

## Early Learning Standards

Authors: Kristin Javorsky and Candice Pittman

### ABSTRACT

This study involved a statewide, large-scale survey of licensed early childhood care providers examining choices in implementation of Mississippi's official *Early Learning Standards* (ELS) for three- and four-year-olds (preschoolers). Although it is a relatively recent educational trend, as of 2015 all 50 states have now adopted ELS with the expectation that this will increase kindergarten readiness among preschool-aged children. However, for creation and promotion of Mississippi ELS to result in improved outcomes for all children, these voluntary standards must be implemented in both private and public early childhood settings, incorporated statewide, and woven into existing policies and procedures appropriately. Given the voluntary nature of the standards, this means that early childhood care providers must believe that implementation of Mississippi ELS is worthy of their effort and investment.

A total of 635 public and private childcare providers or center directors completed the Early Childhood Care Provider Survey (39 items), which addressed questions of director and staff credentials, children served, market sector, collaboration with local school districts, issues of rurality, and perceived barriers to implementation. These respondents represent 39% of Mississippi's 1,611 licensed early childhood care providers (according to MDHS), all of whom were individually contacted by both mail and telephone as part of this study. While the survey responses provide data to answer a multitude of questions surrounding the ELS, the primary research questions addressed in this study were: To what extent are Mississippi's early childhood care and education providers incorporating the state's early learning standards? Are there

patterns of use and non-use according to type of childcare, location, center size, or education level of directors and staff? How useful do these directors perceive the standards to be, and what are the cited reasons for non-use?

While a majority of providers reported they were aware of the state's Early Learning Standards, reasons that providers gave for non-use were not always consistent with actual understanding, such as when providers cited cost (ELS materials are free), accessibility (website download is readily available) or irrelevance (ELS are aligned with multiple other existing frameworks). In addition, two especially interesting early results indicate that childhood care centers that collaborate in some fashion with local school districts are more likely to be currently implementing the state's early learning standards than other providers, and that childcare directors who hold a bachelor's or advanced degree in early childhood degree are also more likely to be utilizing the ELS and to perceive them as highly useful, than directors with less formal education or degrees in other fields.

Policy recommendations based on survey results include 1) increasing awareness among childcare providers of how the Mississippi's Early Learning Standards are beneficially aligned with existing childcare licensing requirements, Head Start framework criteria, and the Mississippi College and Career Ready Standards, 2) expanding educational partnership efforts between private childcare centers and public school districts, and 3) increasing educational and financial opportunities that can raise the formal education levels of the early childhood care and education workforce statewide.