

Effects of the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards on Policy and Practice in Rhode Island

Report to the Steering Committee

By Anne W. Mitchell
Early Childhood Policy Research

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Introduction and Background

This report describes the results of a study commissioned by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) on behalf of the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards Steering Committee. The study was designed to explore the impact of the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards on policy and practice in the state. To explore effects on policy, interviews were conducted with thirteen individuals who are listed in the Appendix. To explore effects on practice, a survey was sent to several hundred individuals who participated in RIELS professional development over the past five years.

The Rhode Island Early Learning Standards (abbreviated RIELS,) were published in 2003 and are available in English and Spanish. A companion activity guide for families, Fun Family Activities for Preschoolers, was published in 2004 and is also available in English and Spanish. The RIELS are a set of eight domains elaborated by learning goals and definitions (knowledge and skills) and examples of expectations for typical four-year-old behavior. The eight domains are:

- approaches to learning,
- social and emotional development,
- language development and communication,
- literacy,
- mathematics,
- science,
- creativity, and
- physical health and development

The RIELS were developed over several years through a broad democratic process. A state-level Steering Committee received recommendations for the content and structure of the RIELS from the appointed Early Childhood Task Force. The RIELS were piloted during 2002-03 in five communities through a year-long professional development course that engaged school, Head Start and child care administrators and teachers along with family child care providers.

The RIELS are supported, in large part, by a program of professional development opportunities. The professional development introduced during the pilot evolved to become the '8-session' model of professional development that was offered to the community for the first time in 2003-04. A mix of teachers, administrators, and others participated. Beginning in 2004-05, the ELS professional development was differentiated and offered as Level 1 (five 3-hour sessions) or Level 2 (ten 3-hour sessions). In cooperation with the University of Rhode Island, Level 2 participants were now eligible to earn 2 college-level credits.

In 2005-06, Level 3 (ten 3-hour sessions) was added to focus on administrators. Currently Level 1 is the introductory, practical course on using the ELS for practitioners and family child care providers. Level 2 for practitioners, and Level 3 for administrators, are for those who have taken college courses in early childhood and have basic knowledge of curriculum and child assessment. Their focus is on using the ELS to develop curriculum and a standards-based program. In addition, the Rhode Island Department of Education, RI Early Learning Standards Project and Ready to Learn Providence worked in partnership to develop a six-session training series for parents and family members of preschool-age children.

Participants who successfully complete a professional development course receive a Certificate of Achievement. In 2005-06, the Next Steps course (15 hours) was offered as an add-on to either Level 2 or Level 3 to qualify participants for three college credits at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Next Steps/Practitioner Portfolio (for teachers) and Next Steps/Program Portfolio (for administrators) are four 4-hour sessions, first offered in 2007-08, to extend learning and help participants continue to build the portfolios that are begun in the prior courses. Currently, the professional development offerings are:

- Level 1 Using the RIELS to Support Children's Learning (five 3-hour sessions),
- Level 2 (ten 3-hour sessions) Implementing a Standards-based Program,
- Level 3 (ten 3-hour sessions) The Administrator's Role in Implementing a Standards-based Program,
- Next Steps (several 3-hour sessions on Saturdays for participants in either Level 2 or 3; 15 hours required to gain college credit),
- Next Steps/Practitioner Portfolio (four 4-hour sessions) and

- Next Steps/Program Portfolio (four 4-hour sessions).

Certified trainers deliver all professional development courses; there are currently 24 certified trainers. Much more information about all aspects of the RIELS is available at the website <http://www.ride.ri.gov/els/>

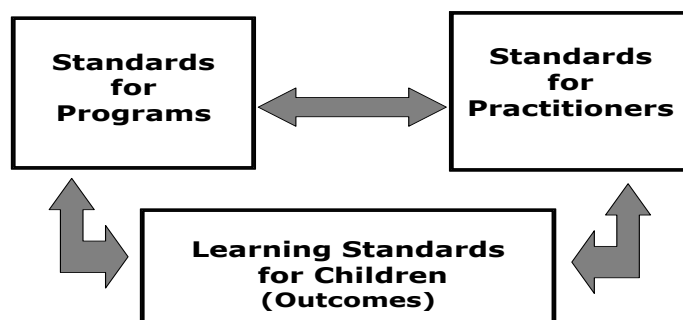
Effects on Policy

Eleven individuals representing public and private agencies and organizations and having a range of experience with the RIELS were interviewed (see Appendix for list). According to these key informants, the RIELS have affected policy in several significant ways.

One standards-based system

First, fundamental characteristics of the RIELS themselves make them capable of impacting policy. As one person said, “The stand for play was significant. The fact that they focus on all dimensions of development and learning – the whole child – and they represent a high level of agreement on what children should know, set the tone for policy development.” The RIELS are the primary initiative focused on children’s learning and “get brought to the policy table(s) as one of the measures to look for in program quality.” Making progress on increasing public investment and improving program quality was possible with the RIELS as a base. “Once the RIELS were in place; then other policies flowed.” That is, quality improvement requires investment and better quality is necessary to garner greater investment.

Policy for quality improvement is expressed in standards for programs and for practitioners. These are aligned with one another and with what children should know. One way to conceptualize this aligned relationship is the diagram below, which is the essence of a standards-based system of early care and learning.



Common standards for children's learning are essential and affect all the components of the system. Practitioner standards elaborate what adults should know and do to promote children's learning. Common program standards, aligned with the learning standards, define program conditions that support quality teaching and learning, and typically evolve within the quality improvement and rating system in a state. Rhode Island's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) plan, Successful Start, in fact called for the creation of aligned program standards to match the RIELS.

BrightStars

"We would not be as far along in BrightStars without the ELS." Everyone who was interviewed noted that the quality improvement and rating system developed in Rhode Island, called BrightStars, is one policy arena that clearly reflects the RIELS. BrightStars is a comprehensive set of program quality standards in six domains, including practitioner standards as Domain 5 (Staff Qualifications). There are five levels; the RIELS are specifically referenced in three Domains for programs seeking a rating above level 1. In Domain 2 (Teaching and Learning), the standard for programs seeking levels 4 or 5 serving preschool-age children is a curriculum aligned with the RIELS. Alignment is demonstrated with the components of quality curriculum in a standards-based program as taught in the RIELS professional development: content, process of learning, teaching strategies, and the context/environment. In Domain 4 (Family Communication and Involvement) the RIELS are noted as a resource for meeting the standards. In Domain 5 (Staff Qualifications), programs seeking levels 4 or 5 must have lead preschool teachers with a RI Early Learning Standards Level II Certificate. To achieve level 5, the director must have a RI Early Learning Standards Level III Certificate.

Prekindergarten

The RIELS are being used as the basis for defining a prekindergarten program. The discussion above of RIELS in BrightStars is an example; preschool programs seeking BrightStars designation must demonstrate alignment with the RIELS. For some time, Rhode Island has been labeled a 'state with no public prekindergarten program.' Efforts are underway to change that. The proposed prekindergarten program is in the planning stages; the demonstration phase is expected to involve sites participating in BrightStars and in which all staff have RIELS certificates, and curriculum and child assessment are aligned with RIELS. The process for developing prekindergarten was/is similar to the process to develop the RIELS. As one leader said, "The platform for Pre-K is the Early Learning Standards."

RIDE's commitment to early education

Several interviewees noted that the RIELS had significant effects on the RI Department of Education itself. The initial process of developing the standards was intentionally designed to include the relevant state agencies; the state-level committee included three staff from RIDE as well

two from Human Services and one each from Health and Children, Youth and Families. The committee believed the obvious permanent home for learning standards for children was RIDE. Funding for the development of the RIELS and the design and implementation of the professional development course to support them was provided by the Department of Human Services and carried out by RIDE. This helped increase RIDE's commitment to early childhood beyond preschool special education. Evidence offered in support of this view is that this year RIDE has contributed funds to the RIELS effort, is revising its preschool approval process, and sought and won a federal grant in support of RIELS. The grant from the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) will provide on-site TA to programs offering inclusive preschool services and support implementation of RIELS. The next opportunity for RIDE to demonstrate its commitment to early childhood and RIELS is the development of core competencies for early childhood educators, including certified teachers. Review of teacher certification standards is underway by the RIDE Office of Educator Quality and Certification; early childhood leaders in RIDE have been asked to participate.

Preschool approval

The RIDE first offered a preschool approval in 1968. The first revision of the preschool approval process and standards is underway, informed by the RIELS, the state's licensing program, accreditation standards of NAEYC and Head Start Program Performance Standards. The new preschool approval standards are comprehensive in regard to the educational program, using the framework of the RIELS and its definition of standards-based education. They also include administration and management and health and safety. The health and safety standards are consistent with DCYF licensing standards. "Licensing anchors one end [of the continuum] and RIDE's revised preschool standards [and prekindergarten] anchor the other end. BrightStars is the bridge in between."

Preschool special education

Several individuals noted that the RIELS initiative has been an inclusive effort. In a sense, the RIELS specify the general education program for preschoolers, which is the foundation for preschool special educators to design instruction to help preschoolers with disabilities. The overall goal of an IEP for a preschooler with disabilities is to access the general curriculum and grow and develop in each area that is affected by their specific disability. The ELS are integrated into the new format for Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

The new federal requirement from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is to measure child outcomes of preschool special education. "The ELS were a significant influence on the method [of child assessment] we chose. What we chose is Creative Curriculum.net, which is an

electronic child portfolio that supports a system of authentic assessment whose primary focus is to influence instruction – which is what ELS does, too.”

Professional Development System-building

For many years, the framework for constructing the early childhood professional development system in Rhode Island has been HOPE, which stands for Harbor of Opportunities for Professional Education. Work on developing core competencies and a career lattice for the workforce began but was not completed. These efforts have recently been revived or as one leader said, “We’ve dusted off HOPE.” The current work takes the approach of five career levels with corresponding competencies and content, which reflect the ELS in terms of curriculum and assessment, individualizing teaching, and family engagement.

Several people expressed the strong opinion that the RIELS could influence the professional development system in format as well as content. “The RIELS professional development provides one of the few examples [we have in Rhode Island] of a meaningful professional development experience that goes beyond just workshops and has levels of mastery. It’s a good example of effective, progressive systematic professional development; it has quality assurance, networking and mentoring, and consistent training offered every year. Our larger professional development system should be modeled on it, with the addition of data collection and evaluation.”

Licensing

Before revising the state’s child care licensing standards, the Department of Children Youth and Families took account of the RIELS as the foundation of children’s learning. The approach the Department established will align new regulations to ensure that health and safety and basic programmatic guidance are included and will refer to the RIELS as the guidance for the learning program.

Child Care Support Network

The Child Care Support Network, a project of the Department of Health, provides mental health consultation and uses the RIELS as the basis of their work with children and their teachers.

Other notable observations

The fact that the RIELS project has been successful in securing funds to conduct training over the years indicates that policymakers valued the work and understood that to actualize the standards in practice required serious professional development and academic credit for those who wanted/needed it.

Many leaders noted that the process, described as “iterative” and “broadly democratic” for developing the RIELS standards contributed to impact, in that the process brought everyone into it from practitioners to academics to leaders in agencies. This structure “ensured input from field, engagement of policymakers, and access to research – and accounts for how effective the standards are.”

Another unique feature of the project – cards for parents (activities related to the standards) – was noted as important to building public support and might have influenced policy. The family activity materials not only helped families engage with the standards but were also useful to frontline practitioners to strengthen the home-school connection.

The beauty of the RIELS document itself was noted several times. “There was genius in the packaging of the stuff – I never thought about the impact of format until this project.”

Effects on Practice

The policy effects discussed above set the stage for impact on practice. The proof of effectiveness of a professional development program is first the changes in practice that result and ultimately the changes in child outcomes. Changes in practice can be documented by self-report and direct observation. This survey is the initial self-report of practice changes; BrightStars will provide observational evidence. Once Rhode Island adopts a common child assessment system, child outcomes of the RIELS professional development can be tracked. In the meantime, a pre-post survey of practice could be devised and used to track effectiveness of the RIELS professional development program. The post-survey should be given long enough after completion of the professional development so that changes in practice have time to occur, probably 3-6 months.

Survey Methodology

To explore effects on practice, a survey was designed to gather information from the hundreds of individuals who completed RIELS professional development courses over the years. The Rhode Island Department of Education maintains records on all professional participants in RIELS training (i.e., not families who take the training). These records include 1,130 entries. Close to one thousand unique individuals have participated in RIELS professional development (N=984).

According to the most recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics¹, there are approximately 5,700 individuals working in early care and education in Rhode Island (4,500 child care workers; 1,060 preschool teachers and 140 preschool and child care administrators). The RIELS professional

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *May 2007 State Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics for Rhode Island*, online at http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ri.htm.

development has reached about 17 percent of the Rhode Island workforce. This is a notable achievement; yet the turnover rate in the child care sector of the workforce is probably over 25%. Continuing to offer professional development at least at the current pace is necessary to keep up. While ideally every early childhood educator should know about the RIELS, a feasible goal might be 50% of the workforce.

To ease the burden on respondents, the surveys were tailored to the RIELS professional development types. Thus an individual did not have to remember which level they took and the surveys for '8-session' and Level 1 participants omitted questions about portfolios, for example. Emails providing the link to the survey were sent on January 5; a reminder email was sent to all non-respondents on January 12; the survey was closed on January 25, 2009. Copies of each of the four surveys are available in the Appendix section of this report that is posted on the RIELS website at www.ride.ri.gov/els.

The survey sample is all participants from the past five years for whom an email address was available (N=453). This method has some drawbacks. Having an email address and one that is valid over several years is associated with stability; those with a stable job are more likely to have a stable email address. The survey was in English, so speakers of other languages may not have been able to reply even if the email reached them (e.g., several Level 1 courses have been offered in Spanish). There are a few other differences between the full database of records and the survey sample. None of the 2002-03 records has an email address since that was the pilot year; thus the sample does not contain any records for that year. For all other years, except 2003-04, about 40% of the records have emails. In 2003-04, twice as many records have email addresses (71%). The records for the full database show that 11% took more than one session, compared to 6% in the survey sample.

Across the full sample, about two-thirds of the email addresses were good, yielding a final sample of 322. Response rates for the four surveys range from 28% to 55% with an overall response rate of 34%; these rates are considered quite good and increase confidence in the results in those categories in which the sample is a good match with the full database. The sample is reasonably well-matched except for Level 1 in which only 14% had an email address. The table below provides basic characteristics of the final sample and response rates.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Survey Sample (N = 453)

<i>Professional Development Type</i>	<i>Number in Database</i>	<i>Number and Percent of Emails Sent</i>	<i>Number and Percent Bad Email Addresses</i>	<i>Number of Survey Recipients</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Survey Response Rate</i>
Eight session	235	124 (53%)	53 (43%)	71	26	37%
Level 1	189	27 (14%)	5 (19%)	22	8	36%
Level 2	618	259 (42%)	68 (26%)	191	53	28%
Level 3	88	43 (49%)	5 (12%)	38	21	55%
Totals	1,130	453 (40%)	131 (29%)	322	108	34%

Survey Results

This section provides selected results of the survey.

Demographics

Nearly all respondents are female (98%) and white (95%); 2% are Latino, 2% Black and 1% multi-racial. The majority speaks only English; 4% also speak Spanish, 2% Italian and 1% each Portuguese and French. The majority (71%) has a bachelor's degree or above. The majority work in non-profit programs or public schools. The following tables present selected information about the respondents.

Table 2. Education Levels of Survey Respondents (N = 133)*

<i>Education level</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Masters degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development	17%
Masters degree in another subject	13%
Bachelors degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development	17%
Bachelors degree in another subject	25%
Associate degree in Early Childhood Education, Child Development	11%
Associate degree in another subject	0%
No college degree but more than 24 college credits in Early Childhood Education or Child Development	8%
No college degree but 1 to 23 college credits in Early Childhood Education or Child Development	6%
High school diploma (or GED)	5%

* Note that the number of responses (133) is higher than the total number of survey respondents (108); although the question asked for 'highest level of education completed' some respondents checked all the levels that they had completed.

Table 3. Survey Respondents' Workplaces (N = 101)

<i>Type of Workplace</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Private for-profit	15%
Private not-for-profit	29%
Nursery/preschool	5%
Head Start	10%
Public school	24%
Family child care	5%
Other (includes retired, unemployed, university-related program, Even Start, or combination of programs)	13%

Table 4. Respondents' Current Position (N = 101)

<i>Position</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Family child care provider/owner	5%
Family child care assistant	0%
Assistant teacher	3%
Teacher	36%
Administrator/director	37%
Other (includes teacher-director, head teacher, special education teacher)	20%

Table 5. Tenure in Current Position and the Profession

<i>Tenure Current Position (N = 99)</i>	<i>Percent</i>		<i>Tenure in Profession (N = 103)</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less than one year	7%		Less than one year	0%
1-5 years	42%		1-5 years	10%
More than 5 years	51%		6-10 years	22%
			11-20 years	42%
			21-30 years	21%
			More than 30 years	5%

Professional development

More than one hundred individuals have taken more than one course; many took two courses (N=117) and several took three or more (N=14), which likely indicates the training was desirable and satisfactory and they came back for more. The most common reasons from the survey were to learn more or get the Level 3 (administrator) certificate.

The survey asked how many in the respondent's workplace had participated in RIELS professional development. Nearly half (49%) of the respondents report that half or more of the staff in their workplace, including the director, has participated.

Table 6. Participation in RIELS professional development by workplace

<i>Degree of participation (N = 95)</i>	<i>Percent</i>
I am the only person	25%
At least one other person	11%
A few of us	16%
About half of the staff and the director	33%
Everyone	16%

Credit

Graduate and undergraduate credit was offered beginning in 2004-05 for Levels 2 and 3. Either 2 or 3 credits, undergraduate or graduate, were available. Next Steps can be taken for 1 credit (graduate or undergraduate). The chart below uses the full database to illustrate the number and percent of those who took the courses for credit from 2004 through 2008. Overall, 30 percent of those who could have taken the course for credit did so.

Table 7. College Credit (2004-2008)

<i>Professional Development Type</i>	<i>Number who took for credit</i>	<i>Potential number for credit</i>	<i>Percent taking for credit</i>
Level 2	157	511	31%
Level 3	27	68	40%
Next Steps	18	96	19%
Next Steps practitioner portfolio	6	11	55%
Next Steps program portfolio	4	14	29%
Totals	212	700	30%

The survey data indicated that those who did not take it for credit did not need/want the credit, or opted for professional development credit (PDCs) instead. A few noted that the credit does not transfer or count toward a major.

Changes in practice

An overwhelming number reported changing practices: 78% of the 8 session; 86% of Level 1; 85% of Level 2 and 83% of Level 3. The following examples are from level 2 respondents.

- We spend more time thinking about the domains of development and then planning the lessons. Prior to the training we planned activities first. Family materials also make it easy to make suggestions to parents/caregivers.
- I use the Standards for everything, talking with parents, observations and records, planning and driving instruction.

- When developing curriculum for preschool age programs at the zoo, I always look through the ELS to make sure I incorporate a variety of learning approaches. It is important that all our lessons are well rounded with components of literature, social development, mathematics, creativity, nutrition, etc... not just science.

One question asked: Is there anything different about your whole program since you took the RI ELS? The majority said yes; 68% of the 8 session; 50% of level 1; 70% of Level 2 and 77% of Level 3. The following examples are from level 3 respondents.

- The children are definitely more engaged and are able to learn at their own pace in their own style and choose which centers they would like to visit for the day. The teachers are writing their own standards-based curriculum under the direction of the head teacher. There is definitely much more accountability on the part of the teachers - this has not always been easy and we have lost some teachers along the way, but gained some great ones who were willing to rise to the challenge. So, all-in-all the experience has improved our staff.
- I prepared an individual professional development portfolio for myself and began a portfolio for the program.
- The difference in my program is that the teachers now look at the students before writing their curriculum. They pull what the children are in need of and write the curriculum based on that.
- I have changed the language in my parent and staff handbooks. I also refer to the standards often when talking to staff about curriculum and program policy.

Notably, 66% of level 2 and 75% of level 3 respondents continued to work on their portfolios after completing the training.

The RIELS training is consistently rated as better than other training offered in Rhode Island. The most commonly requested help for implementing the RIELS were:

- Sample activity/teaching plans that are aligned with the ELS,
- A website with resources for practitioners,
- A place to go (for example, website) for teaching ideas that are aligned with the ELS, and
- A short refresher course.

Advice to the Steering Committee

The following advice was offered by those interviewed. There may also be advice that can be gleaned from analysis of the open-ended responses on the survey.

Evaluation and data. Make sure that RIELS initiative has a solid evaluation. This is key to long-term sustainability. We need better data to show impact on practice and on children.

System-building. Keep the standards-based system together and continue to work explicitly for policy alignment. Continue to have strong relationships with BrightStars since it will have measures in it to judge pre-post effects of RIELS professional development and is a source of information on what programs need.

Develop the companion early learning standards for infants and toddlers (0-3). Support their implementation with professional development and explicitly work to align them with program and practitioner standards.

Ensure that any revisions in teacher certification are aligned with RIELS and the standards-based system.

Professional development system. Professional development in Rhode Island needs to be better coordinated. HOPE is one approach. NAEYC's public policy division has just released a publication called Workforce Designs: A Policy Blueprint for State Early Childhood Professional Development Systems, which may be helpful in this effort. (For the report, see http://www.naeyc.org/policy/ecwsi/pdf/Workforce_Designs.pdf). There is also an online searchable database of state policies.

Access. The RIELS professional development is highly regarded. The knowledge and support of administrators and a critical mass of RIELS trained staff in a workplace probably make a large contribution to practice changes. Be sure training focuses on administrators – they make or break the climate for improvement in a workplace. The early RIELS professional development that combined administrators and teachers in one group maybe should be revived and adapted for teams from workplaces to have more effect on practice.

Cost effectiveness. The RIELS initiatives are well-regarded and appear to be effective. To reach high proportions of the workforce, the professional development needs to be pragmatic. The new technical assistance project (federal) is a good opportunity to determine how much is enough to make a difference and use that information to design professional development and TA that is feasible to take to scale. Do it in a way that's affordable and can be replicated.

Curriculum. Find out more about what specific published resources are being used in RI to develop curriculum and provide more support for the ones that align. Continue to support programs

in developing a curriculum framework and build the capacity of expert teachers to develop their own curricula as well as use published resources Promote clear criteria for ‘good’ curriculum.

Curriculum is a broad construct. The comprehensive definition from RIELS professional development has four elements: content (as in RIELS), children’s processes of learning, adult’s teaching and facilitating, and the learning context (environment). Activities and opportunities that teachers prepare reflect content, goals for children, teaching strategies, and the materials and environment in which early childhood experiences occur. Note that 3 of the 4 most common desires for help expressed on the survey relate to teaching.

Communicate and connect. The project could do more to reach policymakers, e.g., the Permanent Legislative Commission on Child Care should know about the ELS.

The RIELS website could have page for future plans, be interactive on asking for input, and start an e-mail list for outreach.

Connect with libraries to reach families informally and as a place for professional development. Libraries should have copies of standards.

Connect more firmly with higher education on issues of credit, on aligning their curriculum and teaching with the RIELS, and on teacher certification. “Higher education is the nut to crack now.”

Appendixes

Individuals Interviewed

Leanne Barrett, Rhode Island Kids Count

Blythe Berger, Rhode Island Department of Health

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Rhode Island Kids Count

Tammy Camillo, Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children

Christine Chiacu-Forsythe, Early Reading First at Ready to Learn Providence

Leslie Gell, Ready to Learn Providence

Diane Horm, formerly University of Rhode Island, currently University of Oklahoma

Joseph Morra, formerly Child Span, currently Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance

Reeva Sullivan Murphy, former child care administrator, Rhode Island Dept. of Human Services

Michele Palermo, Rhode Island Department of Education

Carol Patnaude, Community College of Rhode Island

Surveys

Eight session

Level 1

Level 2

Level 3