

Introduction to a Comparison of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework the Maryland Model for School Readiness and the Maryland Guidelines for Healthy Child Development and Care

The first five years of life are critical for developing the foundations for learning. The report *Eager To Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (2001) stresses that from birth, a healthy child is learning to explore, communicate, and develop ideas about how things work. The successful development of these abilities and skills depend in large part on a child's early environment. Parents, teachers, and caregivers promote development and learning when they provide experiences that build on and extend the child's capabilities. It is a shared responsibility of parents, teachers and caregivers to furnish optimal care for children so that they will grow to become life-long learners.

Recognizing the importance of the early years, the efficacy of high quality preschool programs, and the research findings that acknowledged children's lack of preparedness for school provided the impetus for developing early learning standards. It was determined that defining content and outcomes for early childhood education would lead to opportunities for a child's positive development and learning. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, "early learning standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive high-quality system of services for young children, contributing to young children's educational experiences and to their future success" (2002).

To address the need for defining desired content and outcomes for early education in Maryland, the Maryland State Department of Education developed the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR). The MMSR provides a common goal and language to assist parents, teachers, and providers to assist young children's learning. The MMSR incorporates research-based instruction, age-

appropriate assessment of children's learning, and effective communication among teachers, parents, and early childhood providers. The overall framework defines what preschool and kindergarten children should know and be able to do during their early years.

To ensure accountability at the national level, Head Start in 2000 developed a document delineating the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Both MMSR and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework include domains, elements/ indicators and objectives. The documents are intended to guide practitioners in their curriculum development and ongoing assessment of the progress and accomplishments of children.

The MMSR and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework include analogous Domains of Learning which include: Language and Literacy, Personal and Social Development, Cognitive and General Knowledge including Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and The Arts, and Physical Development and Health Education.

A caution that must be considered when adhering to the standards is to ensure that the responsibility for meeting the indicators are not placed on the children but rather on the educational system. Negative consequences may result for children who fail to meet the standards because the data used will label them as educational failures. Culturally and linguistically diverse children, and children with disabilities, may be at heightened risk. Another care in implementing the standards is to ensure that efforts are made by teachers to select activities, materials, and experiences that are developmentally appropriate and are selected with an understanding of the needs, interests, and varied learning styles of children.

The Alignment Document was developed to illustrate that although there may be some differences in terminology, there is a strong commonality among the Performance Standards of the MMSR, the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework and the Maryland

Guidelines for Healthy Child Development. The Alignment Document was developed to create a shared language and evidence-based frame of reference so that practitioners, curriculum coordinators, families, and decision makers can work collaboratively to support the implementation of the early learning standards. Regardless of the education program or the setting of the early childhood program, every preschool child in Maryland has the right to a quality learning experiences that are guided by designated Standards.

It is expected that by implementing the standards into program goals and objectives, engaging and supporting families as partners, and building a system of communication and coordination, significant benefits will surface to ensure that all children will begin kindergarten ready to learn.