



# Crafting Early Learning Standards for a Multi-ethnic Society:

## *Lessons Learned from Washington and Alaska*

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*The United States is becoming more diverse, and young children are leading the way. As states develop their early learning systems and strategies, these must be responsive to the language, cultural, and racial diversity of young children and their families. While young children are developing large and small motor and language and numeracy skills, they also are learning who they are and how others expect them to respond to similarities and differences.*

*The BUILD Initiative is developing a series of diversity policy briefs, drawing upon research and best practice, to provide insights on developing early childhood systems in a multi-ethnic society. In the specific area of early care and education, this includes states developing early learning standards or benchmarks, quality rating and improvement systems, and professional development programs that respond to all children's learning styles and abilities, build upon language and cultural strengths, and help children respond to different cultures and languages.*

*Early learning standards or benchmarks are at the core of society's defining how and what children need to learn, what is expected of them at different developmental stages, and what caregivers and educators are expected to do in helping them learn. Child learning involves cultural learning, and it is essential that early learning standards or benchmarks be developed to respond to different cultural and language groups.*

*This policy brief describes the experiences in Washington and Alaska so that other states can learn from and build upon their pioneering and important efforts to address language and cultural issues in the development of guiding frameworks and expectations for how young children grow and acquire knowledge. Compared to the early learning*

*standards established by other states, the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks pay significantly greater attention to issues of culture and language and their implications for child rearing and development. Reference to the implications of ethnic diversity was intentionally woven throughout the document. Because of the high quality of this effort, Alaska later built upon the Washington benchmarks to create its own state early learning guidelines.*

*The purpose of this case study is to cull lessons learned from Washington and Alaska to inform the work of other states as they seek to develop their own early learning standards. As with many endeavors that break new ground, the effort to establish the Washington benchmarks also faced significant challenges. While these benchmarks represent a substantial step forward for the early childhood field, the process supporting their development was problematic, particularly with regards to cultivating ownership across a broad array of key stakeholders and effectively engaging communities of color. As of the writing of this case study in summer 2008, the final product was not being used as broadly or consistently in Washington as any of those who led their creation would have desired. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the heavy scrutiny which has occurred reflects in part the success of Washington state in creating opportunities for communities of color to become involved and offer their opinions.*

<sup>1</sup> While the primary writer of this case study, Hedy Chang, assumes full responsibility for the interpretation offered by this case study regarding the development of early learning standards in Washington and Alaska, she would also like to offer her deep appreciation to the individuals who shared their experiences and insights so she could attempt to construct a picture based upon their multiple perspectives. In Washington, interviewees included Sangree Froelicher, Lorrie Grevstadt, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Kristy Kauerz, Janice Deguchi, Patsy Whitefoot and Sharon Cronin. In Alaska, interviewees included Mia Oxely, Paul Sugar, Mary Lorence and Audrey Saganna.

<sup>2</sup> A Guide to the Formation of Washington State's Early Learning and Development Benchmarks Office of the Governor and Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (2004)

*Impressed by the quality of the Washington Benchmarks, the state of Alaska used them as a springboard for their own early learning standards that are now being actively and broadly disseminated. Drawn from interviews with a variety of stakeholders in both states, this case study attempts to paint a picture of what happened so that readers can identify what they might be replicated or avoided given the strengths, challenges and unique conditions affecting these trail blazing efforts.<sup>1</sup>*

## How did the Washington Benchmarks get started?

The development of the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks began when an opportunity arose to apply for Head Start-State Collaboration Office supplemental funding for professional development from the Head Start Bureau. At the time, a strong interest in developing early learning standards had already begun to emerge in Washington due to a variety of factors ranging from an increased emphasis on standards based reform within the K-12 system, particularly given No Child Left Behind, to heightened awareness about the critical importance of the early years on a child's healthy development and eventual school success.<sup>2</sup> Seizing the opportunity, the director of the Head Start State Collaboration office ( Sangree Froelicher) quickly contacted senior officials at the Office of the Governor (Robin Zukoski) and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (Marcia Riggers) about partnering together to carry out the project and to use their collective clout to ensure the benchmarks would have wide spread impact. Although early learning standards are often not given significant attention by high level state policymakers, both the Governor (Gary Locke) and the Superintendent (Terry Bergeson), separately elected officials, agreed to make the Benchmarks a partnership project between their two offices. Impressed by the high-level partnership proposal, the Federal Head Start Bureau provided substantial financial support for the idea.

Recognizing the potential challenges involved in working collaboratively across elected officials, government departments, and community stakeholders as well as bridging early childhood with K-12 education, an early next step was to hire a consultant to craft a blueprint that would create a common understanding about the purpose behind crafting benchmarks, how they would be developed, who would be involved, and how they would be disseminated and implemented. This blueprint laid a strong foundation for a holistic approach by adopting the term "benchmarks" rather than a more K-12 oriented title of "standards" and clearly communicating the intent to cover ages 0-5 (not just preschool) and to inform parents as well as caregivers and teachers. From the very beginning, the key individuals involved in the development of the benchmarks also recognized the

## E X C E R P T S

### from Washington Benchmarks on Social and Emotional Development

Because diversity is the norm in the United States, children must learn to function in and appreciate a diverse society. Young children need to develop a positive sense of their own identity as well as a respect for others' identities. ... Therefore, environments for young children should provide diverse, non-stereotyping atmospheres in which cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, age, gender, and ability differences are embraced and respected.

- Recognize that many families value interdependence and some children will show varying level of independence and stronger bonds with family and community. ... Be aware and respectful of cultural differences in valuing independence
- Consider the values of families and cultural groups regarding emotional expression (e.g., do not force or deny child's emotional expression). ... Be aware of cultural and gender differences in expressed feelings.

importance of ensuring the benchmarks reflected the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families living in Washington.

### Who Was Charged with Developing the Benchmarks?

The group with primary responsibility for guiding and overseeing the development of the Benchmarks was a Core State Interagency Team selected by the Governor and the Superintendent. The Core State Interagency Team included representatives from the Office of the Governor, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Head Start-State Collaboration Office, Division of Child Care and Early Learning, and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. From its inception, concerns were raised internally and externally about the all white composition of the Core Team, selected by the Governor and Superintendent. Because the Governor felt the group should be limited to state employees who reported to either OSPI or his office, the ethnic composition of the group was not expanded.

To help move the process forward expediently, the Core Team sought out a highly skilled consultant team to write the benchmarks. After broadly circulating a Request for Qualifications (which included a question about their

knowledge of issues of cultural and linguistic diversity as well as addressing disabilities), they interviewed a number of possibilities and eventually selected a team of experts (Sharon Lynn Kagan, Pia Rebello Britto, Kristie Kauerz and Kate Tarrant) from Teacher's College at Columbia University. The Core Team was impressed by their experience and strong reputations in the early childhood field, including their background in addressing cultural and linguistic differences in child development as well as disabilities through work within the United States and internationally. These experts were charged with developing an initial draft based upon a review of the literature as well as relevant existing standards and then incorporating feedback from reviewers to produce a final document.

In addition, an Early Learning Benchmarks Advisory Panel was established to expand the on-going engagement of an even broader array of stakeholders. Involving slightly over 30 participants, the Advisory Panel was made up of individuals from a wide range of public and private agencies involved with young children, almost 30% people of color. It also included representation from the early intervention and disability community. While this Advisory Panel was not involved in the selection of the consulting team, their input was sought to inform key decisions about the initial outline as well as drafts of the benchmarks document.

## **How were the benchmarks developed?**

The first meeting with the team of consultants was held in May of 2004. Involving the Core Interagency Team as well as the Advisory Panel, the meeting focused on clarifying respective roles and responsibilities, establishing ground rules (including that decisions would be made by consensus of the majority) and drafting guiding principles. The consulting team returned in June to seek guidance on key decisions affecting the fundamental organization of the benchmarks including a) what age grouping to use b) how to organize by domains and c) what should be the relationships to existing pre-K, Head Start and K-3 standards. After providing information in advance with options for each of these areas, the consulting team met with the Advisory Panel and Core Team members to find out what was the consensus of the group so it could move forward with crafting a recommended outline for the entire report.

## **What was the process for review and input?**

By early August 2004, the consulting team had produced its initial 150 plus page first draft for review. To ensure people

from broad array of perspectives had a chance to review the draft, the Core Interagency Team organized seven different review groups ranging from K-3 educators to infant/toddler caregivers to a committee focused on bias and fairness as well as early intervention, Head Start/ECEAP and Child Care. Input was solicited quickly so that a next version of the draft would be available for release at a much anticipated School Readiness summit, sponsored by the Governor and the Superintendent, to be held by November. Ultimately, this time line would be even further shortened at the request of Governor Gary Locke. Seeing the Benchmarks as an important legacy project for his administration (which would end in December), the Governor wanted them available for a press conference in early October.

By late summer, concerns about how well the benchmarks reflected the diverse realities of the populations in Washington had already begun to emerge. An important source of critique was the Washington State Multi-ethnic Think Tank (METT), a historic cross-ethnic alliance of education activists reflecting African American, American Indian/Alaska Natives, Asian Pacific Islander American, Hispanic, and low-income communities. Formed in 2000, METT was already dismayed by the lack of attention to culture and bias in the standards being developed for K-12 education. Initial criticisms of the benchmarks focused on the lack of people of color on the Core Interagency team as well as among the consulting team even though one member of the consulting team was a woman of color who had been born in India. At the same time, some reviewers began to express strong concerns about the domains that had been selected in June. These domains (Physical Well-being & Motor Development, Social Emotional Development, Approaches Toward Learning, Cognition and General Knowledge, Language, Communication and Literacy) had been adapted from the National Education Goals Panel. While they helped to promote more holistic conceptualization of child development, they were seen by some as reflecting a European American world view and a research base that has drawn its conclusions upon studies typically conducted with white, middle class children. The domains were criticized for focusing primarily on individual development and not enough on supporting children within the context of their family and community and the natural world. In addition, this framework does not explicitly acknowledge the challenges children of color face when they must learn to navigate between a mainstream white society which sometimes adheres to values and practices that differ and sometimes conflict with the culture of home and community. For example, Western culture places a much stronger value

on spoken communication while other cultural groups, especially Native Americans, are much more likely to emphasize learning and interacting through observation.

Creating space for these types of concerns to be voiced and meaningfully discussed proved to be extremely challenging. If a viewpoint is only held by a minority group, it can easily be overlooked if the group process, as is often true in the United States, seeks to abide by the will of the majority. Equally important, it is difficult to reconcile viewpoints when the time line for review is short, the draft is lengthy, staff capacity is limited, and political pressures heighten due to partnership between the Governor and Superintendent.

Between mid November through January 2005, a second draft was made available for review. The Core Team reconvened the seven review groups and members of the Core Team and the Advisory Panel traveled to 10 regions of the state for one-day reviews in communities that were held in partnership with regional and local leaders. An opportunity for on-line was also made available. Remarkably, more than 1000 comments were received in this manner. Unfortunately, this approach to revision often proved frustrating to everyone involved. Impersonal in nature, this on-line process did not easily allow a person to feel that their comments were heard and respected given the challenges involved in responding to such a wealth of information. Some reviewers may have also had unrealistic expectations that comments would be incorporated verbatim while the consulting team viewed their role as responding to the gist of the feedback and using their expertise to make final decisions. Meanwhile, the consulting team, who were deeply committed to responding to the extensive feedback, were exhausted by the process of making multiple revisions, especially given the time pressures.

Additional steps were also taken to address the concerns about bias by hiring experts in child development and cultural diversity. Columbia University, for example, asked additional content experts, including a education professor or Native American descent, to review the draft while the Core State Interagency Team contracted with two local consultants of color with multicultural education expertise to work with each other to review the Benchmarks and offer proposed edits and to convene a meeting of key stakeholders to agree upon further revisions to the benchmarks. Upon receipt of the consultants edits, the Core State Interagency Team integrated all of their revised changes in the Benchmarks. Simultaneously, key stakeholders came together and recommended that the state reconsider publishing the benchmarks and instead adopt an entirely new process for crafting benchmarks. This proposed new process would

## E X C E R P T S

### **from Washington Benchmarks on Approaches to Learning**

Some cultures encourage children to be obedient and respectful of adult opinions while other cultures encourage children to question and dialogue with adults. ... [S]ome cultural settings promote learning through hands-on manipulation of materials, while others focus on visual representation, and still others focus on linguistic or more structured interactions. Whatever the cultural influences on children's predispositions, all learning styles should be embraced as equivalent, valued, and respected approaches toward learning.

- Ensure that the environment is safe from cultural or other forms of bias
- Use vocabulary and phrases in children's home language when introducing new ideas or concepts
- Provide continued acknowledgements, in ways that reflect children's cultural beliefs and traditions, so all children feel valued.

start instead by working with each ethnic community to identify their desired hopes and developmental outcomes from children. A cross-cutting set of standards could then emerge out of the commonalities. This recommendation was not adopted in the end although the final version of the benchmark did incorporate proposed edits.

### **How are the Benchmarks being used in Washington?**

The benchmarks were published in early 2005 with over 10,000 copies broadly disseminated. A number of constituents wrote letters of concern. Governor Gregoire and the Superintendent responded with a letter indicating that the work to date had strived hard to be inclusive and they would continue to examine how the concerns could be addressed as the benchmarks evolved further. Despite in-depth planning discussions among key stakeholders, little action, however, took place until 2007 when the Washington legislature appropriated \$200,000 to the Department of Early Learning for a Benchmarks Redesign Partnership.

In the meantime, because the initial plans for how the benchmarks would be used were not fully implemented, communities, parents and professionals have been left on their own to decide whether or not to use the benchmarks. When the benchmarks were developed, they were supposed

to serve as a source document for supplemental versions tailored to different uses. In the Spring/Summer of 2005, two such documents were produced: a child care provider brochure and a Train-the-Trainer guide, but no others since then. Nonetheless, there are agencies and individuals (including in some tribal communities) across the state actively using them to guide or expand their practice in the classroom and/or train adults. Implementation, however, is not systemic or supported by strong leadership.

Sadly, negative feelings generated by the review process may still be inhibiting some key stakeholders from taking the time to read the final version of the benchmarks even though doing so might enable them see how their voice did eventually help make a difference. A review of the final version of the benchmarks reveals extensive attention to issues of bias culture and language embedded within each domain with some acknowledgement up-front that the domains used are only one way to conceptualize child development. The strength of the document has also allowed Columbia University to use the Washington Benchmarks as a model to support the development of early learning standards in 25 ethnically diverse countries around the world.

## **How were the Washington Benchmarks adapted for use in Alaska?**

A major impetus for the development of guidelines in Alaska stemmed from President Bush's early childhood initiative, "Good Start, Grow Smart," which called for each state to develop voluntary Early learning guidelines. In the spring of 2004 the Alaska System for Early Education Development (SEED) Council formed an Early Learning Guidelines Development Committee. From the onset, the Committee was deeply committed to addressing cultural and linguistic diversity as well as disabilities. Rather than reinvent work that had been carried out elsewhere, this group began by reviewing other state's early learning guidelines. The group selected Washington State's Early Learning benchmarks and with permission, began adapting them to serve as Alaska's guidelines.<sup>3</sup>

Soon afterwards, in 2005 the US Education Department, Office of Special Education Programs, offered grants to assist states in developing outcomes for all children. Alaska was granted federal funds through the General Supervision Enhancement Grant (GSEG) for the development of outcomes for children from birth to age eight. Later that year, the SEED Early Learning Guidelines Committee and the GSEG group

joined together to develop one shared document for the state of Alaska.

An Early Learning Guidelines Committee was formed to guide the development process. A core team was developed from representatives from the: Departments of Education & Early Development and Health & Social Services, Head Start-State Collaboration Office, Special Education Office, Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education, school districts and the University of Alaska. Approximately 30 additional key stakeholders, including teachers, parents and others, also advised the development process. These stakeholders included some members from Alaskan Native communities (although only one was from a rural village rather than an urban area) as well as non-Natives with a high level of sensitivity to their needs.

In Alaska, time was spent up front agreeing upon 17 principals that became key to guiding the content, development, implementation, and use of the guidelines. These principles established the foundation for the collaborative work on the guidelines. They also closely reviewed and discussed the domains. The group, for example, struggled with the concept of "approaches to learning" though it was adopted in the end. Workgroups were created for each domain and charged with reviewing the relevant material from the Washington benchmarks and revising the content for that domain. The workgroups operated by consensus and if needed, would bring cross-cutting concerns to the core team and broader set of participants for resolution.

As part of this process, some participants proposed adding a domain on *Alaskan Native Cultures* which would refer to the diverse native cultures of Alaska and encompasses traditional knowledge and language as well as cultural beliefs and practices. Based upon an analysis of commonalities in values, subsistence living, spirituality and ways of learning across Alaska's native communities, a document was developed offering specifics about each of the five existing domains could be carried out in a culturally appropriate manner. This effort built upon culturally responsive guidelines and standards already developed by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network and adopted by the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators in 1999.

The Alaskan Native Cultures domain was not, however, fully developed because of time constraints. Instead, discussion occurred, especially through the domain workgroups, about how the information could be integrated throughout the Guidelines rather than appearing as a separate silo. Time limitations combined with the vast geography of the state also made it difficult to solicit additional input from Alaskan

<sup>3</sup> State of Alaska, Early Learning Guidelines: A resource for Parents and Early Educators, December 2007

Natives living outside of urban regions (e.g. Juno, Fairbanks and Anchorage) as well as from other non-white ethnic groups also living in Alaska.

After a draft was completed, state, national and international experts in early childhood development were invited to review the Guidelines and offer their edits. A final draft was put out for comment and review by stakeholders and for endorsement by the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, which occurred in June 2006. Perhaps because Alaska has a small population (only 665,000 residents) and a cohesive early childhood community, decision-making throughout the process was relatively harmonious without significant controversy. In addition, because they were not creating benchmarks from scratch, participants in Alaska's Early Learning Guidelines Committee appeared to make it easier to create time to discuss emerging concerns. There is still some sense, however, that more time could have allowed the document to incorporate even greater attention to cultural and language issues and better engage Alaskan Natives from rural areas as well as other ethnic groups. Alaska continues to invest in further

development of the guidelines, especially the creation of shorter, user-friendly documents that can be more easily understood by parents and direct service providers.

## What are Lessons Learned?

These two impressive and pioneering efforts offer powerful lessons learned for efforts aimed at developing early learning standards in other states. Some possible insights gained include:

- How children learn and caregivers teach is deeply interconnected to the cultural beliefs, world views, and practices. The domains used as the basic building blocks for organizing early learning standards are a reflection of the hopes and values that families and communities of different ethnicities and cultures hold for their children. Substantial time should be invested up front discussing and crafting domains as well as cross-cutting principles among diverse stakeholders to ensure they are meaningful and relevant across different cultural realities and perspectives. Ideally, ethnic groups have opportunities to discuss and agree upon desired outcomes for children amongst themselves as well as across different ethnicities. Early learning standard efforts should consider inviting as broad a base as possible in these initial discussions about domains and principals. Gaining consensus across as many stakeholders upfront could allow for the writing and review of the more in-depth benchmarks to be delegated to a smaller, though still representative, set of key players.
- Engaging diverse communities in a meaningful and respectful manner requires time, in person discussions and relationship building. Each state should spend time mapping out where are the different communities located within their borders and identifying for each group what is the best way to engage them. Short-time frames can easily hamper thoughtful engagement.
- Both a quality product and a process that fosters a sense of ownership and buy-in among key constituents are key to creating early learning standards that are widely implemented.

What lessons learned would you add or revise? How would you apply these insights to efforts in your own state?



## EXCERPTS

### from Alaska Early Learning Guidelines Approaches to Learning

Cultural diversity in Alaska contributes to the diverse approaches to learning. For example, many Native cultures have developed around subsistence activities, which involve more hands-on and kinesthetic learning. Subsistence cultures also value communal effort to accomplish a goal. Kinesthetic learning, building relationships, value of teamwork, and communal effort may characterize optimal learning environments for children from these cultures. Cultures based on oral traditions value story telling as a way of transmitting knowledge. For people who are raised in an oral tradition, skills in speaking, listening and understanding body language and gestures are important. The focus in storytelling is on the relationship between the teller and the listeners, as well as their shared knowledge of their own community and culture. It is important to keep diverse learning styles and values in mind when designing learning environments for young children whose cultures have a tradition of oral storytelling. Learning styles vary among individuals in cultural groups and caregivers should keep in mind to provide a variety of activities so that children with different learning styles can all be successful.

## Washington State’s Early Learning and Development Benchmarks include

a multi-cultural approach to early learning expectations and strategies. While other state early learning standards might include some mention of ethnicity, cultural or language diversity in an introductory section or see that focus relegated to one or two specific domains (such as Language or Social Emotional Development), Washington includes it throughout their standards. Diversity and support for a multicultural perspective are found within Washington State’s guiding principles, in the introduction to each domain, throughout the global strategies, and in the additional sub-domains and specific goal related standards, indicators and strategies across all of its six overarching domains (Physical Well-Being, Health, and Motor Development; Social and Emotional Development; Approaches to Learning; Cognition and General Learning; and Language, Communication and Literacy).

For example, within Washington’s Physical Well-Being, Health and Motor Development domain there are general references to respect for cultural beliefs and family traditions and expectations. Additionally, there are more specific strategies under the daily living skills and nutrition goal areas. While this is not the Washington domain that has the most indicators and strategies that include cultural or language diversity in their makeup, the fact that specific strategies and indicators are included in the Health related domain illustrates the comprehensive approach that Washington has taken in this work, making it unique among state standards.

*From Washington State’s Early Learning and Development Benchmarks:*

### **Domain One: Physical Well-Being, Health and Motor Development**

#### **Global Strategies**

- Ensure that parents and other caregivers have discussed family expectations for children’s learning of personal care skills and are in consensus on the goals for children’s physical development and health that reflect cultural beliefs and traditions
- Ensure that the environment is safe from cultural or other forms of bias;
- Be open to discussions of physical characteristics, as well as individual preferences, as these are important aspects of self-identity and they inform children about others

#### **Sub-Domain: Health and Personal Care**

- **Daily Living Skills**
  - **Goal: Children practice personal care routines**
    - 18 to 36 months—Some strategies for caregivers
      - Are aware of culturally based personal care strategies used by families to promote interdependence
- **Nutrition**
  - **Goal: Children eat a variety of nutritious foods**
    - Birth to 18 months—Some strategies for caregivers
      - Provide child with nutritious foods and snacks, including foods from various cultures
    - 18 to 36 months—Some strategies for caregivers
      - Prepare and provide a variety of nutritious snacks and meals from child’s own cultural background and other cultures
    - 36 to 60 months—Some indicators for children
      - Passes food at the table and takes appropriate sized portions, or other culturally-specific family serving style
    - 36 to 60 months—Some strategies for caregivers
      - Talk with child about food choices in relation to allergies, religion, culture, family choices and overall health

**Alaska started with Washington’s standards and built into them** strategies and definitions that were appropriate to their diverse populations. Again, a focus on the Health domain illustrates how Alaska expanded the comprehensive Washington standards and included more examples and guidance to reflect specific cultures and populations. In addition to the strategies and indicators already outlined in the Washington work, Alaska developed the following definitions within their Health domain.

*From Alaska’s Early Learning Guidelines:*

## **Domain 1: Physical Well-Being, Health and Motor Development**

### **General Definitions**

- **Safety**

- In Alaska’s unique geographical region, which has extremes in temperature and remoteness, it is essential that caregivers pay attention to both traditional indigenous knowledge of survival as well as to modern science and technology. For example, in many parts of the states, parents carry their baby or toddler inside their parkas to keep them warm during intensely cold winters. Fur parkas and mukluks provide protection from cold injuries, while polar fleece can also provide added warmth to a child and has the benefit of drying quickly. Before traveling in the winter, traditional knowledge of the ice is important to heed as well as the weather forecast from the radio or Internet.

- **Supporting Individual Differences, Languages and Diversity**

- Native cultures throughout Alaska place a high value on physical health and endurance. Community events such as dances and sports, such as Native Youth Olympics, provide an opportunity for both Native and non-Native people to gather and participate in activities that promote physical health as well as social development. In many villages and cities, people come together at these events to participate in games, dances, and to renew a sense of community.



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