



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

**MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS
COMMISSIONS ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

3624 Market Street | 2 West | Philadelphia, PA 19104

Telephone: 267.284.5000 | FAX: 215.662.0957 | info@msa-cess.org | www.msa-cess.org

INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE STATES PROGRAMS OF DISTINCTION

Middle States *Programs of Distinction* recognize outstanding individual programs within MSA accredited and candidate schools and school systems. MSA offers schools and school systems the opportunity to assess the following areas of their curricula for excellence against internationally recognized Standards and Indicators of Quality in each field.

21st Century Skills
Early Childhood Education
Global Literacies
Music
Service Learning
School Counseling
STEM
Visual Arts
World Languages

If a school/system's program demonstrates that it meets the expectations of the Standards and Indicators of Quality at a consistently high level and exhibits the characteristics essential to serving as a high quality exemplar program for other schools, the *Program of Distinction* will be awarded. The expectations for earning recognition as a MSA *Program of Distinction* are very high. As such, a small percentage of programs will be determined eligible to receive the **award**.

Alternatively, schools and school systems can use the MSA *Program of Distinction* process as a tool for **program evaluation** that will yield comprehensive feedback for growth and improvement of the chosen area.

For **award or program evaluation**, the school/system will complete a rigorous self-assessment that is presented in a self-study report of the school/system's program. The self-study report is sent to MSA for review and if all is determined to be in order, a specialist visitor or visitors will be assigned to visit the school to validate the program's self-assessment and offer feedback. For schools/systems applying for an **award**, the specialist visitor(s) will make a recommendation to award or defer recognition of the program as a MSA *Program of Distinction*. For schools/systems engaging in **program evaluation**, a detailed feedback report including recommendations and resources will be provided to the school/system.

The specialist visits can be scheduled either in conjunction with a Team Visit for accreditation or reaccreditation, or independently at any time during the accreditation period.

Schools and school systems that have engaged in the MSA *Program of Distinction* evaluation process either for the purpose of seeking an award or for conducting a program evaluation have benefitted greatly from the actual experience as well as the outcome of the process. We encourage you to consider either of these approaches for realizing recognition and growth and improvement of your school or school system.

After review of this document, if you are interested in receiving the application for this *Program of Distinction*, please contact Audra Chin at achin@msa-cess.org.

WHAT IS THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION?

The Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction is one of a series of Programs of Distinction designed by the Middle States Association's Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CES) to recognize exemplary programs in various content and specialty areas.

Research on early childhood education (ECE) is abundant. Findings unanimously report that a child's experiences during the first five years have a profound impact on all future learning and the ability for a child to become a successful adult. Often, regulatory content for early childhood education focuses on setting a 'floor' below which a program may not go. That is important, but it does not address the high quality to which research tells us early childhood education programs should aspire. Accreditation is a critical step in assuring high quality. When an ECE program demonstrates that it meets all of the appropriate Middle States Standards for Accreditation and is accredited, it affirms that the school has achieved a baseline of best practice.

When early childhood education is provided as a free-standing entity rather than as part of a larger school/system, all of the accreditation effort focuses exclusively on the program for children five years old and under. However, accreditation, although a recognized, worthy achievement, does not imply an exemplar program. Rather, it is understood that standards are met at least to an acceptable degree. Since the Early Childhood Program of Distinction requires that a program be "a high quality exemplar" this presents an ideal opportunity for an ECE program to demonstrate that it exceeds a number of the Middle States Indicators of Quality within the context of best practice in the field.

Further, when ECE is provided as part of a larger school/system, it may not receive the level of attention essential for it to be the best it can be—even if the school/system is accredited. The Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction is verification that the ECE program meets or exceeds all of the Early Childhood Education Indicators of Quality within the Middle States Standards for Accreditation. This is also an excellent opportunity for an ECE program within a larger school/system to demonstrate that it exceeds a number of the Middle States Indicators of Quality within the context of best practice in the field.

All early childhood programs that believe they qualify, whether a small free-standing entity or a component of a large school system, are invited to apply for the Program of Distinction, and by doing so, assess themselves against internationally recognized Indicators of Quality that represent excellence in the field.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION CRITERION

The Criterion: The school/system's early childhood education program reflects a commitment to maximizing student outcomes in all domains of development via high quality early care and education experiences offered in partnership with families. This commitment is widely accepted, understood, and supported by the governance, staff, parents, and broader educational community of the school/system. The program implements a well-articulated, child-centered philosophy and daily experiences for young children. Evidence-based best practice is visible throughout ECE operations and is effective for all enrolled children, including those with special needs and those who are English language learners. The ECE program is characterized by collaborative relationships among staff and between staff and families of enrolled children. When the ECE program is a component of a school/system, the school/system assures the ECE program full membership in the school community and actively seeks collaboration and articulation between ECE and elementary grades.

THE INDICATORS OF QUALITY

A Vision of the Early Childhood Education Program

- ECE.1 There is a vision specifically for the Early Childhood Program that focuses on joyful learning and play as well as the identified cognitive skills for success in school.
- ECE.2 The school/system and the Early Childhood Program reflect a strong commitment to providing all students with access to a balanced, comprehensive, and sequential, early childhood education program.
- ECE.3 The school/system and the Early Childhood Program reflect a commitment to facilitating each child's optimal development of age- appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional skills through opportunities that include playful learning and promote creativity and exploration.
- ECE.4 The early childhood education vision is widely published and accepted among the school/system governance, staff, families and broader educational community. The stakeholders are included in periodic review and revision of the vision.
- ECE.5 The stakeholders understand and accept the value and benefits of the early childhood education and support the school/system's Early Childhood Program by providing it with appropriate resources (financial, human, physical, time, etc.).
- ECE.6 The Early Childhood Program vision informs decision-making related to the program.
- ECE.7 At the successful completion of the Early Childhood Program experience, the school/system strives to have children demonstrate that they have developed, or are developing the appropriate independent knowledge, cognitive, social and emotional skills, including the confidence and excitement needed for successful further learning.

Governance and Leadership

- ECE.8 The school/system demonstrates commitment to high quality early childhood education.

School Improvement Planning

- ECE.9 Findings of continuous self assessment aligned with the program's vision determine the Early Childhood Program's goals for growth and improvement. These goals are measurable, and documented in multi-year plans, which outline the specific actions to be taken to achieve them.
- ECE.10 There is a culture of learning from experience, research, and assessments to support short- and long-term planning, which are integral in the Early Childhood Program's culture.
- ECE.11 Knowledge of individual children's development and the needs of the group inform daily plans. Formal and informal observations of individuals and the group are the basis for understanding the children's needs.
- ECE.12 The school/system provides teachers and staff reliable, sufficient time for planning away from the classroom each week.

Finances

ECE.13 Financial and other resources are sufficient and appropriately allocated to attain the vision of the Early Childhood Program.

Facilities and Learning Environment

ECE.14 The facility provides safe and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments appropriate to the ages served.

ECE.15 There is exemplary availability and deployment of equipment and materials for all age groups. Good resources for what “exemplary” looks like are the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and Early Childhood Rating Scale (ECERS).

ECE.16 Regular, safe checks are carried out in both indoor and outdoor environments.

ECE.17 The learning environment is attractive and engaging; natural light is sufficient and soft spaces are available in every classroom.

ECE.18 Appropriate equipment, materials, and books are more than sufficient in scope and quality to facilitate children’s learning and development.

ECE.19 Each early childhood classroom has an extensive library of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and big books to stimulate children’s interest in reading.

ECE.20 Children’s work is displayed prominently with explanations regarding the learning outcomes represented.

ECE.21 There are areas designated for dramatic play, construction, art, literacy, numeracy, science, and independent learning throughout classrooms or nearby spaces.

ECE.22 Early childhood education staff has access to a suitable space in which to plan away from the classroom and to confer privately with families.

ECE.23 The outdoor environment facilitates physical and social learning along with exploration of the natural world.

School Climate and Organization

ECE.24 The program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults.

ECE.25 Families are welcomed and respected as partners in their children’s early years.

ECE.26 A positive, collegial environment is evident among staff in the Early Childhood Program and between the early childhood education staff and other professionals.

ECE.27 All staff receives induction training prior to starting work to be included in the ECE vision, philosophy and learning standards as well as health and safety practices.

ECE.28 The program hires and supports a teaching staff with suitable training and experience to work with young children, including those for whom English is not their first language and those who have suspected or identified learning differences.

ECE.29 Early childhood education staff participates in ongoing professional development targeted specifically at the developmental levels of young children consistent with the Early Childhood Program goals and improvement plans.

ECE.30 All members of the early childhood education staff are provided with job performance feedback throughout the year in a supportive format. Formal performance reviews are conducted regularly.

- ECE.31 The program has written policies and procedures in place for safeguarding the welfare of children in the Early Childhood Program and for reporting suspected child neglect and/or abuse.
- ECE.32 All staff members in the Early Childhood Program must provide evidence of having undergone thorough background checks or a criminal record disclosure process prior to working with children.
- ECE.33 Teachers in Early Childhood Program are compensated based on education and experience and on a scale consistent with teachers in the parent institution.

Health and Safety

- ECE.34 Teachers model and discuss health and safety practices with children throughout the day, including at mealtime and outdoor time.
- ECE.35 Teachers are well trained to identify and report suspected child abuse, manage health emergencies and minor illness, and to prevent the spread of disease.
- ECE.36 Hand washing, diapering, sanitizing, and toileting practices are consistent with recognized American professional organizations, e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association of the Education of the Young Child, or recognized international professional organizations or national standards, e.g., United Kingdom Early Years Foundation Stage Safeguarding and Welfare Requirements.
- ECE.37 There is ample evidence that best practices for all aspects of a safe and healthy environment are in place and include nutrition, hygiene, food handling and other food safety precautions.
- ECE.38 There are policies and procedures in place for evacuation drills including records that indicate staff, families and children have been appropriately informed, and drills have been successfully practiced.

Educational Program

- ECE.39 The written and implemented curriculum is based on current research and best practices for children's social, emotional, language, physical, and cognitive development.
- ECE.40 While respecting individual timetables for learning, early childhood education teachers and staff plan carefully to sequence and support children's development of the skills needed for successful transition to Kindergarten and/or the elementary programs they are expected to attend.
- ECE.41 The teachers and staff have opportunities to interact with Kindergarten and elementary colleagues that promote and achieve successful articulation.
- ECE.42 Learning is implemented through planned purposeful play and a balance of adult-directed and child-initiated activity.
- ECE.43 A wide variety of engaging activities that support all aspects of physical, cognitive, and social development, including the arts and imaginative play, are offered throughout the day. Interest centers are indeed interesting to children, supporting sensorimotor engagement, offering delight and enticement, reflecting children's real lives and experiences.
- ECE.44 Children are given many opportunities to inquire about and explore their world and to engage in playful learning.
- ECE.45 ECE teachers and staff employ classroom management strategies including effective transitions that facilitate positive interactions and maximize children's learning time.

- ECE.46 Ongoing assessment including observation, documentation and interviews is employed routinely to inform staff about children's progress and learning needs.
- ECE.47 Rich oral language experiences are, carefully scaffolded and include listening, speaking, turn taking and expressive opportunities such as shared reading and role play.
- ECE.48 There are daily planned experiences in early literacy (phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, "reading" books, charts, and messages, emergent writing) appropriate to each child's development and goals.
- ECE.49 Early childhood education teachers and staff plan daily experiences in numeracy and science related to real world applications.
- ECE.50 The curriculum includes explorations that children can conduct in their immediate environment as well as in their families and in the local community.
- ECE.51 There are opportunities to celebrate diverse cultures and traditions as well as the children's own cultures and traditions.
- ECE.52 There are developmentally appropriate opportunities to explore and learn languages other than English.
- ECE.53 There are ample opportunities for children to express themselves through technology, construction, art, music, dance, role play and stories.
- ECE.54 Teachers plan carefully to assure that the classroom is a safe, respectful, joyful learning environment. As a result, children demonstrate a love of learning and joy in the educational experience.
- ECE.55 For children age two and older, one-on-one and small group activities predominate each day. For infants and toddlers, the presumed format is one-on-one with the introduction of small groups as children become ready.
- ECE.56 Teachers encourage thought and language via asking open-ended questions and by maintaining a good balance between listening to and talking with children.
- ECE.57 Conversations with children have a variety of purposes: e.g. problem solving, socializing, and sharing of different opinions and ideas, and information sharing. Each day teachers effectively model appropriate language skills for each purpose and add words and ideas to what children say.
- ECE.58 With infants and toddlers, teachers use a wide range of simple, exact words in communication; they engage children in verbal play daily.
- ECE.59 Infants and toddlers have opportunities to develop basic number and science concepts through language, visuals, and/or sensory exploration.
- ECE.60 Teachers are skilled in facilitating children's understanding of and ability to engage in accepted behavior and in helping children to understand the effects of their behavior on others.
- ECE.61 Teachers effectively help children recognize and accept their emotional responses to experiences and equip them with acceptable options for handling them (e.g. using words rather than physical aggression to address feelings). Positive discipline supports effective teaching.
- ECE.62 Teachers effectively help children develop a positive sense of competence, self-reliance, and self-worth.
- ECE.63 Teachers effectively support development and maintenance of children's friendships and group social skills such as sharing, appreciating the accomplishments of others, cooperation, problem-solving, following agreed upon rules, and frustration tolerance.

- ECE.64 Teachers are skilled in engaging families as partners in promoting social/emotional development of children.
- ECE.65 For infants and toddlers, primary caregiver relationships are reliably and effectively implemented.

Assessment and Evidence of Student Learning

- ECE.66 All children are assessed in the major domains of development using a normed assessment protocol.
- ECE.67 Developmentally appropriate assessments e.g., observations, checklists, journals, photographs, portfolios are shared with parents in conferences and used to inform future planning and activities for individual children and for groups.

Student Services

- ECE.68 Program policies and practices are designed to facilitate early identification of special developmental needs and to support appropriate interventions.
- ECE.69 The school/system is connected with local community resources and provides referrals for professional services and support to families when needed.
- ECE.70 Parents and staff are well advised of the services offered by the program.

Student, Family, and Community Activities

- ECE.71 The school/system offers parent education and social activities, which are well attended by parents and considered of value.
- ECE.72 The school/system encourages parents to visit and observe the program prior to enrolling at which time they receive a timely, complete orientation.
- ECE.73 The school/system provides regular opportunities for parents and staff to communicate regarding their children's growth and development. Parents feel welcome and are comfortable in approaching staff.
- ECE.74 The school/system is proactive in offering family engagement activities that reflect evidence-based best practice.
- ECE.75 The school/system formally evaluates family engagement to facilitate ongoing improvement. Stakeholder feedback is actively sought, seriously considered and forms the basis for decision-making.

APPLYING FOR THE PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

QUALIFICATIONS

The following qualifications must be met in order for a School/System to apply for the Program of Distinction:

- The School/System must be accredited by MSA-CESS or be a candidate for accreditation by MSA-CESS.
- If applying for the Program of Distinction independent of a current self-study and accreditation/reaccreditation process, the School/System must:

- Be an accredited member of MSA-CESS;
- Demonstrate that it meets all of the appropriate Standards for Accreditation at the time of its last evaluation; and/or
- Provide evidence that it has addressed successfully all areas of the Standards identified for improvement through Stipulation or Accreditation Maintenance Reports.
- If applying for the Program of Distinction as a part of a current self-study and accreditation process in preparation for a Team Visit, the School/System will integrate the Program of Distinction application as an additional component of the self-study and Team Visit.

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are offered to Schools/Systems wishing to apply for the Program of Distinction:

Schools/systems:

- Must be a candidate or accredited member in good standing of MSA-CESS or an Alliance partner.
- Must be willing to accept an on-site Team Visit to validate the Program of Distinction application. If the School/System is seeking the Program of Distinction as a part of a Team Visit or Mid-Term Review, the School/System must be willing to accept at least one additional team member to focus on the Program of Distinction Application.
- Must give MSA-CESS notice of its intention to apply for the Program of Distinction at least six months prior to the date of the expected evaluation visit.
- Must meet all of the Standards for Accreditation in order to be awarded the Program of Distinction.
- May seek the Program of Distinction at any time.
- May seek the Program of Distinction as a program evaluation for an additional fee.

If a School/System is receiving a Program of Distinction Visitor as a part of a Team Visit, the Program of Distinction Visitor will integrate his/her activities into the three and one-half-day schedule of the Team Visit. If a School/System is receiving a Program of Distinction Visitor as a part of a Mid-Term Review or independent of any other accreditation activities, the Program of Distinction Visitor(s) will develop a separate schedule of meetings specifically targeted on validation of the findings in the School's/System's Application for the Program of Distinction. This may require an additional day extension to the typical one-day Mid-Term Review.

The decisions that the Visitor will recommend are either to award the Program of Distinction or to deny awarding the Program of Distinction. When the awarding of the Program of Distinction is denied, schools/systems may reapply at a later date by submitting a new Application for the Program of Distinction.

ACTIVITY	DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION
Submission of the Program of Distinction Commitment Form	At least six months prior to the intended date of visit
Submission of the completed Application for the Program of Distinction	At least two months prior to the date of the intended visit

*Schools/Systems may also complete the application for the purpose of a program evaluation and not for seeking the Program of Distinction. Full details will follow in a separate section.

STEPS TO EARNING AND MAINTAINING THE PROGRAM OF DISTINCTION

- 1) The School/System contacts Audra Chin at achin@msa-cess.org expressing interest in applying for the Program of Distinction.

- 2) The MSA Staff Coordinator for the Program of Distinction will be informed and contact the school/system to discuss readiness and availability. The School/System will then be sent the Commitment Form and Application.
- 3) The School/System submits the Program of Distinction Commitment Form.
- 4) The School/System submits the Application for the Program of Distinction to MSA-CESS along with payment.
- 5) The MSA Staff Coordinator for the Program of Distinction evaluates the Application to determine how well it meets the Criterion and Indicators of Quality and the school/system's readiness to host the Visitor. The staff coordinator will provide feedback to the school/system and a recommendation regarding whether or not a Visitor should be appointed at this time.
- 6) The Visitor(s) appointed by MSA to evaluate the School/System's application have substantial educational, and/or administrative experience. The number of visitors will vary depending upon the comprehensiveness of the School/System's initiatives in the Program of Distinction area, the size of School/System, etc.
- 7) Upon the completion of the visit, the Visitor submits the Report and a recommendation for award or denial of the Program of Distinction. Upon the receipt of the Visitor's report, the Staff Coordinator develops an analysis of the Visitor's report and makes a staff recommendation on the award of the Program of Distinction.
- 8) An MSA Accreditation Advisory Committee reviews the Visitor's report and the School/System's application and determines its recommendation on the award of the Program of Distinction. The Middle States Commissions' Membership and Accreditation Committees review the recommendations of staff and the accreditation advisory committee and make a recommendation to the full Commissions.
- 9) The Commissions make a final decision on the award of the Program of Distinction.
- 10) The school/system ensures that all future accreditation maintenance activities (e.g. Periodic Reviews, Mid-Term Reviews Visits, etc.) will examine progress on recommendations outlined in the school/system's Program of Distinction application and the Visitor's report.
- 11) The School/System may reapply for the Program of Distinction in any subsequent year.

The Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools meet twice a year (typically in April and October) to make accreditation decisions. It is at that time that decisions regarding the award of the Program of Distinction will be made although; the School/System will be informed of the recommendation of the Visitor prior to their departure.

USING THE APPLICATION FOR A PROGRAM EVALUATION

The following guidelines are offered to schools wishing to use the Program of Distinction **ONLY** as a Program Evaluation tool:

- Schools/Systems may seek the Program of Distinction as a program evaluation tool at any time.
- Schools/Systems seeking to use the Program of Distinction as a formal program evaluation tool must be willing to accept an onsite visit to validate the findings of the self-study. If the school/system is seeking the program evaluation as a part of a team visit or Mid-Term review, the School/System must be willing to accept at least one additional team member to focus on the components of the program.
- If a school is receiving a Visitor as a part of a team visit, the Visitor shall integrate his/her activities into the 3 and ½ day schedule of the team. If a school is receiving a Visitor as a part of a Mid-Term Review or independent of any other accreditation activities, the Visitor shall develop a separate schedule of meetings specifically targeted on validation of the findings in the school's self-study of the program. This may require an additional day extension to the typical one-day Mid-Term Review.
- Schools must give MSA-CESS notice of its intention to apply for the Program Evaluation at least six months prior to the date of the expected evaluation visit.
- Schools seeking a Program Evaluation independent of any other MSA-CESS accreditation activities shall adhere to the following timelines:

ACTIVITY	DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION
Submission of the Program of Distinction/Evaluation Commitment Form	At least six months prior to the intended date of visit
Submission of the completed Application for the Program of Distinction/Evaluation	At least two months prior to the date of the intended visit

PREPARING FOR AND HOSTING THE VISITOR(S)

When the school's/system's application has been received and reviewed by the Middle States staff, one or more visitors will be assigned, and the length of the visit will be determined based upon the size and scope of the school's/system's educational program and the type of visit. The visit may be arranged as a "stand alone" or in conjunction with a regularly scheduled accreditation visit. The Middle States Association will contact the school to arrange the details. The purpose of the visit will be to validate the school's/system's application, ascertain the quality of the program vis à vis the Criterion and Indicators of Quality, and make a recommendation to award or deny the Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction. A schedule will be developed by the visitor(s) and Middle States liaison that will include interviews, classroom observations, and review of materials and documents.

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction or Program Evaluation Visitor(s) will likely want to meet with the following individuals and groups:

- Board Member(s)
- Superintendent of School/System
- Director of Curriculum
- The Head(s) of School
- The Head(s) of the Early Childhood Program
- Early Childhood Education steering committee
- Early Childhood Program staff
- Selected elementary education staff members
- Parents
- Community members, representatives from partnerships, consultants and other stakeholders as appropriate

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Observations should be arranged so that the Visitor(s) see as much of the program as possible in the time allotted. If a system is applying for more than one school, all schools being considered will be visited.

MATERIALS AND DOCUMENTS FOR REVIEW

It is recommended that the school/system have available a variety of evidence in support of its self-assessment and application for the Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction. Online documents and electronic versions including CDs and videos are welcome. The suggestions below offer a wide range of evidence that the school/system could provide for the Visitor(s)' review during the visit:

- Early Childhood Program curriculum guides or access to curriculum maps
- Sample units and/or lesson plans if not included in curriculum guides or in maps
- Samples of developmentally appropriate instructional/ assessment materials
- Developmentally appropriate assessment tools including portfolios
- Student performance results and samples (may also include recorded/video streamed samples)
- Documentation of partnerships, e.g., university collaborations, “sister school” relationships, international education projects, and community connections
- Documentation of experiences in the natural world and other field trips the school/system offers to enhance learning
- Goals of the program and any short and/or long range plans that have been developed or are currently being developed to attain them
- Documentation of the communication of the goals, value and benefits of early childhood education within the school/system, to families and to the community
- Documentation of feedback from families and family connection activities
- Policies that show how the school/system promotes early childhood education.
- Budget demonstrating resource allocations to the Early Childhood Program
- Documentation of recognition, grants and/or scholarships the program, staff and/or children have been awarded in early childhood education

FEEDBACK FROM THE VISITORS

At the conclusion of the visit, the Visitor(s) will meet with the Head of School/System and head of the Early Childhood Education Program or other key personnel as appropriate to offer feedback on the interviews, classroom observations, and review of materials and documents. A report of the visit observations and findings will be forwarded to the Head of School/System within four weeks. If the school/system is seeking the Early Childhood Education Program of Distinction and has been recommended for it, the Program of Distinction will be officially conferred after review of the report and approval of the recommendation by the accreditation advisory committee and the MSA Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools.