



Fostering School Success with Standards for Nonacademic Skills

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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.¹ 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.²

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.

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