



NJDOE News

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For Release: April 17, 2000

Commissioner Hespe Approves Early Childhood Education Expectations & Standards

Accepting the recommendations of a task force comprised of early childhood experts and practitioners, Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe today adopted a comprehensive set of expectations and standards that will serve as a model for quality preschool programs in New Jersey.

Governor Christie Whitman commended the efforts of the task force, which began its work last fall, and said its recommendations will better prepare children for academic success by the time they enter school.

"These expectations will provide children in preschool programs with developmentally-appropriate experiences that will increase their knowledge and sharpen their skills," said Governor Whitman. "The activities recommended by the task force will prepare three- and four-year-olds to meet our core curriculum content standards."

"The research is clear that the best approach for early childhood educators to take is to guide, not direct, children's learning at this age," Hespe said. "Traditional classroom instruction that relies on workbooks and paper-and-pencil tasks is inappropriate for a preschool program. What preschoolers need is a nurturing and secure environment that provides opportunities for play and exploration."

The expectations outlined in the 72-page document that is being distributed to all school districts is not a curriculum guide. It is a tool to provide early childhood educators with developmentally appropriate practices to support and prepare three- and four-year-old children to enter school.

"The standards of quality developed by the task force reflects the breadth of experience brought to the table by each member of the task force," noted Margretta Reid Fairweather, assistant commissioner for early childhood education. "In addition, we actively sought and received input from New Jersey's early childhood education community. Their perspectives and comments helped strengthen the document."

The document, entitled *Early Childhood Education Program Expectations: Standards of Quality*, also advises educators to consider the needs of their communities when designing and implementing an early childhood program.

"New Jersey has a very diverse population," Hespe said. "Early childhood educators should be prepared to build upon the strengths of our state's diversity and the richness of race, culture, language and experience that our youngest learners bring to the classroom."

The document recommends that early childhood programs should help children who come from homes where English is not the primary language to communicate proficiently in their non-English home language in order to promote the learning of English. The task force agreed on the need for educators to personalize learning for each child and honor differences in all children.

"An important ingredient in the success of this effort is for schools and parents to work together and to keep lines of communication open," Hespe said. "This collaboration will help children achieve their fullest potential."

"New Jersey has an unbelievable opportunity to provide quality preschool education programs for its three- and four-year-olds," Fairweather said. "This collaboratively developed document is the foundation upon which quality early childhood education programs in New Jersey will be built."

The task force appointed by the commissioner in September 1999 was chaired by Barbara Fridy Scott, a nationally known early childhood education consultant who formerly served as the early childhood supervisor for the Newark school district, and comprised of early childhood experts from across the state. These professionals included superintendents, early childhood supervisors and other practitioners from Abbott districts, licensed child care providers, Head Start agencies and professors. Parents and the business community were also represented. The task force provided expertise in the areas of special education, bilingual education, early childhood and curriculum development. The Division of Early Childhood Education provided leadership and assistance throughout the project. In addition, the department's Office of Standards and Professional Development provided

technical assistance and information.

The panel reviewed current research, curricula, standards and guidelines developed by local boards of education, other states and professional organizations. The task force's initial draft was circulated to over 11,000 members of the early childhood community and was posted on the department's website for review and comment. In addition, three focus groups were convened throughout the state to allow stakeholders additional opportunities to provide feedback. All comments were considered by the task force in preparing the final document. Its release today meets the deadline set by the New Jersey Supreme Court in its latest *Abbott v. Burke* ruling. The State Board of Education is scheduled to consider a resolution in support of the *Early Childhood Education Program Expectations: Standards of Quality* at its April 19th meeting.

The department will convene a working group to establish instructional frameworks and programmatic guidance to ensure that districts and providers will be able to fulfill the expectations.

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(Note: A copy of *Early Childhood Education Program Expectations: Standards of Quality* is attached.)