The first five years of life are a time of enormous growth of linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor competence. Because children learn continuously from birth, child care and education cannot be thought of separately. High-quality child care and education should provide appropriate developmental experiences for young children, including attention to the physical needs of children. Early education promotes the overall development of a healthy child, but it is also critical because children who have had the right kinds of educational experiences before kindergarten do better in school.

A recent study of kindergartners illustrates the importance of early education for later performance in school more clearly than ever before. It demonstrates that children begin kindergarten with different levels of knowledge and skills based on their background, and while the more disadvantaged children catch up on basic skills in reading and mathematics during the kindergarten year, the gap widens on measures of more sophisticated reading and mathematics knowledge and skills. New syntheses of research developed by the National Research Council show the positive connection between quality educational experiences in the preschool years, readiness for kindergarten and first grade, and later learning outcomes. An accumulation of studies points to the payoff for children and taxpayers of well-designed early childhood programs, especially for children from low-income families. As interest in improving American schools and children's performance continues to rate high as a public concern, our nation's leaders are increasingly aware of the critical role of early education.[1]

Unfortunately, studies have also found that while most preschool children in the United States spend at least a portion of their days in care outside the home, they are not in settings of sufficient quality to produce later learning outcomes. The National Research Council's newly published synthesis of research, Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers, cites the warning that the growing understanding of the importance of early education "stands in stark contrast to the disparate system of care and education" available to the nation's preschool children. The report suggests that many children from low income families are in child care programs "of such low quality that learning and development . . . may even be jeopardized."[2]

As part of the Pre-K through grade 3 continuum of learning, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System (NC) serves 2,000 four-year-olds in its Bright Beginnings program. Since 1997, the system has used 85 percent of its Title I funds to provide Pre-K services to those students with the greatest educational needs. Title I funding supports highly qualified staff, a literacy and language-oriented curriculum, professional development, family-school partnerships, and transportation. The program has a fully developed, written curriculum; program standards; and a curriculum-integrated parent component. Professional development includes summer institutes, monthly full-day sessions, and bi-weekly after school opportunities. The program involves Even Start, Head Start collaborative classes and state-funded community partnerships (North Carolina's Smart Start) in addition to classes at elementary schools. Children's progress is assessed using components from the Child Observation Record and Concepts about Print. Initial results show that the effects of Bright Beginnings are sustained; children perform consistently better on end-of-year kindergarten assessments than do comparable children who did not participate. Most important, initial results show that participation in Bright Beginnings has substantially reduced achievement gaps associated with race and poverty by the end of kindergarten. The district has the goal of doubling the number of children served in Bright Beginnings with the long term objective of having at least 85 percent of all Charlotte-Mecklenburg students reading at or above grade level by the end of grade three.

Because of concern about the quality and availability of early childhood education, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) is committed to raising awareness about the importance of early childhood education, the characteristics of high-quality programs, and the availability of federal resources to support preschool services. As part of this task, the Department is providing information to educators and policy-makers about why early education is important and what it takes to ensure that preschoolers' education experiences are of sufficient quality to make a difference in learning outcomes. Recognizing the scope of the task, the Department has chosen to focus initially on promoting the development of children's cognitive and language skills in preschool settings supported by public schools.

What is the purpose of this document?

This guide is an initial step designed to provide information to local, district, and state educators about the hallmarks of high-quality early childhood programs. It includes short syntheses of research about the characteristics of early education programs that have the most influence on the development of cognition and learning. Then, indicators are provided to assess the quality of preschool programs. The indicators are based in research as well as guidelines developed by states and early childhood professional associations. If a school or district currently operates a preschool program, the guide can be used as a self-assessment tool to judge the program's quality and make plans for improvements. If the district is considering starting a preschool program, the guide offers quality standards to be used during planning. States may find the quality indicators and outcomes useful as they prepare guidance for the operation of early childhood programs.

Why target public schools?

The target audiences for this document are public school educators and policymakers who are planning or providing educational programs for children ages three to five. Elementary school administrators are beginning to realize that they must invest in the quality of preschools to demonstrate success in meeting demanding educational standards. Administrators know that children need to enter the K-12 system with a

Missouri's Independence School District became the nation's first School of the 21st Century in 1988. The district provides child care for three-and four-year olds and before-and after-school care for school-aged children in every elementary school. It operates Head Start and Full Start, a program initiated to blend Head Start and child care. Independence schools also administer Medicaid and case management and offer child development training to families and child care providers.

A range of school programs in Texas' Austin Independent School District illustrates ways that public schools can support preschool education. At Becker Elementary, parents of pre-kindergarten children learn in the Parents As Partners program how to facilitate their children's literacy development. Parents learn about literacy activities to support learning and also develop supportive relationships with teachers. The school reports unprecedented progress on observational assessments of literacy. At Sanchez and Allison Elementary schools, the Parents Advocates for Literacy (PALS) program trains parents in early literacy so that they can work as volunteers in pre-kindergarten programs. Each school day features a 45 minute PALS time when parents and preschoolers work together in small groups in pre-reading and writing. PALS adds substantially to the instructional time young children receive.

strong language and literacy foundation to achieve the goal of producing competent readers by the end of the primary grades. Public schools have great potential for improving the quality and increasing the impact of preschool services. Schools have access to resources and the capacity to enhance continuity between early education and kindergarten and first grade. Public funding for pre-kindergarten has been increasing as the K-12 system recognizes its vested interest in the preparation of young children for success in the early grades. Local school districts already have the responsibility to provide education for preschool-aged children who need special education services. But public schools can do much more by supporting staff, creating community connections and providing resources to make an impact on the early foundation for learning.

There are many ways that the public school system can support early education: providing universal pre-kindergarten; financing the placement of high needs children in early education settings; extending services for some children; offering professional development to Head Start and private preschool teachers; coordinating local providers and community resources; and facilitating transitions across settings.[3]

Why emphasize cognition and language?

The Department acknowledges that attention in the preschool years to all domains is vital, but will place more emphasis on cognition and language. Research now provides clear direction in these domains, which in the past have often been neglected in preschool settings. The new research sheds light on the competencies of young children, the role of a supportive context in development, and specific ways to promote learning. An extensive body of evidence is now available, for example, to guide emergent literacy skills and early reading.[4] Because developmental domains are related, however, growth in language and cognition will optimally occur in the context of other areas of development. Language development emerges from social interactions and rich experiences; good health and nutrition are foundational for all types of learning; and self-assurance in a group setting helps a child profit from school experiences.

What are the roles of states and districts in supporting high-quality early childhood programs?

States and districts can provide leadership, guidance, and technical assistance in support of early childhood programs. Putting in place high-quality education programs for preschool children on a large scale requires action on many fronts simultaneously. States can play a leadership role by providing guidance for program design and assessment, acknowledging pre-kindergarten children as learners, creating partnerships and collaborations to extend services, and offering financial support to encourage additional and improved services. School district offices play an essential role in creating effective early childhood programming because support for young children's learning requires the involvement of the full community. Early childhood education is most effective when it is seen as part of the full continuum of a child's education.

Section II
Vital Concepts for Planning Early Education Programs

II. VITAL CONCEPTS FOR PLANNING EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The type of early childhood programming that develops young children's language and cognitive abilities for school success has distinguishing characteristics that make it a resource-intensive but worthwhile undertaking. Without specialized training in the early childhood field, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the program options and settings that will have a long-term payoff for young children in later school achievement from those that merely have the *appearance* of quality. Seven vital concepts can guide the planning of effective early childhood programs.

1. Intensity of participation matters.

Intensity refers to the amount and length of time a child participates in high-quality experiences as well as the degree to which those services are tailored to a child's individual development. In general, the younger the child, the more individualized the programming. Preschool children learn best in small group settings with experienced adults who have the time each day to devote to their individual development. Early childhood education is more expensive to provide than elementary education simply because more adults are needed for the same number of children. Intensity and length of participation matter a great deal, especially for children who are living in circumstances that place them at greater risk of school failure, including poverty, low level of maternal education, and maternal depression.[5] To realize cognitive benefits from preschool, children need to experience educationally-focused programming on a regular basis over the course of their years of development. Fortunately, high-quality education can take place in a wide range of settings because some children now spend eight or more hours a day in care settings outside the home. It may be unrealistic to expect that all aspects of the child's day would have an education focus, but it is important that time is devoted each day to cognitive and language development.

2. Teacher expertise is the crucial ingredient.

Children's cognitive growth and language development are primarily influenced by the daily interactions between children and the adults who are guiding their learning opportunities. Quality depends on the expertise of adults in listening to, observing, talking with, and asking questions of children over time. How able is the teacher to use a child's interests and daily activities to extend vocabulary, introduce numeracy concepts, and reinforce language sounds that are the building blocks of reading? How facile is the teacher in observing signals that suggest a child is ready for new cognitive challenges? While the classroom setup and materials available to children are important elements of quality, it is the teacher's ability to help the child learn about his or her environment on a daily basis that makes a long-term difference for learning. Teachers with early

childhood expertise have backgrounds that are different from those of elementary school teachers. They require additional training in child development, language acquisition and early literacy, observation and assessment, cultural diversity, special needs, and parental involvement.[6]

3. Links with families are essential.

Preschool sets the pattern for the family's contact with the formal learning system. Early childhood teachers have the responsibility for reaching out to parents and engaging them with their children's learning so that parents begin to understand the responsibility they have for supporting their children through the school years. Teachers must work to bridge cultural and language differences with both parents and children. If preschool is the child's first independent foray outside the language and culture of the home, it becomes the job of the early childhood teacher to recognize and build on the strengths of the child and family while introducing the expectations of the formal learning environment. The language of the home that children have used since birth is most likely the language they will use for meaningful communication and construction of knowledge. The native language can be the foundation for English language acquisition.[7]

4. Children's pace of development is not uniform.

Children enter preschool with many significant differences in their cognitive, social, physical, and motor skills. Those differences arise from family experiences, individual biology, and social and cultural contexts, and thus any approach that assumes "lock-stepped development" is not productive. The role of the preschool teacher is to learn about and build upon the individual and developmental characteristics that the child brings to the learning situation.[8]

5. Early childhood education can benefit all children.

Children with disabilities and children who may be not as advanced as their age peers in some areas of development are likely to benefit most from high-quality preschool experiences. Because advantages in literacy resources and activities, language development, and some aspects of social and physical development are correlated with higher socioeconomic status, it is especially important that children from lower income backgrounds have access to quality early childhood education. Delaying children's entry into group settings because of disabilities or into preschool because of presumed lack of readiness denies opportunities for growth through interaction with peers of the same age. In the words of the National Association of Early

Childhood Specialists referring to the practice of delaying entry to kindergarten, "[delaying entry] implies that children have failed at school even before they begin."[9]

6. Continuity sustains positive effects.

Continuity has several dimensions. Children thrive in stable relationships with adults who know and care for them. The strongest programs keep staff turnover to a minimum, employ staffing patterns that keep primary caregivers with the same children over several years, use a team approach, and try to keep the peer group stable over time. Transitions across institutional structures must be carefully planned. Children who receive consistent services as they move from preschool to kindergarten and first grade will be more successful academically and socially.[10]

7. Quality requires resources.

Not every early care and education experience yields outcomes that are visible as success in elementary school; preschool programs that economize on the extent of children's participation, teacher expertise, or ratio of adults to children are not likely to provide visible benefits. High-quality early childhood programming is worth the investment of resources in terms of its promise of school success.

If the principles described above and the quality indicators found later in this document are absent, it is unlikely that learning outcomes will be realized for many children.

Section III

Features of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs that Promote Cognitive and Language Development

SECTION III. FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

This section of the document addresses six features of early childhood programs related to cognitive growth and language development: parental involvement, learning environment, pedagogy, curricula, assessment, and staff qualifications. Each feature begins with a summary of salient findings from research followed by a statement of the challenges to be faced for quality implementation. A series of quality indicator statements describes what an observer could look for to determine whether the program is on the track of producing long term meaningful outcomes for children. Rate your preschool program on each of the indicators using the five-point scale that ranges from "Not at all Descriptive of our Program" to "Very Descriptive of our Program." The final section of this document includes the indicator statements in instrument format for use in self-assessments.

The statements in the sections that follow describe hallmarks of good practice that have widespread support, but they are not intended to serve as a complete list of ideal program qualities. The statements can be used to help schools set benchmarks for improving the quality of preschool services. The quality indicators in this section are derived from the extensive work done in recent years by federal agencies, state departments of education, academics, and professional associations. Major sources include:

The National Research Council's Eager to Learn, The National Reading Panel Report on Teaching Children to Read, and Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children

National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Early Childhood Specialists

The standards and guidelines for early childhood developed by several states, including California, Connecticut, New York, and Texas.

See endnotes and resource section for more information.

A. QUALITY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

From the research:

- Family variables are powerful predictors of children's subsequent language development and academic performance. Parental beliefs and attitudes about literacy and reading affect children's literacy development. Parents report that they feel less able to positively impact their children's intellectual development than any other area of child development.[11]
- Families contribute to children's literacy and school-related competence directly by engaging in language-rich verbal exchanges with the child, and in indirect ways, by providing reading and writing materials, and serving as role models in the regular use and enjoyment of reading and writing in everyday life. Gains in children's skills are associated with parents' responsiveness during story reading.[12]
- Children with multiple risk factors, including poverty, are less likely than others to engage in literacy activities frequently with their families.[13]

The challenge for programs:

Many professionals have never had training in parental involvement strategies. Certainly, many parents are not aware of the importance of their roles in supporting children's learning, nor have they been exposed to techniques for doing so. In general, the field of parenting education is less well developed than other fields. Relationship-building with parents can be especially challenging for staff when families are from cultural, language, or income and social groups that differ from their own backgrounds. Engaging parents who have limited literacy skills poses both a challenge and opportunity. Schools might initiate or link with a family literacy program specifically designed to develop parents' literacy skills, while supporting involvement with their children's literacy development. It is important for all schools to have clear expectations for parents as well as for their own roles in the home-school relationship.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT: LOOK FOR...

Development of home-school relationships

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- All parents believe that their child's teacher respects their views and express trust in the teacher. Parents are welcome visitors to the program at any time.
- A system is in place for teacher-parent communication of day-to-day happenings that may affect children. Staff regularly provides information to parents about how their children are progressing and does so formally through conferences several times a year.
- The school has explicit expectations for the parent's role. Staff provides information to all parents about their roles in family-school relationships, the schedule and school calendar, the meaning of progress reports and school forms, and so forth.
- All parents have opportunities for input into program procedures and the plans for meeting their child's needs.

Home literacy environment and parent-child interactions

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff routinely provides books and other literacy materials for use in the home environment. Staff encourages parent-child book reading in a variety of ways. Staff demonstrates ways to read with children.
- Staff makes home visits for instructional purposes as appropriate.
- During parent-teacher conferences, staff asks parents for their observations about their child's language and literacy development. Staff uses the knowledge in ongoing assessment and planning.
- The program makes available opportunities for parents to extend their own literacy learning, directly or through referrals.

Competence in working with diverse parent populations

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff has detailed knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. Staff understands and respects the values and traditions of culturally diverse families.
- Staff makes appropriate accommodations for parents with special needs, e.g., oral presentations of written material, visits to the home.
- Staff makes arrangements for communicating with parents in their preferred language.

B. QUALITY OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

From the research:

- Class size and adult-child ratios are related to learning outcomes. Low ratios allow more interaction and individualization. Small group size encourages more extended language opportunities, child-initiated learning, and exploration and problem solving.
- Children learn best when their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically safe and secure. Children need to know that school is a safe place where adults will protect them.[15]
- A significant part of the variation in performance in Head Start is related to the quality of classroom environments. Children's performance is higher if the teacher encourages independence, and classes have varied and appropriate schedules, are well-equipped, and provide rich language learning opportunities.[16]

The challenge for programs:

Most early childhood educators would agree that learning environments strongly influence what is learned and how it is learned. Unfortunately, when the rush to provide services to increased numbers of preschoolers compromises the quality of the learning environment, desired results might not be achieved. The goal is to create an environment that conveys messages such as these to children: *This is a safe and comfortable place. I belong here and I am valued. I know what I'm expected to do.*[17]

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: LOOK FOR...

CLASS SIZE AND TEACHER-STUDENT RATIOS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- The number of adults in the classroom and the adult-child ratio follow state-recommended guidelines for age groups. Ratios and grouping are adequate so that each child is known well by at least one adult.
- Staff members have assigned responsibility for a particular group of children. Programs maintain stable staff relationships, for example, keeping the same staff with children over several years.
- Space is arranged so that children can work individually, in small groups, and as a whole group.

Safe, secure classrooms, schools, and other learning environments

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- The space, including outdoor play areas, is clean, well-lighted and ventilated and in good repair.
- Room arrangements, schedules, and daily expectations follow consistent routines that are known to children. Transitions are smooth, purposeful, and not rushed.
- There is at least one adult who speaks the home language of most children.
- Adults are respectful toward children.
- Adults involve children in the development of clear and consistent rules. Adults encourage positive social behavior, e.g., turn taking, respecting others' feelings, and model how to solve problems and resolve differences.

Rich literacy environment

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Arrangements and selection of materials engage children's interest in exploration. Children's work and products are displayed in the classroom.
- The early childhood classroom has many and varied books, which are displayed attractively and are accessible to children. Writing materials are available in many different parts of the classroom.
- The classroom contains alphabet materials, including posted letters, labels on objects in the environment, alphabet manipulatives, and alphabet books.
- At least some reading materials have been selected for their connections to children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Children have access to a wide range of materials useful for creative expression, e.g., art materials, dramatic play props.

Accommodation of children with special needs

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff includes all children in activities and events, e.g., games and sports. Adaptations are made in activities to facilitate participation by all children, and interventions for children with disabilities or other special needs maximize their participation and membership in the group.
- Physical space and materials are adapted to promote engagement, interaction, play and learning. Adaptations encourage children to initiate learning and do not always depend on adults.

C. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

From the research: [18]

- A supportive early childhood context can strengthen young children's learning in all domains, e.g., cognition and language, physical and motor development, emotional and social development, and cultural and aesthetic development.
- Children are better prepared for school when early childhood programs expose them to a variety of classroom structures, thought processes, and discourse patterns.
- Children construct knowledge actively, integrating new concepts into existing understandings. Teaching and learning are most effective when they begin with and build on children's existing understandings.
- Approaches that encourage children to reflect, predict, question, and hypothesize allow children to learn more deliberately.

The challenge for programs:

Children arrive at preschool with very different developmental, social, and cultural experiences, resulting in great variations in their readiness for the setting. Because individual differences among children have a strong influence on growth and development, no single "lock-stepped" approach to teaching is useful. Working with children who represent a wide range of development requires well-trained staff. Early childhood programs must explicitly address the development of the whole child because learning in one domain of development often reinforces or deepens learning in another area of development. Some curricular activities such as arts, music, and dramatic play are especially productive for developing language and literacy concepts.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN PEDAGOGY: LOOK FOR...

VARIETY OF DOMAINS AND STRUCTURES

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- The early childhood program has the explicit goal of supporting all domains of development for all children.
- Children's daily schedules include a mix of whole class, small group, and individual interaction with teachers.

Individualization

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff spends time each day observing children, including during play. Staff records observations for use in planning, and discusses observations of progress to match activities to the child's level of development.
- Each day includes some opportunities for child-initiated learning activities along with teacher-structured activities.

Learning how to think

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- During all types of activities, staff frequently uses open-ended questions with all children to develop children's thinking.
- Staff conducts and facilitates conversations among children on a daily basis, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to participate in taking turns during conversations.
- Each day staff provides opportunities for children to ask questions and explore responses, reason and problem-solve, and use both deliberate and trial and error approaches for investigations. Staff encourages all children to participate in hands-on activities and interact with peers and adults about their observations.

D. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA

From the research:

- Research does not identify any one best curriculum for preschool-age children to prepare them for school. But it is clear that there are some important ingredients, including explicit curricular goals, planned learning experiences in all curricular areas, and extensive language and literacy development.[19]
- Children learn from interactions with the physical and natural environment and also learn from each other. Children learn through play and active exploration of the environment.[20]
- Teaching children phonemic awareness significantly improves reading. Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly, e.g., through story reading or listening. Repetition and multiple exposure is important for vocabulary learning.[21]

The challenge for programs:

Early childhood programs need to balance consistent curricular guidance that ensures that all children have an opportunity to attain desired outcomes with the flexibility that staff needs to meet the wide-ranging needs of children. The nature of learning should inform the practice of teaching. Learning activities that take a child just beyond his or her existing knowledge and skill level are optimal for educational development. Narrowly focused curricula that emphasize only basic skills or drills on content have little meaning to children and should be avoided.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR CURRICULA: LOOK FOR...

PLANNING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff members in the early childhood program are able to describe the theoretical base from which the program operates.
- The early childhood program has identified foundational concepts and specific skills that all children should learn. Curriculum content is designed to achieve long range goals for children. The early childhood curricular expectations are linked to elementary school standards.
- The curriculum allows for children to work at different levels on different activities. Children are not expected to all do the same thing at the same time.
- The curriculum is organized within conceptual frameworks such as projects, units, and themes in order to provide context for abstract concepts.

LANGUAGE FOUNDATIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Adults engage throughout the day in meaningful conversations with children, including conversations initiated by children. Adult speech is pleasant in tone, varied in complexity, and understood by children.
- Vocabulary development is part of all learning activities. Staff takes advantage of routines, informal daily activities, and play opportunities to point out new words in context, and adults expand upon children's speech.
- Staff members exhibit respect for the home language of children. Staff may use the the language in some daily conversations and include stories and materials in the home language.

Emergent literacy foundations for reading

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff explicitly teaches phonological awareness skills through rhyming, categorization of sounds, and identification of syllables. On a daily basis, staff uses rhyming, poetry, music, and word play with sound clusters to build sensitivity to sounds and awareness of phonemic patterns.
- Staff frequently makes explicit connections between speech and print, e.g., pointing out letters of the alphabet associated with sounds and speech units and taking dictation from children.
- Staff explicitly teaches skills associated with conventions of print and literacy, e.g., book handling, following print on a page.
- Adult-child shared book reading of quality children's literature occurs every day. During story reading and telling, instructional approaches are used frequently to engage children in dialogue about the story and telling the story.
- Teachers encourage children every day to talk about their experiences and to represent their ideas in stories and pictures.
- Children are encouraged to write using their own spellings of words to link sounds with letters.

Mathematics and science foundations for problem-solving

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff encourages direct, first hand, interactive experiences with natural and manipulative materials. The real world is the subject of learning activities. Children have the opportunity to develop concepts about the natural world, including the basic needs of living things, the differences and similarities among objects and organisms, the materials things are made of, and cycles and patterns of change.
- Staff develops children's understanding of key vocabulary associated with sequencing, comparisons and sorting, spatial relationships, and temporal relationships.
- Children have the opportunities to learn the functions and properties of objects, and classify and group materials.
- Staff provides instruction and practice in recognizing numerals, counting objects, describing and naming shapes, reproducing and extending simple patterns, using basic measurement tools, and collecting and organizing information.
- Staff helps children develop simple investigations that involve asking questions, making observations, gathering information, drawing conclusions, and communicating findings.

E. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF

From the research: [22]

- A defining feature of a supportive environment is a responsive and responsible adult who nurtures children's dispositions to learn. The quality of early teacher-child relationships affects social competence and school achievement.
- Teachers' professional backgrounds are related to the types of interactions with children that support cognitive and language development. When the teaching staff knows how to observe children's approaches to learning, they are able to create challenging learning experiences that are within the reach of the child, and as a result, extend the child's competence.
- Stability and consistency of relationships between adults and children are important for learning. Building close relationships depends upon stability; therefore, turnover of staff is disruptive for children's learning.

The challenge for programs:

In many areas, there is a shortage of qualified early childhood staff so maintaining staff, with expertise and experience requires ongoing attention. Because individualized support for children is critical, schools need to create professional working conditions that support continuous learning, enabling teachers to learn more about the children in their care and reflect on the effectiveness of teaching practices.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY OF STAFF: LOOK FOR...

BACKGROUND OF STAFF

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Early childhood teachers have at least baccalaureate degrees, ideally with specialization in early childhood education. At a minimum, early childhood instructional assistants are high school graduates or have equivalent credentials and have been trained in early childhood education.
- Early childhood teachers and instructional assistants have or are working towards appropriate state certification for early childhood.
- At least some members of the staff speak the home language of the majority of the children.

Professional development

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- All early childhood staff members (teachers and instructional assistants) have training in child development; child observation and assessment; early literacy and language acquisition, including second language acquisition; curricula, environments and materials for young children; parental involvement; cultural diversity and special needs; and working with other staff.
- At least weekly, staff has an opportunity to discuss their observations of children's development and seek guidance for instructional approaches.

Professional working conditions

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- During the school day, staff spends little time on tasks that do not involve children's learning.
- Early childhood staff members receive supervision from an early childhood specialist with at least a Masters degree in early childhood education.

F. QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

From the research:

- Assessment serves several purposes in early childhood: planning instruction and monitoring progress, communicating progress to parents, identifying children in need of special services or intervention, and evaluating how well the program is meeting its goals.[23]
- There are long-term negative consequences associated with deferring identification of and planning interventions for children who need additional support for language and literacy development.[24]
- Assessment in early childhood is currently in a state of flux and the field is continuing to develop.[25]

The challenge for programs:

Assessment is inseparable from effective instruction; teachers daily guide learning based on their assessments of each child's development. A wide variety of approaches and instruments is appropriate for instructional assessment to provide additional support in areas of need. Those same instruments may not be appropriate for higher stakes assessments of preschool children, for example, placement decisions. Much more care needs to be employed when assessment is used for purposes external to the classroom, e.g., program evaluation and accountability. Schools certainly need to assess the effectiveness of preschool programs in terms of their outcomes for children, but the data should always be collected and reported in ways that bring benefits to children rather than delaying services. Because the course of development in the preschool years is uneven and sporadic, assessment results that reflect only a single point in time can easily misrepresent children's learning.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: LOOK FOR...

GUIDANCE FOR INSTRUCTION

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Teachers use a variety of assessment procedures that are embedded in instruction on an ongoing basis, including observation, performance assessment, work samples and interviews.
- Records of assessments document what children know as well as what they do not yet know. Teacher records show which children are not making adequate progress in order to ensure that attention is paid to skill development.

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS FOR SPECIAL SERVICES AND INTERVENTIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- The program has a process in place for screening and referring children for special education and other services. The process includes provisions for informing parents of the referral in advance, along with their associated rights. Parents may remain with the child during assessments.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff and parents meet to develop instructional and other goals for children.
- Staff and parents participate in a formal annual review to determine the program's effectiveness in meeting the needs of children and families.
- The annual review includes an assessment of the overall context, including staff turnover, and parental satisfaction.
- The annual review of the program includes performance data about children collected by teachers. Multiple indicators of progress are included to assess program effectiveness in meeting instructional goals.
- Staff make recommendations for program improvement based upon findings in the annual review.

SUMMARY

If the indicators listed in the six features above ***are*** descriptive of your current preschool program, then you are well on the way to providing experiences for young children that will produce strong outcomes. The next section lists specific outcomes for language development, enabling you to determine whether children in your preschool program are attaining the skills that are important foundations for school success.

If your program ***did not*** rate well on some indicators, now is the time to take stock and develop an action plan that answers these questions:

- Where do we want to be in a year? What changes are most important? What goals are reasonable?
- What strategies, capacities, and resources do we need to achieve those goals?

Section IV
Child Outcomes in the Language Domain

SECTION IV. CHILD OUTCOMES IN THE LANGUAGE DOMAIN

What should parents and the public expect from the preschool experience? This section lists examples of benchmarks within the language domain that most children could be expected to attain as a result of participation in a quality preschool. Of course, all children would not be expected to arrive at a benchmark at the same time nor attain the same proficiency. Assessments should take into account a child's ability in English and his or her stage of native and English language acquisition.

There are many ways to measure the attainment of the outcomes listed below, including observation and performance assessments. The Resource Section includes a list of assessment instruments that programs might consider for gauging attainment of outcomes.

The outcomes listed below are expectations that are appropriate for most children who have participated in high-quality preschool programs. Children's performance on these outcomes will help you judge the adequacy of preschool program quality.

By the end of preschool, how many of children in your program are able to ____?

A. Oral Language, Communication and Listening	**MOST** (75%or more)	**MANY** (50-75%)	**SOME** (25-50%)	**FEW** (less than 25%)
Communicate to be understood by adults and peers.				
Initiate and engage in conversations with adults and peers.				
Ask questions for information and to extend learning.				
Use multiple word sentences to express ideas.				
Listen to others and indicate understanding.				
Understand accurately directions with more than one step.				

B. Background Knowledge and Vocabulary	**MOST** (75%or more)	**MANY** (50-75%)	**SOME** (25-50%)	**FEW** (less than 25%)
Learn new vocabulary from everyday situations.				
Attempt to communicate more than current vocabulary, extending to create new meaning.				
Use correct vocabulary related to position, order, direction, size, and comparison.				
Use vocabulary associated with scientific principles, e.g., sink, float, freeze, liquid, alive.				
Use basic computer vocabulary, e.g., mouse, keyboard, printer.				

C. *Emergent Literacy*

Phonological awareness	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Recognize that words are made up of individual sounds.				
Recognize that language is made up of words.				
Recognize and produce rhyming words.				
Perceive the difference between similar sounding words.				
Identify words that begin with the same sounds.				
Break words into syllables.				

Alphabetic principle	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Understand that sounds are represented in print by combinations of letters.				
Make some sound-letter matches.				

Letter awareness	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Know some alphabet letter names, including those in own name.				
Recognize own name and several high frequency words in environment.				

Print awareness	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Understand that print conveys messages.				
Understand that there are different text forms used for different functions.				
Demonstrate book awareness, e.g., holding the book right side up, turning pages.				
Understand print conventions, e.g., left to right, top to bottom, and spaces between words.				

Writing	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Use symbols or drawings to express ideas.				
Use letter approximations to write words or ideas.				
Dictate words, phrases, sentences to adults for recording.				
Write letters in own name.				

D. Comprehension	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Retell the sequence of main events in a story.				
Predict events in a story.				
Connect information in books to real life experiences.				

E. Interest in Literacy	MOST (75%or more)	MANY (50-75%)	SOME (25-50%)	FEW (less than 25%)
Play with the sounds of language in games and songs.				
Attend to and engage in discussion about books when being read to.				
Show interest in reading-related activities.				
Attempt to read and write independently.				
Have favorite books and request re-reading of books.				
Enjoy library visits and select books by own criteria.				

CONCLUSION

The Department of Education offers the information in this guide to states, districts, and schools to use in developing high-quality early childhood programs and in supporting the continuous improvement of existing programs. The guide may also be used to make the case for providing services to young children and ensuring that those services are of sufficient quality to have long-term positive effects.

If your self-assessment shows need for improvement, the information in this guide may help identify the capacities and resources needed to improve services over the coming year. The resources in the next section can provide additional help for your improvement efforts.

Section V
Resources

SECTION V. RESOURCES

This section of the guide includes references for additional information, and endnotes for the text.

A. Program Quality Instruments

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). The ECERS is a global rating of classroom quality based on structural features of the classroom. It uses a seven-point rating scale that provides extensive descriptive information on the classroom. The ECERS was recently revised, and is easier to train and gain inter-rater reliability. The ECERS-R features more clearly defined criteria for each scale, as well as an improved balance between classroom materials, furnishings, and routine activities with classroom processes and practices. The ECERS-R subscales include space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff. ECERS was used in the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), the Observational Study of Early Childhood Programs, National Child Care Staffing Study, the Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study, Family and Classroom Correlates of Head Start Children's Developmental Outcomes, and the Thresholds of Quality Study. The ECERS-R is currently being used in FACES.

Assessment Profile for Early Childhood Programs. The Assessment Profile is an observational checklist containing 147 Yes/No items designed to assist in self-assessment to improve the quality of early childhood programs. It focuses on five aspects of the dynamic classroom environment: (1) the learning environment, (2) the curriculum, (3) interactions, (4) individualizing, and (5) health and safety. The Assessment Profile is used in FACES (Learning Environment and Scheduling scales), and was previously used in the Observational Study of Early Childhood Programs, the Atlanta site of the National Child Care Staffing Study, the National Child Care and Family Study and an adaptation was developed for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care.

Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO). The ELLCO is a 30-40 minute observation period followed by an interview with the teacher. The observer then rates the classroom on 14 variables that span four functional areas: 1) classroom functional environment (organization of the classroom, contents of the classroom, presence and use of technology, opportunities for child choice and initiative); 2) the interactive environment (classroom management strategies, classroom climate); 3) language and literacy facilitation (oral language facilitation, presence of books, book reading practices, approaches to children's writing); and 4) broad support for literacy (approaches to curriculum, recognizing diversity in the classroom, facilitating home support for literacy, approaches to assessment).

B. Selected References for More Information (see also endnotes for major references):

Articles and Books

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Burns, M.S., Griffin, P., & Snow, C. (Eds.). (1998). *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success.* Washington, DC: Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council.

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Katz, L.G. (1993, April). *Five perspectives on quality in early childhood programs.* Available on-line: http://ericeece.org/pubs/books/fivepers.html

National Governors' Association. (1996). *Promising practices to improve results for young children.* Washington, DC: Author.

Regional Educational Laboratories Early Childhood Collaboration Network. (1995, November). *Continuity in early childhood: A framework for home, school, and community linkages.* Washington, DC: Author.

Stief, Elizabeth. (1994). *Transitions to school.* Washington, DC: National Governors' Association.

Organizations

Center for Improvement of Early Reading (CIERA)
Available on-line: http://www.ciera.org

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
Available on-line: http://www.cec.sped.org

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE)
Available on-line: http://www.ericeece.org/

International Reading Association (IRA)
Available on-line: http://www.reading.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Available on-line: http://www.naeyc.org

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE)
Available on-line: http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/abtnaecs.html

National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL)
Available on-line: http://www.fpg.unc.edu/NCEDL

National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL)
Available on-line: http://www.famlit.org

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)
Available on-line: http://www.nifl.gov/

National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, Early Childhood Institute (ECI)
Available on-line: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/

C. ENDNOTES

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[5]National Research Council. (2000). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers. Executive summary.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

[6]National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education. (2000, March). *New teachers for a new century: The future of early childhood professional preparation.* (U.S. Department of Education Publication: ECI 2000-9038) Available: <http://www.ed.gov> Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

[7]National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1998, July). Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. A joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Adopted May 1998. *Young Children, 53*(4); and Powell, D. R., & D'Angelo, D. (2000, September). *Guide to improving parenting education in Even Start family literacy programs.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Even Start Family Literacy Program. Available: <http://www.ed.gov>

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[9]National Research Council. (2000). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers. Executive summary.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press; and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS). (2000, August). *Unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement.* Author. http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position/trends2000.html

[10]Council of Chief State School Officers. (2000). *Early childhood and family education.* Washington, DC: Author.

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[22]National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education. (2000, March). *New teachers for a new century: The future of early childhood professional preparation.* (U.S. Department of Education Publication: ECI 2000-9038) Available: <http://www.ed.gov>. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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The following pages contain a self-assessment tool using the quality indicator statements for the six features of high-quality early childhood programs described in Section III. For each quality indicator statement, determine how descriptive that indicator is of your program, ranging from "Not at all Descriptive of our Program" to "Very Descriptive of our Program." Write notes to explain the ratings.

It is helpful to involve a multi-disciplinary team to determine and discuss the ratings. Use the team discussion to identify the strengths of preschool services and also determine areas for needed improvements.

Section VI
Program Self-Assessment

A. QUALITY INDICATORS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

Development of home-school relationships

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 All parents believe that their child's teacher respects their views and express trust in the teacher. Parents are welcome visitors to the program at any time.

2 A system is in place for teacher-parent communication of day-to-day happenings that may affect children. Staff regularly provides information to parents about how their children are progressing and does so formally through conferences several times a year.

3 The school has explicit expectations for the parent's role. Staff provides information to all parents about their roles in family-school relationships, the schedule and school calendar, the meaning of progress reports and school forms, and so forth.

4 All parents have opportunities for input into program procedures and the plans for meeting their child's needs.

Home literacy environment and parent-child interactions

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Staff routinely provides books and other literacy materials for use in the home environment. Staff encourages parent-child book reading in a variety of ways. Staff demonstrates ways to read with children.

2 Staff makes home visits for instructional purposes as appropriate.

3 During parent-teacher conferences, staff asks parents for their observations about their child's language and literacy development. Staff uses the knowledge in ongoing assessment and planning.

4 The program makes available opportunities for parents to extend their own literacy learning, directly or through referrals.

Competence in working with diverse parent populations

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Staff has detailed knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. Staff understands and respects the values and traditions of culturally diverse families.

2 Staff makes appropriate accommodations for parents with special needs, e.g., oral presentations of written material, visits to the home.

3 Staff makes arrangements for communicating with parents in their preferred language.

B. QUALITY OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Class size and teacher-student ratios

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 The number of adults in the classroom and the adult-child ratio follow state-recommended guidelines for age groups. Ratios and grouping are adequate so that each child is known well by at least one adult.

2 Staff members have assigned responsibility for a particular group of children. Programs maintain stable staff relationships, for example, keeping the same staff with children over several years.

3 Space is arranged so that children can work individually, in small groups, and as a whole group.

Safe, secure classrooms, schools, and other learning environments

PROGRAM SELF-RATING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 The space, including outdoor play areas, is clean, well-lighted and ventilated and in good repair.

2 Room arrangements, schedules, and daily expectations follow consistent routines that are known to children. Transitions are smooth, purposeful, and not rushed.

3 There is at least one adult who speaks the home language of most children.

4 Adults are respectful toward children.

5 Adults involve children in the development of clear and consistent rules. Adults encourage positive social behavior, e.g., turn taking, respecting others' feelings, and model how to solve problems and resolve differences.

Rich literacy environment

PROGRAM SELF-RATING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Arrangements and selection of materials engage children's interest in exploration. Children's work and products are displayed in the classroom.

2 The early childhood classroom has many and varied books, which are displayed attractively and are accessible to children. Writing materials are available in many different parts of the classroom.

3 The classroom contains alphabet materials, including posted letters, labels on objects in the environment, alphabet manipulatives, and alphabet books.

4 At least some reading materials have been selected for their connections to children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

5 Children have access to a wide range of materials useful for creative expression, e.g., art materials, dramatic play props.

Accommodation of children with special needs

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Staff includes all children in activities and events, e.g., games and sports. Adaptations are made in activities to facilitate participation by all children, and interventions for children with disabilities or other special needs maximize their participation and membership in the group.

2 Physical space and materials are adapted to promote engagement, interaction, play and learning. Adaptations encourage children to initiate learning and do not always depend on adults.

C. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

Variety of domains and structures

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 The early childhood program has the explicit goal of supporting all domains of development for all children.

2 Children's daily schedules include a mix of whole class, small group, and individual interaction with teachers.

Individualization

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Staff spends time each day observing children, including during play. Staff records observations for use in planning, and discusses observations of progress to match activities to the child's level of development.

2 Each day includes some opportunities for child-initiated learning activities along with teacher-structured activities.

C. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY (CONTINUED)

LEARNING HOW TO THINK

	PROGRAM SELF-RATING NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE — VERY DESCRIPTIVE 1 2 3 4 5
1 During all types of activities, staff frequently uses open-ended questions with all children to develop children's thinking.	
2 Staff conducts and facilitates conversations among children on a daily basis, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to participate in taking turns during conversations.	
3 Each day staff provides opportunities for children to ask questions and explore responses, reason and problem-solve, and use both deliberate and trial and error approaches for investigations. Staff encourages all children to participate in hands-on activities and interact with peers and adults about their observations.	

D. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA

PLANNING

	PROGRAM SELF-RATING NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE — VERY DESCRIPTIVE 1 2 3 4 5
1 Staff members in the early childhood program are able to describe the theoretical base from which the program operates.	
2 The early childhood program has identified foundational concepts and specific skills that all children should learn. Curriculum content is designed to achieve long range goals for children. The early childhood curricular expectations are linked to elementary school standards.	
3 The curriculum allows for children to work at different levels on different activities. Children are not expected to all do the same thing at the same time.	
4 The curriculum is organized within conceptual frameworks such as projects, units, and themes in order to provide context for abstract concepts.	

Language foundations

1 Adults engage throughout the day in meaningful conversations with children, including conversations initiated by children. Adult speech is pleasant in tone, varied in complexity, and understood by children.

2 Vocabulary development is part of all learning activities. Staff takes advantage of routines, informal daily activities, and play opportunities to point out new words in context, and adults expand upon children's speech.

3 Staff members exhibit respect for the home language of children. Staff may use the the language in some daily conversations and include stories and materials in the home language.

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

Emergent literacy foundations for reading

1 Staff explicitly teaches phonological awareness skills through rhyming, categorization of sounds, and identification of syllables. On a daily basis, staff uses rhyming, poetry, music, and word play with sound clusters to build sensitivity to sounds and awareness of phonemic patterns.

2 Staff frequently makes explicit connections between speech and print, e.g., pointing out letters of the alphabet associated with sounds and speech units and taking dictation from children.

3 Staff explicitly teaches skills associated with conventions of print and literacy, e.g., book handling, following print on a page.

4 Adult-child shared book reading of quality children's literature occurs every day. During story reading and telling, instructional approaches are used frequently to engage children in dialogue about the story and telling the story.

5 Teachers encourage children every day to talk about their experiences and to represent their ideas in stories and pictures.

6 Children are encouraged to write using their own spellings of words to link sounds with letters.

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE FOUNDATIONS FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING	PROGRAM SELF-RATING NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE — VERY DESCRIPTIVE 1 2 3 4 5
1 Staff encourages direct, first hand, interactive experiences with natural and manipulative materials. The real world is the subject of learning activities. Children have the opportunity to develop concepts about the natural world, including the basic needs of living things, the differences and similarities among objects and organisms, the materials things are made of, and cycles and patterns of change.	
2 Staff develops children's understanding of key vocabulary associated with sequencing, comparisons and sorting, spatial relationships, and temporal relationships.	
3 Children have the opportunities to learn the functions and properties of objects, and classify and group materials.	
4 Staff provides instruction and practice in recognizing numerals, counting objects, describing and naming shapes, reproducing and extending simple patterns, using basic measurement tools, and collecting and organizing information.	
5 Staff helps children develop simple investigations that involve asking questions, making observations, gathering information, drawing conclusions, and communicating findings.	

E. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF

Background of staff

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Early childhood teachers have at least baccalaureate degrees, ideally with specialization in early childhood education. At a minimum, early childhood instructional assistants are high school graduates or have equivalent credentials and have been trained in early childhood education.

2 Early childhood teachers and instructional assistants have or are working towards appropriate state certification for early childhood.

3 At least some members of the staff speak the home language of the majority of the children.

Professional development

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 All early childhood staff members (teachers and instructional assistants) have training in child development; child observation and assessment; early literacy and language acquisition, including second language acquisition; curricula, environments and materials for young children; parental involvement; cultural diversity and special needs; and working with other staff.

2 At least weekly, staff has an opportunity to discuss their observations of children's development and seek guidance for instructional approaches.

E. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF

Professional working conditions

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 During the school day, staff spends little time on tasks that do not involve children's learning.

2 Early childhood staff members receive supervision from an early childhood specialist with at least a Masters degree in early childhood education.

F. QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Guidance for instruction

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Teachers use a variety of assessment procedures that are embedded in instruction on an ongoing basis, including observation, performance assessment, work samples and interviews.

2 Records of assessments document what children know as well as what they do not yet know. Teacher records show which children are not making adequate progress in order to ensure that attention is paid to skill development.

Identification of needs for special services and interventions

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 The program has a process in place for screening and referring children for special education and other services. The process includes provisions for informing parents of the referral in advance, along with their associated rights. Parents may remain with the child during assessments.

2 Teachers know the signs of children who may be having difficulty acquiring language skills. Assessments take into account a child's ability in English and his or her stage of native and English language acquisition.

3 Results of screening tests are not used as the sole criterion for placement into special programs.

Program assessment

Program Self-Rating

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE				VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5

1 Staff and parents meet to develop instructional and other goals for children.

2 Staff and parents participate in a formal annual review to determine the program's effectiveness in meeting the needs of children and families.

3 The annual review includes an assessment of the overall context, including staff turnover, and parental satisfaction.

4 The annual review of the program includes performance data about children collected by teachers. Multiple indicators of progress are included to assess program effectiveness in meeting instructional goals.

5 Staff make recommendations for program improvement based upon findings in the annual review.

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