**Observational Formative Assessment in Early Childhood:   
A Joint Position Statement of the Massachusetts Departments of**

**Early Education and Care, Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education**

In the early childhood years, child observation is considered one of the most developmentally appropriate methods of collecting evidence of learning. Information from observations are therefore a key component within a comprehensive system of assessment in the early childhood years (birth –age eight). Observation allows the early childhood educator to see how different domains (physical, cognitive, language and social emotional) can influence each other. Through observation early childhood educators are able to document distinctions between what a child can do independently and what the child can do with support or prompting from a skillful educator. A well designed observational assessment has the potential to provide the most accurate evidence of a child’s performance because it is conducted within classroom settings and everyday situations and is readily incorporated into a child’s daily activities and interactions, making it a part of the teaching process. The early childhood educator uses what is learned through observations to build a relationship with a child and to gain insight into a child’s thinking and behavior and to plan and develop learning opportunities. Observational assessment supports early childhood educators in their ability to responsively extend learning in ways that are appropriate for an individual child.

The selection of an observational assessment measure for young children depends largely on the purpose that the observation is intended to serve. Observational tools are organized to address three intended purposes:

* 1. identifying children who may need interventions or further evaluation;
  2. monitoring learning and development; and
  3. guiding planning and decision making.

High quality observational tools are valid and reliable, culturally sensitive and designed with the purpose of monitoring child’s learning and development. They use clear and agreed-upon criteria that correspond to identified learning progressions or a developmental continuum. They are available in a variety of forms to document a child’s thinking and behavior, most of which go beyond anecdotal records. These may include checklists, teacher ratings, time records, videos or narrative descriptions. These forms may be augmented with portfolio items, recordings, photographs or a child’s work samples. Observational tools are more meaningful when educators have successfully completed professional development focused on observational assessment.

Observation is one step in a cycle of formative assessment that includes asking questions, collecting evidence, interpreting evidence and taking action. The results of all assessment should be routinely shared in reciprocal communications with families and among all educators who collaborate in their work with the children observed. Interpretation of evidence is more accurate when there is an understanding and sensitivity to the context and cultures in which a child develops and when the perspective and culture of the family and other educators are taken into account. Educators abide by ethical principles in the collection and evaluation of all assessment data, including the principles that:

1. a child is best understood in the context of their family, language, and culture, so that educators have a responsibility to engage and connect with families;

2. assessment results are more likely to be valid when the child feels safe and respected during assessment; and

3. educational decisions, particularly those related to diagnosis or labeling, are never made on the basis of a single assessment.

**References**

*Assessment of Child Progress: A Guide to the Early Childhood Program Standards and Related Accreditation Criteria*. (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2005).

[*Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8.*](http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/CAPEexpand.pdf)Position statement with expanded resources, adopted 2003. Joint position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (Washington, DC: NAEYC. 2003).