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From Policy to Practice: How State Policies Relate to Public Pre-K Teachers' Curriculum Use

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As many states expand the number of pre-K seats in public schools, policymakers are focused on better understanding the role of curriculum in ensuring high-quality early childhood education environments. By combining data from The National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) *State of Preschool Yearbook* with data from RAND's *American Pre-K Teacher Survey*, we investigated the role that state policies related to curriculum use play in public school pre-K teachers' reported curricula use across the United States.

We find substantial variation in the curricula teachers report using across states, and some differences across pre-K programs within states. In addition, specific state curriculum guidance appears to influence classroom curriculum use. When states required that teachers use specific curricula (rather than recommending curricula), teachers reported combining fewer curricula in their classrooms.

Key Findings

- **Half of state-funded pre-K programs** have a list of required or recommended curricula.
 - **In state pre-K programs with a list of required curricula**, 86% of teachers reported using a curriculum from the state list.
 - **By comparison, in state pre-K programs with a list of recommended curricula**, 77% of teachers reported using a curriculum from the state list.
 - **State curriculum policies can have “spillover” effects.** In states that require or recommend specific curricula in state-funded pre-K programs, non-state-funded teachers also reported using curricula from those lists.
 - **Teachers in state-funded pre-K programs with lists of required or recommended curricula** were less likely to use more than one comprehensive curriculum and less likely to add a subject-specific curriculum (e.g., math, literacy, social-emotional) than teachers in states without such lists.
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Introduction

Recent evidence on the long-term impacts of pre-K attendance on children’s academic and social outcomes is mixed, reinforcing the need to better understand the components of high-quality pre-K programs at-scale (e.g., Barnett & Jung, 2021; Dawson et al., 2026; Gray-Lobe et al., 2023; Whitaker et al., 2026). Similar to K–12, the specific materials pre-K teachers use, and how they use them, are intended to be a mechanism to improve children’s learning (e.g., Weiland, 2016). For this reason, which curricula early childhood teachers use is a topic of increasing interest in the United States (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024).

State policy is one lever policymakers can use to encourage pre-K teachers to use specific curricula. Such policies are linked to increased use of required or recommended materials in grades K–12 (Doan et al., 2025). Most states have policies that support decisions about curriculum adoption and use in early childhood classrooms, but the specific policies—and which curricula are included on state lists—vary widely across states (Friedman-Krauss & Weisenfeld, 2025). Even as many state-funded early childhood programs have policies that encourage use of specific materials, there is little evidence that state policy is linked to actual curriculum use by pre-K teachers.

To address this gap, this report investigates the relationship between state curriculum policies for state-funded pre-K programs and teacher curriculum use in public school-based early childhood programs across the nation. The audience for this report is state policymakers, school district leaders, early childhood program leaders, advocates, researchers interested in understanding how policies translate into practice, and curriculum developers who might find this report useful for understanding the role state policy plays in pre-K teachers’ curriculum use decisions.

Research Questions

1. Which state pre-K programs have policies that guide curriculum selection and how do these policies vary across the United States?
2. Are state policies about early childhood curricula related to pre-K teachers' reported use?
3. Are state curriculum policies related to how pre-K teachers combine comprehensive and subject-specific curricula?

Data

We leverage two primary data sources in this report. First, we gathered information about state policies for pre-K curricula from [NIEER's 2023-2024 State of Preschool Yearbook Survey \(Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025\)](#). The NIEER survey was administered to state pre-K administrators in the fall of 2024. Sixty-four state-funded pre-K programs in 44 states and D.C. provided information about state pre-K policies. State pre-K programs that said they provided lists of required or recommended curricula to pre-K programs also provided the specific curricula on their list. Five states did not have a state-funded pre-K program and therefore were not asked to complete a survey; we excluded them from these analyses. For a full description of the methods used to collect pre-K curriculum policy data, please see Friedman-Krauss et al. (2025). We coded state policies as (1) requiring a specific curriculum or requiring programs to choose from a list of curricula, (2) providing a list of recommended curricula, or (3) providing no list of required or recommend curricula. In some states with multiple state-funded pre-K programs, curriculum policies varied across pre-K programs within a state. While we relied primarily on what state pre-K programs reported on the Yearbook survey and follow-up questions to clarify their responses, we also did a web search to check and augment (if needed) states' curriculum lists. This included checking for curriculum guidance in the states that did not have a state-funded pre-K program (N = 5); however, no state provided such a list.

To connect policy with practice, we used RAND's fall 2024 survey of [public school-based pre-K teachers](#) to capture teacher reports of the curricula they used in their classrooms. The RAND survey was conducted using the [American Teacher Panel \(ATP\)](#), and is the only nationally representative survey of public school-based pre-K teachers in the United States (Grant et al., 2025a). To be included in the survey, teachers had to teach pre-K in a public school. The survey sample includes U.S. pre-K teachers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia who teach in a variety of public school settings. For a full description of our recruitment, screening, and sampling approach and a complete description of the demographic characteristics of responding teachers, see Grant et al. (2025b).

Teachers who responded to the RAND survey reported whether they taught in a state-funded pre-K program by selecting the name of the program; they were also able to report "I don't know." Teachers also selected the instructional materials they used regularly (i.e., once per week or more) from a list of materials generated from prior surveys of pre-K teachers. See Shapiro et al., 2025 and Woo et al., 2025, for complete descriptions of how we created the list of materials in the survey. For this report, we focused on the 576 surveyed teachers who reported working in state-run pre-K programs. We excluded a total of 55 respondents, including one early interventionist, 7 teachers who did not answer the curriculum survey questions, 18 teachers in Colorado who did not select the name of their pre-K program, and 29 teachers in states without state pre-K programs: Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Wyoming or states that were not included in the sample: Indiana and Utah.

We merged the two data sources—state policies and teacher reports of curriculum use—together by state and program name. This combined data set offers the opportunity to connect policy and practice by comparing the state's pre-K curriculum policies with public pre-K teachers' curriculum use. We primarily rely on descriptive statistics of the sample based on a variety of characteristics and test for statistically significant differences using chi-square tests when appropriate.

More than Half of State Pre-K Programs Have a Curriculum List

According to the NIEER Preschool Yearbook Survey (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025), 55% of state-funded pre-K programs offer some form of curriculum list for teachers and administrators. Twenty-three pre-K programs across 16 states had policies that required use of a specific curriculum or required selection from a list of curricula (see Table 1 for our categorization of pre-K programs by type of curricula policy). In addition, 13 programs in 11 states and Washington D.C. provided a list of recommended curricula. We found similar patterns for the total enrollment of children in state pre-K programs: 23% of children who attended state pre-K were enrolled in programs with a required curriculum list and 32% were in programs with a recommended curricula list.

Twenty-nine state programs (45%) do not provide a curricula list at all, which creates an opportunity to provide additional support for pre-K administrators and teachers making curricula decisions. Forty-five percent of preschoolers are enrolled in these

55%

**OF STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL
PROGRAMS OFFERED A REQUIRED
OR RECOMMENDED LIST OF
CURRICULA**

programs, representing a substantial portion of the pre-K population being served in programs without curricula guidance lists. Importantly, regardless of funding status and whether states have a pre-K curriculum list, nearly all pre-K programs require that any curricula used are aligned with the state's early learning and development standards (Friedman-Krauss & Weisenfeld, 2025).



State Curriculum Lists Encourage Classroom Curriculum Use

We used the variation in whether state pre-K programs have a required curriculum list, a recommended list, or no list to investigate how state guidance and policy translate to reported curriculum use among teachers in state-funded and non-state funded pre-K programs. Using these categorizations of state-funded pre-K programs, we then categorized teachers' responses to the RAND survey based on pre-K curriculum list policy for the state pre-K program in which they reported teaching. For example, a teacher teaching in Georgia's Pre-K program was categorized as teaching in a program with a required curricula list, whereas a teacher in Alabama's First Class Pre-K program was coded as teaching in a program with no curriculum list.

Eighty-six percent of pre-K teachers in state pre-K programs that required the use of specific curricula reported using one of the required curriculum choices, as shown in Figure 1. Similarly, 77 percent of pre-K teachers in state pre-K programs that had a recommended curriculum list reported using curricula from the state-provided list. Together, these results suggest a strong relationship between a state policy that lists specific curricula (required or recommended) and teacher-reported use of the listed materials. A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.00$) between the percentage of complying teachers (e.g., those using a curriculum

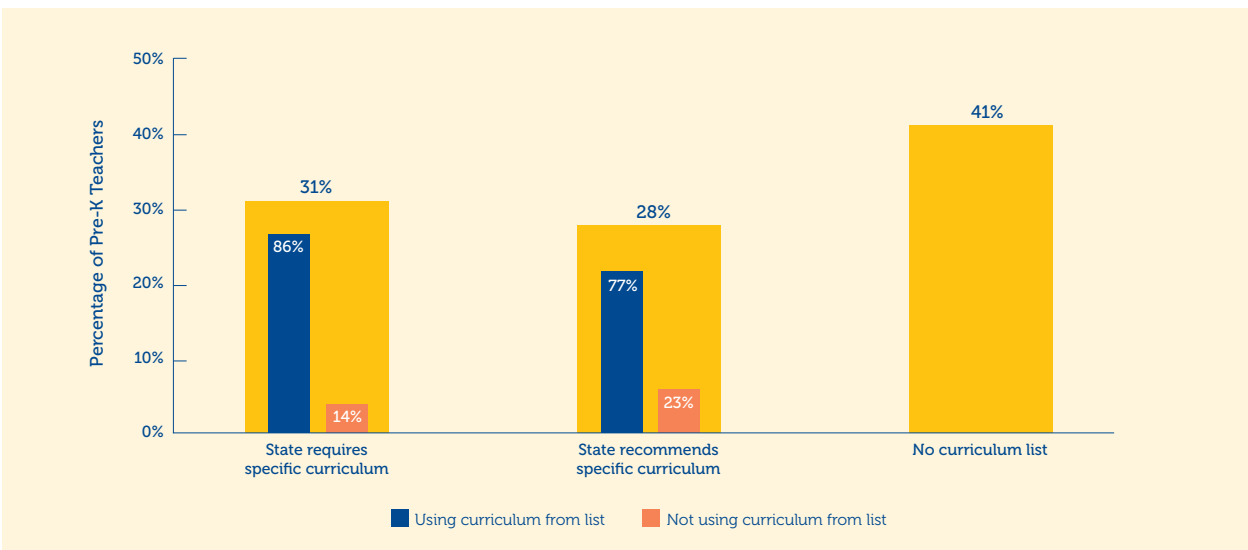
86%

OF STATE PRE-K TEACHERS
COMPLY WITH STATE REQUIRED
CURRICULUM POLICIES

from a required list) and conforming teachers (e.g., those using a curriculum from a recommended list), suggesting significantly higher adherence with state requirements than recommendations. However, teachers' use of a curriculum from a state list was only slightly higher when this was a requirement (86%) rather than a recommendation (77%), suggesting that a recommended curriculum list may be a sufficient policy tool.

We also considered the extent to which pre-K teachers outside of state-funded pre-K programs adhered to curriculum guidance provided to state-funded programs. Approximately 36% of pre-K teachers in programs that were not state-funded reported using a curriculum on the state's list, suggesting a spillover effect.

Figure 1. Eighty-Six Percent of Pre-K Teachers Comply with State Required Curriculum Policies

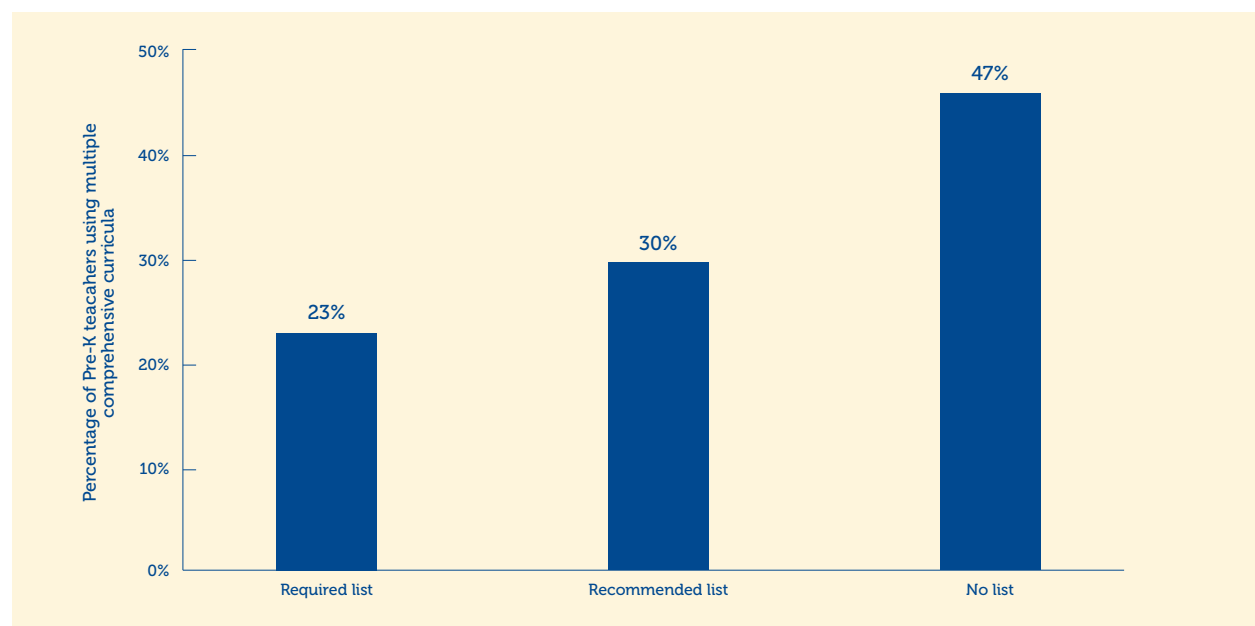


Note. This figure depicts the percentage of teachers in state-funded pre-K programs by program curriculum category: requires specific curriculum, recommends specific curriculum, or no curriculum list. The figure also presents the percentage of pre-K teachers who reported using a required or recommended curriculum. N = 576.

Teachers in State Pre-K Programs with a Curriculum List are Less Likely to Use Multiple Curricula

Combining curricula is the norm for most pre-K teachers. During the 2024-2025 school year, 85 percent of pre-K teachers reported using more than one curriculum; on average teachers reported using three curricula (Woo et al., 2025). Fifty-five percent of teachers said that they used both comprehensive and domain-specific materials (this includes teachers who also used created materials). Therefore, we explored the extent to which having a required or recommended state pre-K curriculum list was associated with using multiple curricula. Of the 28 curricula asked about in the RAND survey, pre-K teachers in state-funded programs reported using an average of 3 curricula (SD = 1.40; range: 0-10), including an average of 1 comprehensive curriculum (SD = .58, range: 0-4) and 1-2 domain-specific curriculum (SD = 1.11, range: 0-6).

Figure 2. About Half of Teachers Who Used Multiple Comprehensive Curricula Were in a State Pre-K Program Without a Curriculum List



Note. This figure depicts the percentage of teachers in state-funded pre-k programs who reported using multiple comprehensive curricula by whether the state provided a list of required curricula (required list), recommended curricula (recommended list) or no list. N = 43.

One key difference emerged between state pre-K programs with required versus recommended lists of curricula. Teachers in programs with required lists combined the fewest curricula materials ($M = 2.53$) compared to teachers with recommended lists ($M = 2.96$, $p = 0.01$) and teachers without a curriculum list ($M = 2.83$, $p < 0.1$). However, across the three groups, there was no statistically significant difference in the percentages of teachers who combined domain-specific and comprehensive (chi-square = 1.48, $p > 0.05$). Teachers combined both sets of curricula at similar rates in programs with and without state-issued curriculum guidance, suggesting that while state lists appear to influence curriculum adoption, additional curricula are also being adopted by all pre-K teachers.

Although there were only 43 pre-K teachers in our sample of state-funded programs who reported using more than one comprehensive curriculum, about half of them were in programs that did not provide a curriculum list (Figure 2). Typically, comprehensive curricula are not intended to be combined with other comprehensive curricula, and this finding suggests that having a recommended or required curriculum list may be a helpful tool to encourage teachers to use only one comprehensive curriculum.



Summary and Implications

We sought to better understand how state curriculum guidance is related to pre-K teachers' reported curriculum use by combining surveys of state pre-K program administrators and pre-K teachers. We found that a large majority of pre-K teachers in states that provide such a list reported using curricula from their state's list. Teachers in states with lists of required and recommended curricula reported using listed materials at high rates and were less likely to combine comprehensive curricula. We also found evidence that state curricula guidance may be used by pre-K teachers in programs outside of the state pre-K program. Overall, state policies on curriculum use for pre-K programs do appear to influence the curricula used by teachers in their pre-K classrooms, underscoring the importance for states to make evidence-based decisions when developing pre-K curriculum guidance, including curriculum lists.

While this report focuses on teachers' use of pre-K curriculum, in many cases, teachers may not be the primary decision-maker about which curriculum they use in their classrooms. That is, their school district or school administrators may make this decision at a school or district-level. This study included a sample of pre-K teachers drawn only from public school settings participating in state-run pre-K programs, which may limit the generalizability and representativeness of the findings to other early childhood education contexts, such as private child care, Head Start, or community-based programs, including those that are part of state-funded pre-K systems. In addition, some teachers reported uncertainty regarding whether they taught in a state pre-K program (N = 81), which can be an understandably difficult question for some teachers to answer in many state contexts. Finally, teachers were asked to report only the instructional materials they used regularly (defined as once a week or more); therefore, the data may not provide a complete accounting of all instructional materials used within classrooms.

Future research aimed to better understand the state pre-K context can expand surveys across additional pre-K contexts and target questions to understand the multidimensional state pre-K environment. For example, research examining how teachers in child care providers utilize state curriculum guidance in states with and without mixed delivery would further our understanding of the implications of state pre-K curriculum guidance. Likewise, examinations of the decision-making processes behind state curriculum guidance and who determines such guidance will provide additional context for one key component of state pre-K programming.

Table 1. State Preschool Program Curriculum Guidance Categorization

Program	No list	Recommended list	Required list	No program
Alabama	✓			
Alaska Pre-Elementary	✓			
Alaska EEP			✓	
Alaska 0.5 ADM			✓	
Arizona	✓			
Arkansas			✓	
California CSPP	✓			
California TK	✓			
Colorado		✓		
Connecticut CDCC	✓			
Connecticut SR	✓			
Connecticut Smart Start	✓			
Delaware		✓		
District of Columbia		✓		
Florida		✓		
Georgia			✓	
Hawaii EOEL	✓			
Hawaii SPCS	✓			
Idaho				✓
Illinois	✓			
Indiana*		✓		
Iowa Shared Visions	✓			
Iowa SWVPP	✓			
Kansas	✓			
Kentucky	✓			
Louisiana 8(g)			✓	
Louisiana LA 4			✓	
Louisiana NSECD			✓	
Maine	✓			
Maryland	✓			
Massachusetts CPPI	✓			
Massachusetts Chapter 70	✓			
Michigan			✓	
Minnesota HdSt			✓	
Minnesota VPK/SRP			✓	
Mississippi ELC			✓	
Mississippi SIP			✓	
Missouri FF		✓		
Missouri QPK			✓	
Montana				✓
Nebraska	✓			
Nevada	✓			
New Hampshire				✓
New Jersey			✓	
New Mexico	✓			
New York	✓			
North Carolina			✓	
North Dakota	✓			

Table 1. State Preschool Program Curriculum Guidance Categorization (continued)

Program	No list	Recommended list	Required list	No program
Ohio		✓		
Oklahoma		✓		
Oregon OPK	✓			
Oregon Preschool Promise	✓			
Pennsylvania RTL		✓		
Pennsylvania HSSAP			✓	
Pennsylvania K4 & SBPK		✓		
Pennsylvania PKC			✓	
Rhode Island			✓	
South Carolina			✓	
South Dakota				✓
Tennessee			✓	
Texas		✓		
Utah*		✓		
Vermont	✓			
Virginia VPI			✓	
Virginia Mixed Delivery			✓	
Washington ECEAP			✓	
Washington TK	✓			
West Virginia		✓		
Wisconsin	✓			
Wyoming				✓

Note. *Indicate programs categorized using NIEER's State of Preschool Yearbook but not surveyed in RAND's ATP study.

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