This article describes the progress that organizations and school systems are making in developing arts education standards or guidelines for young children. As will be seen, it is a somewhat disjointed road: goals among the different authors and organizations do not necessarily line up, and the language used is diverse. Significant coordination will be needed if this road is to traveled successfully.

In order to understand the status of early childhood education and the arts in the United States, our stops on the road will be at several organizations that deal with the arts and/or early childhood education, where we will view principles, and related sets of guidelines and standards on young children and the arts. In addition, the national standards in dance, music, theatre/drama, and visual art will serve as an umbrella under which all the guidelines and standards will be studied. Finally, we will look at what is happening in the states in terms of Pre-K and kindergarten standards for arts education.
The AEP Report on Young Children and the Arts

The first stop on our road is at the Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a coalition of over 140 organizations working to promote the role of the arts in student learning. In 1998, AEP released *Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections—A Report on the Task Force on Children’s Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight*. The Task Force, which brought together educators and artists to “ensure the full and appropriate integration of the arts into early childhood learning,” was clear about the importance of the arts:

[F]or all children at all ability levels, the arts play a central role in cognitive, motor, language, and social-emotional development. The arts motivate and engage children in learning, stimulate memory and facilitate understanding, enhance symbolic communication, promote relationships, and provide an avenue for building competence.

The authors of this document propose three principles which they suggest should “guide the development of arts-based programs and resources for young children.” The principles focus respectively on “the child,” “the arts experience,” and “learning environment and adult interactions.”

The first principle states that “children should be encouraged to learn in, through, and about the arts by actively engaging in the process of creating, participating in/performing, and responding to quality arts experiences, adapted to their developmental levels and reflecting their own cultures.”

The second suggests that “arts activities and experiences, while maintaining the integrity of the artistic disciplines, should be meaningful to children, follow a scope and sequence, and connect to early childhood curriculum and appropriate practices. They also may contribute to literacy development.”

The third principle proposes that “the development of early childhood arts programs (including resources and materials) should be shared among arts education specialists, practicing artists, early childhood educators, parents, and caregivers; and the process should connect with community resources.”

These guiding principles are supplemented by specific examples of how the principles can inform the design of developmentally appropriate arts experiences for young children, characteristics of well-conceived arts activities, and indicators of appropriate practice for arts and cultural organizations working with young children. The Task Force also advocated that:

“Individuals and organizations that specialize in the arts:

• Address arts education in preschools and other settings by creating standards or guidelines with teachers and others working with young children;

• Encourage and provide professional development opportunities for arts teachers, librarians, and artists to become knowledgeable about the special development characteristics and learning styles of young children; and

• Advocate for the inclusion of all art forms (dance and drama in addition to music, visual arts, and literature) in school curriculum and early childhood classrooms and centers.”

What Head Start Has to Say About the Arts in Early Childhood Education

Our next stop is at Head Start. “Curriculum,” according to the Head Start document addressing standards, means a written plan that includes (1) “the goals for children’s development and learning,” (2) “the experiences through which they will achieve these goals,” (3) “what staff and parents do to achieve these goals,” and (4) “the materials needed to support the implementation of the curriculum.”

Certain key words in this passage might be interpreted as inferring the presence of the arts—words such as “experiences,” “what staff and parents do” and “materials that will support the curriculum.” In some instances, specific arts experiences are identified as crucial to the development of young children.

Specific references to the arts include adults’ responsibility for:

- Designing activities representative of the observed stages and interests of children. To accomplish this, certain strategies might be helpful, including observing “children carefully in order to observe their referred ways of interacting with the environment…taking into account their interest in listening to stories and songs.”
Providing “opportunities for children of all ages to acquire knowledge in areas such as science, social studies, the creative arts, numeracy, and language and literacy.”

Reinforcing and promoting children’s creativity because “children need to express themselves creatively. Their experiences with art, music, drama, dance, creative movement, and related conversation enhance their overall development. Because self-expression varies, reflecting the individual’s level of development, adults can reinforce children’s creativity by:

• Supporting exploration of art materials and demonstrating appreciation of each child’s self-expression;
• Engaging in rhythmic activities, singing, and the use of musical instruments;
• Encouraging children to express their thoughts and emotions through dance and creative movement activities; and
• Stimulating imagination through drama and other language-rich experiences.

Modeling communication and providing a climate in which children communicate effectively by:

• Using a variety of strategies for children to learn new and interesting vocabulary, and to expand their language skills through songs, games, poems, and stories from their own and from other cultures;
• Engaging in dramatic play in which children act out familiar activities, such as going to the grocery store or the library, and using the telephone.

Supporting the development of literacy and numeracy skills by:

• Encouraging oral traditions through storytelling:
  • Providing stories from children’s own and other cultures; and
  • Providing books and stories with repetitive verses, words, or sounds, or in which the pictures follow the text closely, so that children can relate what they hear to what they see;
• Developing young children’s self-awareness, autonomy, trust, and sense of exploration can be developed by:

• Establishing face-to-face contact and engaging in playful exchanges of sounds and simple games;
• Using pictures and photographs of infants and toddlers with their families; and
• Encouraging language development by engaging children in a variety of songs, stories, poems, books, and games.

Supporting children’s cognitive development and eagerness to learn by:

• Incorporating developmentally appropriate strategies for children to learn concepts and skills related to science, social studies, language, literacy, numeracy, art, music, and movement;
• Engaging children in creative activities and problem solving; and
• Encouraging children to interpret and represent their experiences, understanding, and ideas through drawing, writing and other art media; language; movement; and music.

What NAEYC Has to Say About the Arts in Early Childhood Education

In researching curriculum standards for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) via that organization’s website, this author found two types of examples indicating value placed on the presence of arts in the early childhood curriculum. Some statements mentioned the arts literally, while others implied support of the arts based on previous statements describing developmentally appropriate experiences.

NAEYC’s new draft standards clearly state the need for arts-aesthetic experiences. For example:

Focus Area—Children; Program Standard 2: Curriculum: the program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following domains: aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, language, physical, and social.

Rationale: Curriculum that is goal-oriented and incorporates concepts and skills based on current research fosters children’s learning and development. A well-articulated curriculum guides teachers so they can provide children with experiences that foster growth across a broad range of developmental and content areas. It also brings intentionality to planning a daily schedule that incorporates time and materials for play, self-initiated learning, and creative expression, etc.
A section of the NAEYC website entitled “Early Years are Learning Years” offers brief articles that liberally uphold the importance of arts experiences. These include the following titles:

- In “Can You See What I See? Cultivating Self-Expression through Art,” authors posit that educators, psychologists, and philosophers have come to appreciate the value of children’s art and its vital role in early childhood education. They state that many in the field agree that exploring and creating with art materials helps children become more sensitive to the physical environment (for instance, shape, size, and color); promotes cognitive development (decision-making, nonverbal communication, and problem solving); and increases their social and emotional development (a sense of individuality, appreciation of others’ work, and sharing). Young children who are encouraged to take part in expressive art activities gain a sense of accomplishment and grow toward reaching independence and autonomy. Nine suggestions are offered for ways of working with children through visual art.

- In “Simple Gift Giving for the Early Years,” authors suggest that puppets, books, nursery rhymes books, dress-up clothes, and arts and crafts materials make appropriate and enjoyable gifts for young children.

- In “Music Appreciation: A Universal Language for All Ages,” authors state that children are natural musicians, and musical experiences during the early years enhance the learning process by promoting language development, creativity, coordination, and social interaction. Caregivers can play an important role in incorporating music and movement into children’s lives by making sure they have opportunities to listen to music, respond physically to music, and make music.

- In “Seven Ways for Young People to be Smart,” authors discuss Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and state that children may be “picture smart” (spatially intelligent), “music smart” (musically intelligent), “body smart” (kinesthetically intelligent), or “person smart” (interpersonally intelligent) which allows children to engage in role-playing.

Other draft standards allude to arts experiences, for example:

Focus Area—Children; Program Standard 3: Teaching: the program uses developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches that enhance each child’s learning and development in the context of the program’s curriculum goals. This standard evolves from a rationale stating that teachers who use multiple instructional approaches optimize children’s opportunities for learning.

Summary

Both Head Start and NAEYC state the importance of the arts in standards and in practice. Both organizations outline specific desirable arts scenarios, experiences and activities while inferring the incorporation of arts experiences for growth in such areas as socialization, language development, communication, and literacy and numeracy skills.

Goldberg and Scott-Kassner state that “the role of arts in schools can take many forms, from a disciplinary study to a tool for the understanding of mathematics or science. As a tool for the understanding or exploration of other subjects, arts in general and music specifically have been described as languages for learning.” Head Start and NAEYC concur by virtue of their steadfast inclusion of the arts in their curriculum.

The Arts in Early Childhood: National and State Standards

National Standards in the Arts

In 1992, the Music Educators National Conference (now MENC, the National Association for Music Education), on behalf of the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop voluntary national standards for each of the four arts disciplines—music, visual arts, theatre, and dance—in grades K-12. These voluntary standards describe the knowledge, skills, and understanding that all students should acquire in the arts disciplines—music, visual arts, theatre, and dance—in grades K-12. These voluntary standards describe the knowledge, skills, and understanding that all students should acquire in the arts disciplines—music, visual arts, theatre, and dance—providing a basis for developing curricula.

After two years of deliberations over their development, the arts standards were approved by the National Committee and presented to U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley. Since 1994, then, national standards in the arts for Kindergarten students have been in existence.

In 1994, MENC also published a document that stated not only the K-12 arts standards but also new standards in the arts for Pre-K children. This document, The School Music Program: A New Vision—The K-12 National Standards, Pre-K Standards, and What They Mean to Music Educators begins with a set of belief statements about Pre-K children ages 2 through
4—their musical development and the nature of their musical experiences as integrated with aspects of their social and cognitive growth in appropriate settings.

A section on music experiences for infants and toddlers lists seven ways in which adults can encourage the musical development of these young children. These include the singing and chanting of songs and rhymes; exposure to a wide variety of sounds including live and recorded music; physical activities which show steady beat, rhythm and melody; safe musical toys which can be controlled by a child; and talk about music’s expressive value.

According to A New Vision, musical experiences for two-, three-, and four-year-old children should include a variety of sound sources, selected recorded music, opportunities for free improvised singing, and the building of a repertoire of songs. An exploratory approach, using a wide range of appropriate materials, provides a rich base from which conceptual understanding can evolve in later years. A variety of individual musical experiences is important for children at this age, with little emphasis on activities that require children to perform together as a unit. As a result of their experiences with music, four-year-olds should initiate both independent and collaborative play with musical materials and should demonstrate curiosity about music.

The MENC document includes four content standards for use with four-year-olds: (1) singing and playing instruments, (2) creating music, (3) responding to music, and (4) understanding music. Standards for five-year-old children are incorporated in the kindergarten standards of the original K-12 document.

MENC is one of the four national advocacy organizations in the arts that has presented Pre-K arts standards in either draft or final form. However, the national arts organizations are not united in their attempts to guide Pre-K arts curriculum through carefully researched published arts standards.

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The States and Their Standards for Young Children in the Arts

The author completed a cursory search of state websites and their standards in the arts for Pre-K and kindergarten. When arts standards were reported, they generally included dance, music, theatre/drama, and visual arts. The search revealed three main groupings of states concerning arts standards in Pre-K and kindergarten settings.

- The largest grouping was comprised of 22 states that displayed arts standards for kindergarten only, with none listed for the Pre-K level.
- Eleven states showed standards for the arts at both kindergarten and Pre-K levels.
- Nine states showed arts standards for neither kindergarten nor Pre-K, but several of these states displayed arts standards for students beginning either at grade 3 or at age 8.

Three states indicated certain levels of proficiency in the arts that should be attained by the end of a particular grade level rather than what should be implemented at the beginning of a student’s educational journey. The websites for four states were temporarily out of order and no information concerning standards in the arts was available. One state’s website did not list grade levels for its mandatory standards in the four content areas of the arts.

These data indicate a lack of consistency in approaching standards in arts in early childhood education. The largest group of states shows standards for kindergarten arts experiences, while 10 show standards for Pre-K and kindergarten and ten more show no standards for the arts for either grade level.

**Early childhood arts advocates and professionals at all levels must actively and fervently interact with and learn from early childhood professionals in other areas.**

**Recommendations**

In comparing national and state arts standards for Pre-K and kindergarten with guidelines for recognized entities working with young children, we are faced with a some what fragmented picture. Goals amongst authors and organizations do not necessarily line up, and the language used is diverse.

If the arts in early childhood education are important to the emotional, cognitive and social development of young children—as has been cited in this document—then unified efforts must be made to advance our understanding of young children and the teaching/learning strategies that most effectively move them forward.
National Level

Other national arts advocacy groups [theatre/drama and visual art] need to catch up with ME NC and the National Dance Association and establish standards for Pre-K.

- The national arts advocacy groups should identify Pre-K standards in light of existing kindergarten standards so there is a logical sequence in skill development.
- The emergent skills for Pre-K students in discrete art forms should parallel each other in nature.

State Level

All states need to model the national arts standards for both Pre-K and Kindergarten, following the lead of the 11 enlightened states that are already doing so.

Advocacy efforts should come from the following; such efforts would help the Pre-K/Kdg arts standards initiative immensely:

- National arts advocacy groups;
- State boards of education;
- Local curriculum agencies and curriculum directors;
- All teachers of the arts: Pre-K through 12;
- Higher education—those professionals teaching teachers—arts specialists and classroom teachers;
- School administrators at all levels;
- Legislators;
- People in other high places: celebrities, government positions, spouses of governors, former leaders. For example, Gerald Ford is on the board of the Palm Desert aesthetic education institute;
- The teachers' unions, nationally and locally; and
- Community arts organizations such as opera companies, symphony orchestras, and dance and theatre companies.

Finally, all along the road to arts standards for young children, communication and collaboration are key. Advocacy alone from separate entities—even from all of the types of organizations named above—will not bring early childhood arts in education and their teaching/learning benefits to the forefront. Organizations and individuals supporting the arts in education and the arts for early childhood in particular must join forces in coordinated efforts. They must ensure that the language across arts standards levels (national, state, local) should be similar so that the message is clear, concise and united.

It is also crucial for advocacy efforts at the national, state, and local levels to coordinate with and inform the work of professional not-for-profit arts organizations. Our orchestras, opera companies, art museums, and dance and theatre companies must put the standards to work in all educational venues. Standards and the manner in which they are implemented by professional artists’ programs must be clearly highlighted in marketing and educational materials.

At the same time, early childhood arts advocates and professionals at all levels must actively and fervently interact with and learn from early childhood professionals in other areas, such as child development, reading/literacy, cultural literacy, and other discrete content areas. Admittedly, this is difficult. The infrastructure necessary for this to happen is non-existent. Early childhood professionals must create ways to meet and learn from one another. Such efforts might begin at the grassroots level; higher education should examine this as a way of working within its own walls and throughout its larger network.

Without this intertwined, collective knowledge, each area is navigating a narrow road alone. Until we learn to identify, acknowledge, and interact with our myriad and various early childhood colleagues and to complement, supplement, and coalesce our respective knowledge, early childhood efforts will be splintered and incomplete. Just as whole children come to us for guidance and leadership in navigating their worlds, we must be responsibly united in our approach to piloting them through that maze.

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1 More information about the Partnership and its reports is available online at www.aep-arts.org.
2 Head Start program performance standards are available online at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hhsb/performance/index.htm
3 These articles are available online at www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/default.asp.