

## **New York State Education Department Introduction to PreK Learning Standards Initiative**

In seeking to further reduce the student achievement gap, the New York State Board of Regents set forth a charge to align standards, assessments, curriculum, and instruction not just across kindergarten through grade 12, but the more comprehensive and inclusive span of prekindergarten (Pre-k) to 16. This call to action was particularly timely considering the growth of state-funded Pre-k programs. It is intended to improve the quality and consistency of early childhood instruction for all Prek children across all settings.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is responding to this challenge by developing standards that will strengthen instruction in Pre-k classrooms in all settings, as well as help administrators and educators align Pre-k standards with the K-12 system. As a first step, NYSED invited representatives from the P-16 community to participate in a focused conversation about the early learning standards. The inaugural meeting of this group featured a presentation entitled *Early Learning Standards: The ‘Why’s, How’s, and What’s?* by internationally recognized early childhood researcher Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan.

Dr. Kagan’s presentation and question-and-answer session fostered an informed discussion of the purpose and process for developing standards. The seven-step process described by Dr. Kagan is predicated on a set of values established by, in this case, a panel of early education specialists. Teachers, directors, providers of teacher preparation and professional development, and NYSED staff all provided input into what parents, family members, and citizens – as a collective body – want their children to be like when they grow up. What key values must be reinforced in children so that they will reflect their heritage and be prepared for their futures?

The panel generated a lengthy and thoughtful list of values, from which evolved suggestions for five distinct, but highly interrelated, domains:

- Approaches to Learning – “how children become involved in learning and acquiring knowledge”
- Physical Development and Health – “children’s physical health and ability to engage in daily activities”
- Emotional and Social Development – “the competence and ability to form positive relationships that give meaning to children’s experiences in the home, school, and larger community”
- Communication, Language, and Literacy – children’s understanding, creating, and communicating meaning
- Cognition and Knowledge of the World – what children understand about their world and how they apply what they know.

A very important outcome of this discussion was the realization that the domains are shaped by a series of fundamental beliefs about children, childhood, and learning. Including these guiding principles for children enhances the usefulness and validity of the learning standards themselves. The following guiding principles are deemed equally significant.