



# Fostering School Success with Standards for Nonacademic Skills

By Danielle Ewen and LeighAnn M. Smith    October 2015

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

When we look at a newborn, we rarely think about the child’s potential for success and skills development for college and career readiness. Instead, we are awed by the baby’s mere existence: her strong grip; her smile; how her eyes track loved ones; how each cry communicates a need to be met. We now know that each of these moments is also an opportunity for the child’s brain to grow; to make new social, emotional, and cognitive connections; and to form important neurological pathways.

As children move from infancy to toddlerhood and into preschool, their brains continue to grow and change. Parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults provide input that helps children master the basic skills they will need in order to climb slide ladders, hold pencils to spell their names, excitedly tell the story of their day, and understand when they are asked to put their toys away.

As children move into kindergarten and first and second grades, they begin to build on these earliest social, emotional, physical, and academic skills. They learn to read and do math; to play with their friends; and to follow rules in the classroom and on the playground. Each new milestone sets these children on the path to college and career readiness.

New evidence highlights the importance of social and emotional skills alongside academic skills for success in school and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Academic skills—including basic literacy and math skills—are well defined and include skills such as learning the alphabet and counting. Social and emotional skills, meanwhile, include sharing, self-control, and building relationships with peers and adults. Yet, when states look to align early learning standards with those for K-12, social and emotional skills are often left out of the standards for children in elementary, middle, and high school—even as new research highlights the importance of these skills throughout elementary school and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

This report explores the reasons for including social and emotional learning in early education standards, as well as detail about the five domains of learning—cognition, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, physical development, and language development—and how several states have incorporated them into their learning standards. By using these examples as guidelines for their own educational standards, other states can align early learning guidelines with standards for K-12 in order to support academic and social-emotional skills for all children.

# Social and emotional skills are important

While the exact label for social and emotional skills is inconsistent in the later grades, the idea that they should be incorporated more fully beyond the earliest years is not.<sup>3</sup> A growing body of research and evidence shows that students must master a range of deeper learning skills and knowledge to be ready for success in both college and career training, yet school systems generally do not include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and academic skills as vital teaching points in K-12 classes, despite state support of these standards in early learning settings.<sup>4</sup>

Both the social-emotional development domains and the approaches to learning domains identified within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start learning standards contribute greatly to the acquisition of other skills. Indeed, a continuing study of kindergarten learning published by the National Center for Education Statistics finds strong correlations between kindergarteners' ratings on behaviors categorized as "approaches to learning" and their reading and math outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, a longitudinal study from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that young children with strong social skills are more likely to be successful as adults.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, regardless of the term used to describe them, the development of these skills—and the contributions they make to learning and development in the later grades—should not be overlooked.

Recent efforts to create birth to third-grade continuums that link early childhood standards, curriculum, assessment, program requirements, and professional development<sup>7</sup>—as well as attempts to foster a cultural shift that aligns supports for children's development across the birth to third-grade spectrum—have created new opportunities at state and local levels. When created and implemented together, this combined approach to academic and nonacademic standards promotes integration across early learning and K-12 systems; informs best teaching and learning practices for the full range of knowledge and skills required for school readiness; and promotes college and career readiness. Yet, too often learning standards in the early elementary grades continue to omit nonacademic areas of development.

# Early learning standards cross the range of domains

A variety of national organizations and research programs have authored guidance, tools, or model learning standards for the early childhood age groups.<sup>8</sup> A number of these standards adopt some iteration of the same five essential domains of school readiness that were articulated by the National Education Goals Panel, or NEGP, though the terminology can vary between organizations. Other organizations, however, urge larger recognition of another takeaway from the NEGP: that early learning is complex, multidimensional, and influenced by a number of individual, cultural, and contextual variables. Thus, though there are different approaches as to how or whether early learning standards can be quantified, the frequent use of specific models by states creates an opportunity to analyze trends in early learning standards development.

In 1990, all 50 state governors and President George H.W. Bush identified a set of goals that became the core work of the National Education Goals Panel.<sup>9</sup> The first of these identified a plan for school readiness. In 1995, the panel outlined five specific domains<sup>10</sup> that should be included within the school readiness framework:

- Physical well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches toward learning
- Language development
- Cognition and general knowledge

Given their extreme interrelatedness, these five domains are meant to be adopted in tandem with one another. Because these domains were developed using a comprehensive literature review, as well as with input and peer review from numerous early learning experts, the NEGP domains became a framework upon which a number of states developed their own early learning standards.<sup>11</sup>

For example, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, or HSELOF—formerly known as the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework—has been published since 2000. This framework reflects early childhood research in establishing what children should know and be able to do at various ages and stages of development.<sup>12</sup> The framework represents the continuum of learning for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and designed to guide all programs that serve children ages 3 to 5. In its current form, updated in June 2015,<sup>13</sup> HSELOF presents five central domains of child development and early learning that are understood to be essential for both school and long-term success:

- Perceptual, physical, and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches toward learning
- Language and literacy development
- Cognition

While these goals are aligned with the five essential domains of school readiness identified by the NEGP, HSELOF provides more detailed categories within several of the five central domains. (see Table 1)

All 50 states have implemented some iteration of early learning standards, and many have had them for a number of decades. (see Table 1) These learning standards for children up to age 5 are typically focused on a variety of academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills.<sup>14</sup> A handful of states adopted standards for pre-K, or ages 3 to 5, in the mid- to late-1990s, and all states had some standards in place by 2006.<sup>15</sup> As of 2010, nearly half of all states also had standards for infants and toddlers, defined as birth to age 3.<sup>16</sup> The majority of states' early learning standards are modeled after those of the federal Head Start program, and many states have expanded the breadth of their standards in recent years to more closely reflect prior versions of the HSELOF. Indeed, now that all states have some form of early learning standards, the influence of the NEGP and HSELOF frameworks can easily be seen. (See Table 1)



**TABLE 1**

**Alignment and adoption of early learning development frameworks**

National Education Goals Panel <sup>1</sup>	Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework <sup>2</sup>	States adopting <sup>3</sup>		
Physical Well-Being and Motor Development	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development	Standards exist in all states.		
Social and Emotional Development	Social and Emotional Development	Standards exist in all states.		
Approaches Toward Learning	<p style="text-align: center;">Approaches to Learning</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Formerly divided into the subdomains of “Approaches to Learning” and “Creative Arts Expression.”</p>	<p>Approaches to learning standards in all but five states: Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, and Texas; Creative Arts Expression standards in all but four states: Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, and Wisconsin.</p>		
Language Development	<p style="text-align: center;">Language and Literacy</p> <hr/> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="663 668 729 695">Literacy</td> <td data-bbox="859 658 991 710">Language and Communication</td> </tr> </table>	Literacy	Language and Communication	<p>Language Development and Literacy standards exist in all states.</p>
Literacy	Language and Communication			
Cognition and General Knowledge	<p style="text-align: center;">Cognition</p> <hr/> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="586 778 802 805">Mathematics Development</td> <td data-bbox="840 778 1007 805">Scientific Reasoning</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">Formerly divided into the subdomains of “Logic and Reasoning,” “Mathematics Knowledge and Skills,” “Science Knowledge and Skills,” and “Social Studies Knowledge and Skills.”</p>	Mathematics Development	Scientific Reasoning	<p>Early Math standards in all states except New Hampshire; early Science standards in all but two states: New Hampshire and South Carolina; History and Social Studies standards in all but seven states: Alabama, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.</p>
Mathematics Development	Scientific Reasoning			

Note: Skill domain names are taken directly from the frameworks.

Sources:

- 1 Sharon Lynn Kagan, Evelyn Moore, and Sue Bredekamp, eds., “Reconsidering Children’s Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary” (Washington: National Education Goals Panel, 1995), available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391576.pdf>.
- 2 Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework 2015: Ages Birth to Five (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pdf/ohs-framework.pdf>.
- 3 Information on state standards is drawn from the websites of each state’s department of education to further expand on the research initially presented by Sarah Daily, Mary Burkhauser, and Tamara Halle, “A Review of School Readiness Practices in the States: Early Learning Guidelines and Assessments,” *Early Childhood Highlights* 1 (3) (2010): 2, available at <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2010-14-SchoolReadinessStates.pdf>.

# State examples: Possibilities for alignment of early learning and kindergarten standards

Establishing continuity between early development and the K-12 system is key to children’s success in their education.<sup>17</sup> The most prevalent national trend in kindergarten standards is the alignment of K-12 standards in literacy and mathematics. For example, as of the 2014-15 school year 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted and chosen to implement the Common Core State Standards, or CCSS, for both English language arts and mathematics, while the state of Minnesota has adopted only the English language arts standards.<sup>18</sup> And while most states have made some effort to integrate social and emotional competencies within other domains—such as health, social studies, or English language arts—few have developed explicitly aligned social-emotional development domains or approaches to learning domains or standards.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while standards in English language arts and mathematics are consistently present in kindergarten and beyond, the remaining categories addressed in early learning standards do not have the same consistent, formal structure in later grades.

However, a growing number of states are addressing social and emotional competencies by integrating them within other domains, demonstrating several ways in which alignment can be implemented. The examples discussed here show the various pathways that states may explore to include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and academic standards within literacy and math standards as children move beyond early learning programs and into kindergarten and early elementary school.

## Example 1: A single, cohesive framework

Illinois incorporates social-emotional standards across the grade-level continuum. The Illinois State Board of Education has created Early Learning and Development Standards for preschool, as well as Early Learning Guidelines for children from birth through age 3. The Illinois kindergarten standards are simi-

larly constructed and arranged with the social-emotional development standards aligned with the corresponding Illinois K-12 social-emotional standards. See Table 2 below for examples.<sup>20</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
**Illinois standards**

Social/Emotional Development			
Early Learning (Preschool)		Kindergarten	
State goal	Standard	State goal	Standard
<b>Goal 30:</b> Develop self-management skills to achieve school and life success and develop positive relationships with others.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.</li> <li>2. Recognize own uniqueness and personal qualities.</li> <li>3. Demonstrate skills related to successful personal and school outcomes.</li> </ol>	<b>Goal 31:</b> Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and manage one's emotions and behaviors.</li> <li>2. Recognize personal qualities and external supports.</li> <li>3. Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.</li> </ol>
<b>Goal 31:</b> Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop positive relationships with peers and adults.</li> <li>2. Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.</li> <li>3. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.</li> </ol>	<b>Goal 32:</b> Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.</li> <li>2. Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.</li> <li>3. Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.</li> <li>4. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.</li> </ol>
<b>Goal 32:</b> Demonstrate decision-making skills and behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin to consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.</li> <li>2. Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.</li> <li>3. Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.</li> </ol>	<b>Goal 33:</b> Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.</li> <li>2. Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.</li> <li>3. Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.</li> </ol>

Note: Skill domain names and information are taken directly from the sources.

Sources: See, for example, Illinois State Board of Education, "Early Childhood Education: Birth to Age 3 Years," available at <http://www.isbe.net/earlychi/html/birth-3.htm#elgdlns> (last accessed September 2015); Illinois Early Learning Project, "Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards" (2013), pp. 24–40, 95–102, available at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/IELDS/iellds.pdf>. In Illinois, social/emotional learning standards exist for grades K-12; therefore, Illinois pre-K "state goals" are aligned to the social/emotional learning standards for grades K-12.

The Illinois standards serve as an example of how intrapersonal skills can be integrated into programs beyond pre-K. In both English language arts and social-emotional development, Illinois has created State Goals to which more specific assessable standards are aligned. Furthermore, State Goals are either correlated or correspond directly to specific early learning and kindergarten standards.<sup>21</sup>

### Example 2: Alignment through a supplemental framework

Washington state presents a unique framework design in alignment across early learning and K-12 standards. In addition to the state's K-12 learning standards, which include English language arts and mathematics,<sup>22</sup> the Washington State Department of Early Learning has created the Early Learning and Development Guidelines to supplement the standards for children from birth to third grade.<sup>23</sup> While these guidelines are not presented as standards, they offer additional resources for educators, parents, and caregivers. The Early Learning and Development Guidelines were developed in partnership with representatives from Head Start; the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, or ECEAP; parents; Native American tribes; child care providers; special needs experts; K-12 staff; and the state's ethnic commissions.<sup>24</sup> They include guidance on the following topics, which are aligned to the Head Start Child Development Early Learning Framework, or HSCDEL; the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, or WaKIDS; ECEAP Standards; and the Washington state K-12 learning standards:<sup>25</sup>

- **Family and culture** (social and emotional development; social studies knowledge and skills; approaches to learning)
- **Building relationships** (social and emotional development)
- **Touching, seeing, hearing, and moving around** (physical development and health)
- **Growing up healthy** (physical development and health)
- **Communicating** (language development; English language development; literacy knowledge and skills)

- **Learning about my world** (logic and reasoning; mathematics knowledge and skills; science knowledge and skills; social studies knowledge and skills; creative arts expression)
- Additionally, each age-based guidelines section notes “Differences in Development” that may be a cause for concern.

The social and emotional development skills incorporated in the Building Relationships domain include, among others, several guiding principals that are detailed in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Washington standards**

	<b>Ages 3-4</b>	<b>Ages 4-5</b>	<b>Age 5 and Kindergarten</b>
<b>Interactions with Adults</b>	<p>Separate from important adults, sometimes relying on another adult to feel safe.</p> <p>Release tensions through laughter, tears, trembling, talking, or yawning.</p>	<p>Seek emotional support from caregivers.</p> <p>Understand that adults may want the child to do something different than he/she wants to do.</p>	<p><b>Interactions with Peers and Others</b></p> <p>Accept new people who are trusted adults (e.g., teacher, bus driver).</p> <p>Able to adapt to a larger group environment.</p>
<b>Interactions with Peers</b>	<p>Engage in play with other children. Join in group activities.</p> <p>Make decisions with other children, with adult help.</p>	<p>Play with children the same age and of different ages.</p> <p>Make and follow plans for games with other children.</p>	<p>Make connections with other children in different settings.</p> <p>Share suggestions for what to do in play.</p>
<b>Social Behaviors</b>	<p>Respond to directions from adults about putting items away or being careful with them.</p> <p>Begin to remember and follow multistep directions.</p>	<p>Adjust behavior to different settings (such as using an outdoor voice or an indoor voice), sometimes with reminders.</p> <p>Wait for a turn without getting angry or grabbing. May lose interest in the object or activity before getting a turn.</p>	<p>Behave in accepted ways in different settings.</p> <p>Help, share, take turns and cooperate in a group.</p> <p>Include children who are a different gender or ethnic background from self, speak a different language, or have special needs.</p>
<b>Problem Solving, Conflict Resolution</b>	<p>Accept / reach out to children who are different.</p> <p>Wait for a turn.</p>	<p>Make decisions and solve problems with other children, with adult help.</p> <p>Be able to talk about ways to solve a problem or help another child, and keep in mind the personality and preferences of that child.</p>	<p>Make decisions and solve problems with other children.</p> <p>Listen to others’ ideas and wants, share own ideas and wants, consider what is fair, and make suggestions for different ways to resolve conflicts.</p>

Note: Skill domain names and information are taken directly from the sources.

Sources: Washington State Department of Early Learning, “Washington State Early Learning Guidelines,” available at <http://www.del.wa.gov/development/guidelines/> (last accessed September 2015); Washington State Department of Early Learning, “Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines: Birth through 3rd Grade” (2012), available at <http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/development/docs/guidelines.pdf>.

While Washington state presents its academic learning standards separately, it includes a framework to incorporate interpersonal development—not only in early learning and kindergarten, but also through the third grade. Because these guidelines were created to align with the K-12 framework, there is consistency and likely alignment in the progression of these guidelines and the academic standards.

### Example 3: Opportunity for alignment through guidelines for additional standards

In 2010, the Massachusetts legislature required the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to create guidelines for schools on the implementation of social and emotional learning, or SEL, curricula.<sup>26</sup> The state includes these guidelines, along with other resources, as part of the Office of Learning Supports and Early Learning’s Bullying Prevention and Intervention Resources.<sup>27</sup> The guidelines state that the goals of SEL curricula include teaching basic skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Additionally, schools in Massachusetts are urged to utilize evidence-based curricula that are age appropriate; sustained from preschool through high school; and adequate to address the varying needs of individual students, schools, and communities. Thus, though such guidelines do not explicitly prescribe the SEL standards to be used in Massachusetts schools, they adopt many of the same categorical requirements as states that do prescribe a specific standards framework.

### Example 4: State alignment without social-emotional standards

New York has adopted a framework for its pre-K standards that is aligned with the CCSS for English language arts and mathematics, as well as the state’s K-12 learning standards in science, social studies, and the arts. New York refers to this curriculum as its “P-12 Common Core Learning Standards.”<sup>28</sup> It is organized into five broad domains, which align with the general early learning standards categories described above, and are labeled as follows:<sup>29</sup>

- (1) Approaches to learning
- (2) Physical development and health
- (3) Social and emotional development

- (4) Communication, language, and literacy
  - (a) Approaches to communication
  - (b) English language arts and literacy
- (5) Cognition and knowledge of the world
  - (a) Mathematics
  - (b) Science
  - (c) Social Studies
  - (d) The Arts
  - (e) Technology

New York’s P-12 Common Core Learning Standards also cover general knowledge in additional categories—including science, social studies, health and physical education, and technology—creating the possibility for alignment between early learning classrooms and kindergarten. However, while expectations for increasing awareness and competence in approaches to learning and social and emotional development are incorporated into early learning standards, they are not expressly present in those for for grades kindergarten and above.<sup>30</sup> The early learning standards in social and emotional development seek to address strands of knowledge and skills—such as self-regulation, accountability, and adaptability—which do not appear within other domains addressed in K-12. Therefore, while there is explicit alignment in New York state for the vast majority of learning standards, not all developmental domains are expressly addressed by its learning standards.

Similarly, Georgia has made an explicit effort to align its early learning standards with the English language arts and mathematics Common Core Georgia Performance Standards, or CCGPS, for K-12.<sup>31</sup> The state’s Department of Early Care and Learning has also specifically aligned the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards, or GELDS, with the HSCDEL. However, like New York, Georgia’s K-12 standards lack the specific domains of social and emotional development and approaches to learning and play. While the “Quality Core Curriculum” in place before 2002 contained some similar elements within a “Character Education” domain, there is no direct alignment between these standards and the GELDS.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Georgia’s kindergarten standards also have a focus on cognition and general knowledge but lack formal requirements for interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

# Conclusion

Many skills are mastered between the time a child uses a table to pull themselves up and when they march across a stage at high school graduation. In between, these children count on school districts and states to provide a solid foundation and consistent opportunities for growth that will allow them to succeed later in life. While many states make some effort at ensuring that what children are asked to know and do in literacy and math is aligned along a continuum that begins in the students' early years, few other content areas have been similarly aligned.

The efforts in a handful of states demonstrate that it is possible to align social-emotional standards across early learning and K-12 programs. Thoughtful, intentional approaches that begin with a comprehensive analysis of standards for both early learning and K-12 can incorporate academic and social-emotional content. The experiences of these states demonstrate that these broader standards can be created and implemented in a variety of ways, either as part of an overall set of standards or as part of standalone frameworks and guidance that are designed for use alongside literacy and math standards. As research increasingly points to the value of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and academic skills throughout children's schooling, the benefits of incorporating such skills into states' K-12 learning continuums could have profound effects on children's success in school and beyond.



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## About the authors

**Danielle Ewen** is a senior policy advisor at EducationCounsel LLC and has served in numerous leadership positions in child care and early education policy. She previously served as the Director of the Office of Early Childhood Education in the District of Columbia public schools, where she oversaw the operations of programs serving three- and four-year old children in high quality, comprehensive classrooms. Prior to her work in DCPS, Ms. Ewen served as the Director of the Child Care and Early Education team at the Center for Law and Social Policy, or CLASP. At CLASP, she worked on federal and state issues around child care and early education, particularly the reauthorizations of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start.

Ms. Ewen also worked at the Children’s Defense Fund as a Senior Program Associate in the Child Care and Development Division and was the Assistant Director for the National Child Care Information Center. Early in her career, she worked as a Policy Analyst at the US Department of Education in the Office of Migrant Education, where she was involved in issues related to implementation of Chapter 1 programs, family literacy, bilingual education, and evaluation. She holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master’s in Public Administration from Columbia University.

**LeighAnn M. Smith** is a Policy Assistant at EducationCounsel, LLC and a 2016 J.D./M.A. Education Policy candidate at the George Washington University. She has written blogs on the issues of educational equity, school segregation, and school choice, and has authored an article discussing the intersection of housing and education policy, forthcoming in the American Bar Association’s Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law. Prior to her graduate studies, LeighAnn was a middle school humanities teacher, professional developer, and instructional leader for Baltimore City Schools. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology from the University of Southern California.

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- 4 For example, see Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "State Scan Scorecard Project," available at <http://www.casel.org/state-scan-scorecard-project> (last accessed October 2015).
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