

Standards of Excellence

A Tool for Peak Performance in Educational Practice, Enrollment Building, and Family Engagement

by Julie Wassom

Imagine an easy-to-use tool early childhood managers and educators could use to improve performance in educational practice, marketing, enrollment conversion, and family satisfaction and retention. How would a center benefit if this tool could help teams assess current performance, drive action plan development, build strong leadership teams, and encourage staff involvement in quality program delivery? This vision, question, and a teacher's request for help rating the quality of early childhood educational programs based on standards, sparked the creation of the Standards of Excellence for Jewish Community Centers and Synagogues with Early Childhood Education Centers. (<https://rcfdenver.org/study-report/standards-excellence-jewish-community-centers-synagogues-early-childhood-education-centers/>)

This comprehensive resource is the result of a decade of work, and millions of



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dollars invested to enhance and improve Jewish early childhood education and family engagement in synagogues and Jewish community centers in the Denver/Boulder Colorado area.

"The Standards of Excellence is a landmark publication for all who work in Jewish ECE and care deeply about the next generation," says Lisa Farber Miller, senior program officer at Rose Community Foundation, which supported the development of the publication. "It's one thing to talk about exemplary practices, but the SOE paints a clear and rich picture of what high quality Jewish ECE looks like—and what needs to be done to create excellence."

Though specifically designed for Jewish early education centers, most of the standards and competency growth areas within the SOE apply, or are easily adapted, to all child care programs.

Design

The SOE was designed as a tool to help centers assess and improve quality and excellence in early childhood education. It is composed of 15 overarching standards such as physical environment, teacher-child relationships, and enrollment conversion.

Its structure provides a clear and effective framework for centers to engage in a self-reflective inventory of current practices and to take concrete steps towards higher and higher levels of mastery. Each performance level describes the specific behavior or results the center needs to achieve to attain competence. Thus, it guides ECE programs toward ongoing, intentional growth.

Development

The educational practice sections of the Standards of Excellence were developed by the Colorado Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative (<http://www.rcfdenver.org/content/colorado-jewish-early-childhood-education-initiative-progress-report-2008-2012>). These include nine essential standards for exemplary educational practice, including curriculum, the center-home partnership, physical environment, professional development and more.

A refined and expanded version of the Standards of Excellence was developed during the launch of the three-year initiative, BUILDing Jewish ECE (<http://www.rcfdenver.org/content/building-jewish-ece>). This project provided nine Jewish centers in Colorado with mentoring and resources in marketing communications, enrollment conversion, family satisfaction and

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retention, and family engagement. As project director and marketing specialist for this initiative, I was part of a team of authors who developed six more SOE competency standards for exemplary practice in these areas of performance.

Effective Use

In BUILDing Jewish ECE, mentor coaches assigned to each center used the SOE as a concrete growth tool to assess current performance, establish a plan for improvement, chart progress, and measure success. With three separate levels of performance—Initial, Satisfactory, and Exemplary—users could easily see a path to implementing best practices for each standard. (See Standard 11.4 - Staff Involvement in Enrollment Conversions)

Assess Performance

With mentor coach guidance, each center management team reviewed the SOE areas of focus for BUILDing Jewish ECE,

and tallied their current competency levels. Each team chose three or more specific competencies, or “key indicators,” on which they wanted to focus and set goals for improvement. Midway through and at the end of the initiative, the teams tallied again their levels of performance on selected standards,

changing the key indicators as intentional efforts yielded higher performance and they achieved new levels of competency. Thus the SOE became a very user-friendly tool for documenting progress and assessing areas still in need of support in order to become exemplary.

Standard 11.4: Staff Involvement in Enrollment Conversions						
Initial		Satisfactory		Exemplary		Score
MINIMAL 1	EMERGING 2	DEVELOPING 3	COMPETENT 4	CONSISTENT 5	ENGRAINED 6	
<p>Staff see themselves as educators of children rather than as partners in the enrollment conversion process.</p> <p>They lack the opportunity to interact with visiting prospective families.</p> <p>Prospect visits in classrooms may be perceived as disruptive.</p>		<p>The staff warmly greet potential families when they enter their classrooms.</p> <p>During the center visits, the director does all the communicating with visiting parents, and staff engage with the parents or child only by greeting them.</p>		<p>The director notifies staff of scheduled center visits to their classroom and provides basic information about the family.</p> <p>The staff warmly greet potential families by name when they enter their classrooms. When appropriate, the teacher engages the visiting child in an activity and/or talks with the parent briefly explaining the classroom and addressing any parent questions, while the director fills in for the teacher.</p> <p>Families feel that the director and educators demonstrate keen interest in enrolling their child(ren).</p>		

Drive Action Plans

With competency levels tallied, the center management teams could build action plans focused on highest priority areas where performance improvement was needed. For example, if the center wanted to create marketing messages to increase inquiries, yet scored themselves as only “emerging” in the brand identity standard, the mentor coaches and I worked first with the teams to build actions into their marketing plan that would create a clear brand specific to their center and larger organization. Once brand identity was at an exemplary level, they were in a better position to develop marketing messages to effectively communicate their unique image and story. At that point, the action plan was updated to address a new standard—to work on creating branded marketing messages to generate qualified inquiries from their target audiences.

Engage Leadership Teams

A section of the SOE provided performance standards for leadership team development and function. Called the BUILD Team in this initiative, the teams were composed of center managers, board members, teachers, parents, and senior leaders in the organization. The SOE and resulting action plans were the

roadmap for each center’s leadership team, with each member ideally offering expertise and taking on individual tasks in the action plans. Teams met periodically to report results of action steps taken, discuss strategy, and report progress toward improved performance. As teams reached exemplary levels in select standards, they updated plans with new actions to move on to the higher levels of performance in other competency areas. This step-by-step team approach helped the centers move strategically toward better inquiry generation, enrollment conversion, and family retention, without overloading busy directors with additional tasks.

Out of this SOE-driven work, one participant in the initiative, Temple Sinai Preschool, emerged with not only an ongoing leadership team, but a strong, active parent ambassador program. This program has driven inquiries, enrollment conversion, and customer retention, as well as built a healthy community of families engaged in the center and exposed to other opportunities to expand their involvement in the synagogue.

“BUILDing Jewish ECE led us through an engaging educational experience that took us on a wonderful journey,” said Temple Sinai Preschool Director Debbie Kohn. “We have become intentional in everything we do – from defining our

vision and developing our leadership team, to marketing our center.”

Rose Community Foundation has made the SOE available on a complimentary basis to any early childhood education professional who wants to use it as a tool for growth in their own early care and education environment. If you believe that your child care center or organization could benefit, please download it at <http://rcfdenver.org/content/standards-excellence-jewish-community-centers-and-synagogues-early-childhood-education>.

Using the Standards of Excellence in your Program

How can you use Standards of Excellence for positive results in your school? Use this process to make it a practical tool for you and your team of center managers to create a center improvement and growth action plan.

- With your owner or manager, review the entire SOE.
- From the 15 standards, select an initial three or four on which you would like to improve performance. An example might be physical environment, marketing communications, and family satisfaction and retention.

Standard 10.3

Action	Target Dates	Action Steps	People Responsible	Budget	Outcome/Eval
Develop an image message / tagline for the ECC	October 30	Develop basic competitive advantages (BCAs)	Jill, Alexa, and ECC staff	\$0.00	Deliverable: Tagline unique to ECC Tagline in all image messaging
	November 24	Brainstorm from BCAs into a brief statement - seven words or less	Jill, Alexa, and ECC staff		Evaluation: Increased inquiries
	November 30	Test three potential taglines with teachers, parents, colleagues	Jill, parent, and volunteer		
	December 11	Select a tagline	Jill, Alexa, and manager		
	December 16	Determine where to put tagline	Jill and manager		
	December 31	Execute tagline placement	Jill and Alexa		

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- Discuss the behavioral elements in each level of competency for each standard you selected. Each performance level describes the specific behavior or results that the center needs to achieve to have attained that specific level of competence.
- Together, score your center's current efforts along a continuum of Initial, Satisfactory, or Exemplary in each of your three chosen standards.
- Develop a separate action plan for each of these standards to improve or enhance your center's performance.

"Child care organizations that write goals, develop written action plans, and identify specific actions with completion dates that are assigned to specific team members have a higher probability of success," said Karen King Stokes, an industry veteran who served as a mentor coach for BUILDing Jewish ECE.

Be sure each of your action plans include the following elements:

- goal
- SOE standard and specific competency
- action
- target completion dates
- action steps
- people responsible for executing each action step
- budget
- deliverable or outcome anticipated
- method of measuring results toward goal achievement

For example, your marketing action plan goal might be to increase inquiries by 10 percent. One SOE standard you will focus on could be brand identity (Standard 10.3). Your specific competency toward building brand identity could be to develop an image message or tagline for your center. Your plan could

then include this as one action toward building that competency.

Throughout the year, periodically review your action plans together with your management team to chart progress. Action plans should remain flexible to accommodate setbacks, changes in course and early completion of actions. As you complete tasks, identify new actions and add them to your action plans.

Re-score your selected focus areas of the SOE annually and compare that score to your initial scoring. Doing so will make it easy for you to measure the success your center has achieved, and to identify where you still need to develop higher competencies.

Used together consistently, the Standards of Excellence and action plans can help you achieve increasing levels of mastery and the goals that come with peak performance.