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# How to Choose a Preschool Curriculum

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## Introduction

As a preschool curriculum sets out what and how children learn it is a critical tool for ensuring that every young child receives a high-quality early education that builds on the strengths and meets the needs of each child and family. The choice of a preschool curriculum is a decision that falls to early childhood leaders and administrators in both the public and private sectors. This brief supports their curriculum decision making with a brief introduction to what curriculum is, why it matters, and key issues to consider when selecting a preschool curriculum. It concludes with a short, practical checklist of important considerations for use by any decision maker.

Policymakers who provide guidance regarding preschool curriculum selection as well as local program administrators should find this brief useful. Federal regulations guide the selection of curriculum for Head Start but still leave much room for discretion at the local level. States vary greatly in their regulations and guidance for curriculum in their preschool programs from requiring the use of one specific curriculum to providing an approved curriculum list that may offer a few or many options, to general guidance to select a curriculum aligned with state learning standards.<sup>1</sup> We believe that state guidance can be improved by attending to issues raised in this brief about preschool curriculum. Privately funded programs can select any curriculum they wish, and they also can benefit from attention to the issues we raise. About half adopt a commercial curriculum while others develop their own (41%) and more than 1 in 10 teachers in private programs reported having no curriculum (12%).<sup>2</sup>

## What is a Curriculum?

A preschool curriculum is a comprehensive plan for what children should learn and develop, how they should learn and develop, and the environment in which that learning and development should take place. In sum, it sets out for teachers the structure for attaining a program's goals for children's learning and development. Goals for children's learning, development, and well-being are critical determinants of both *what* and *how* we want children to learn. An effective curriculum guides teachers to ensure that they cover all areas of learning and development and provides intentional teaching strategies, activities, and materials to facilitate children's learning and development.<sup>3</sup>

A recent report from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM, 2024) emphasizes that a strong preschool curriculum is more than a plan.<sup>4</sup> It is a coherent set of principles, strategies, and materials that organize children's daily classroom experiences and ensures the consistent provision of rich experiences to all children. To do so, curricula should be adapted to the wide range of children and families served, so that every child, regardless of background, can participate fully and thrive.

## How Goals Guide Curriculum Selection and Why it Matters

Curriculum choice should be guided by a preschool program's goals for children's experiences, learning, development, and well-being. Head Start sets its goals through the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Birth to Age 5<sup>5</sup> and requires that Head Start programs use a curriculum that is aligned with that framework. All states have early learning and development standards (ELDS), and nearly all state-funded preschool programs are required or guided to use curricula that align with the state's ELDS.<sup>6</sup> A curriculum supports teachers in ensuring that programs achieve those goals.

The Head Start Framework and state ELDS set a high—and appropriate—bar for the breadth and depth of a curriculum. However, even the most detailed standards leave room for choices regarding the relative emphasis on each outcome and the specific content. Decision makers should also consider the strengths, values and needs of the children and families they serve. Families choose preschool programs for their children based on their values, resources, and needs. Programs should allow for adaptations within a curriculum to identify the unique strengths and meet the specific needs of individual children.

As research continues to inform the early childhood field about what is most critical for children's learning, those who guide and make curriculum





choices should identify curricula that provide children with deep and broad experiences across all domains of learning and development. Two important domains often receiving less than optimal attention in the past are math and science, though gross motor activity can be quite limited as well.<sup>7</sup> All children should receive rich, connected learning experiences across multiple domains that are intentionally balanced. Low-income, Black, and Latine children have been found to receive less access to rich content than others.<sup>8</sup> A strong curriculum also is specifically adapted to support the children with home languages other than English and children with disabilities.<sup>9</sup> The 2024 NASEM report, *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum*, emphasized the need to reconceptualize preschool curricula to provide rich early learning opportunities for all children with particular attention to those historically underserved or inappropriately served.<sup>10</sup> Further detail regarding the identification of curricula that address these concerns is available on line and additional resources are suggested in the final section of this brief.<sup>11</sup>

Two broad types of curricula—domain-specific and comprehensive—both seek to address the challenges described above. Domain specific curricula can increase time allocated to and improve teaching and child outcomes in their specific domains such as math or early literacy. Yet, children also need a base or general overarching approach that is coherent and includes all aspects of daily activities that can be difficult to provide by combining multiple separate domain specific curricula. In addition, children may learn better and more efficiently when activities address multiple domains simultaneously. How to navigate these and other concerns when choosing and supporting the implementation of a curriculum is the subject of the remainder of this brief.

## What Makes a Preschool Curriculum High Quality

High-quality curricula foster healthy development and joyful learning for every child that prepares them for success in later schooling and life, while also protecting them from stress and adversity. Effective preschool curricula should have evidence that they promote positive outcomes for all children that reflect high priority goals such as language and early literacy, math, motor, and cognitive skills, as well as social-emotional skills, self-regulation, sense of agency, and for multilingual learners (MLs), emergent bilingualism.

When selecting a curriculum, consideration should be given to how it supports a wide range of child and family values, strengths, and needs. How readily is it adapted to the specific needs of a child or family? What are the methods for identifying child and family strengths that can provide the basis for effective instruction? Two groups that are relatively large and growing—children with disabilities and MLs—have been somewhat neglected in curriculum development. When choosing a preschool curriculum, decision makers should ask to what extent curriculum methods and materials have been adapted or supplemented to capitalize on the competencies and address the specific needs of each of these populations.

For MLs, the research is clear on two basic principles: 1) acquiring two or more languages in early childhood is a strength and provides multiple cognitive, social, and academic benefits, and 2) robust proficiency in a child's home language combined with strong English language skills at kindergarten entry is the best preparation for long-term academic and life success. The preschool curricula that best promote these outcomes create a warm and nurturing climate and implement practices that encourage peer collaboration, allow ML children to select activities that are of interest to them, and use all their linguistic skills when communicating.<sup>12</sup>

Based on federal law and regulations (The Individuals with Disabilities Act, IDEA), young children with disabilities have a right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting with a focus on individualized goals that directly reflect areas of need.<sup>13</sup> Young children with disabilities encompass a wide range of different conditions and are educated with varying degrees of inclusion in regular education classrooms and support from personnel with specialized expertise in disabilities.<sup>14</sup> Young children with disabilities require curricula that provide specific strategies and approaches for teaching developmental skills across all domains of learning. Children with disabilities often require explicit instruction in social and language skills.

Although children with disabilities have largely been underrepresented in studies of preschool curriculum effectiveness, some specific curricula have been studied. The most effective integrate curriculum-based assessments, support data-based decision making, and enhance teachers' abilities to deliver differentiated and targeted instruction. To implement this vision, preschool teachers need specialized preservice education with ongoing in-service combined with classroom-based coaching that focuses on how to embrace inclusion and meet individual needs.<sup>15</sup> Preschool curricula also can provide specific guidance and materials for accommodations, modifications, and supports to adapt activities and assessment in alignment with the individualized education programs (IEPs) of young children with disabilities.

Strong partnerships and engagement with families are essential to responding to the unique needs of each child and family. Effective preschool curricula include methods for identifying and building upon families' linguistic, social, and cultural strengths. Each child and family need to be seen through the lens of three questions: What are the talents they bring to the classroom? How can we recognize and build upon what the child already knows to promote early learning goals? How can we learn from each family to enrich instructional practices?



## Supporting Strong Curriculum Implementation

How well any curriculum achieves its goals depends on implementation. That, in turn, depends on the curriculum's demands and support for teachers' practices, preparation, and development. This is explicitly recognized by two requirements of the Head Start Performance Standards (1302.32 Curricula) that would benefit any program, public or private. First, the curriculum should "have standardized training procedures and curriculum materials to support implementation." Second, programs should "at a minimum, monitor curriculum implementation and fidelity, and provide support, feedback, and supervision for continuous improvement of its implementation through the system of training and professional development."<sup>16</sup>

Programs vary in their qualifications requirements for preschool teachers. These differences in preparation create differences in the supports a teacher needs to implement a curriculum well. However, no matter what a teacher's preparation, strong implementation of curriculum requires curriculum-specific training and professional development. These should be provided by experts familiar with adult learning principles, best practices, and the realities of preschool classrooms. Decision-makers will want to ask what support for training and professional development in the curriculum is available from the publisher and other sources including the program's own site level administrators, supervisors, coaches, and professional learning communities.

## A Checklist to Guide Curriculum Choice: Issues to Consider When Choosing a Preschool Curriculum

Choosing curriculum even with the best information is complex with numerous important factors to consider. As the evidence base and available curriculum choices are constantly evolving, we suggest that states have an intentional process for regularly reviewing requirements and recommendations for curriculum in state-funded preschool programs. Curriculum review processes should consider the extent to which curricula have direct evidence of effectiveness from specific studies of their impacts on the populations to be served, as well as the extent to which curricula are consistent with the broader research on how young children learn and develop.<sup>17</sup> It is particularly important that reviews attend to outcomes beyond kindergarten entry. Research is clear that short-term test score advantages do not always yield positive lasting gains.<sup>18</sup> In addition, we provide the following six question checklist with issues to consider to assist state and local leaders navigating the complexities of curriculum choice. As this checklist is quite general, additional resources providing more detail to support the use of the checklist are listed in the next section.

- ✓ **Does the curriculum include rich and meaningful content aligned with program goals and center child engagement and agency?** *Preschool curricula should address all domains of development including language, literacy, mathematics, science, social, emotional, and physical development while offering opportunities for child choice and initiative. Although the field tends to dichotomize approaches as global (whole child) or skills-focused, effective curricula can be comprehensive AND focused on domain-specific knowledge and skills.*<sup>19</sup>
- ✓ **Does the curriculum incorporate the experiences, perspectives, cultures, languages, strengths, and needs of a diverse range of children, families, and workforce settings?** *Effective preschool curricula reflect a strengths-based approach that builds on children's prior knowledge and abilities acquired in their families and communities. Strong family partnerships are essential to identifying and building upon cultural, social, and linguistic strengths.*<sup>20</sup>
- ✓ **Does the curriculum include well designed learning experiences, intentional responsive teaching strategies, clearly defined objectives and outcomes, and differentiation based on children's ability levels, specific needs, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds?** *Responsive preschool curricula incorporate children's cultural background and provide support for teachers to scaffold MLs' English language development while also providing specific strategies to support their home language development. Materials and activities should be available in English, Spanish, and other languages commonly spoken by families.*<sup>21</sup>
- ✓ **Does the curriculum have a predictable scope and sequence that reflects children's ways of thinking and learning with research-validated learning progressions that are culturally and linguistically affirming?** *Effective preschool curricula can be viewed as setting out plans that provide a scope and sequence (or developmental trajectory)—setting out the areas of development and the content to be addressed, including, where appropriate, the order in which specific knowledge and skills are addressed. They are designed to ensure that all children receive rich content and that the curriculum includes activities that reflect research on how children learn and their developmental progressions, recognizing that research constantly evolves.*<sup>22</sup>
- ✓ **Does the curriculum provide and/or accommodate adaptations, modifications, and other supports for children with disabilities?** *Scaffolded supports, targeted adaptations and accommodations for children with disabilities are crucial for meaningful and effective full inclusion for children with disabilities. These might include visual aids, adapted hands-on activities, and simplified materials, as well as assistive technology.*<sup>23</sup>
- ✓ **Does the curriculum offer professional development and job-related supports such as in-classroom coaching?** *For a curriculum to be effective it must be implemented at a high level with fidelity. Effective preschool curricula provide systematic professional development and support for teachers to implement with sensitivity, flexibility, and adaptability. Monitoring of curriculum implementation is frequent and applied to a model of continuous program improvement.*<sup>24</sup>

## Additional Resources

To support gathering all the information needed and provide additional detail regarding how to apply the criteria in the Checklist, we recommend several resources to be used with this brief. Of course, the curriculum developers themselves and the materials they provide are important sources of information about each curriculum. In addition, the NASEM report that is widely cited in this brief is available online [here](#).

Another useful source of information to assist in curriculum decision making is EdReports. EdReports is conducting reviews of preschool curriculum based on criteria derived from the NASEM report and aligned with our checklist.<sup>25</sup> These will be available online starting early in 2026. Among the first to be reviewed are two of the most widely used curricula: The Creative Curriculum (Teaching Strategies) and Frog Street (Frog Street Press). An 18 page guide to the review criteria EdReports is using is available [here](#). State policymakers and others conducting their own reviews of curriculum may find EdReports' criteria helpful for their process.

EdSolutions offers a guide to selecting preschool curricula based on the 2024 NASEM report. This 97 page document provides a detailed prescription for curriculum selection that is available [here](#).

The federal Office of Head Start offers a wide range of information on preschool curricula [here](#). While quite detailed, this resource is organized to permit users to rapidly identify specific resources that they are seeking. Notably, Head Start provides information to support selection of a curriculum for home-based programs and for adaptations to support multilingual learners.



## Endnotes

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