

A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum

Policymakers

OVERVIEW

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened a committee of experts to conduct a comprehensive study of preschool curriculum for children ages three through five, with special attention to the needs of Black and Latine children, dual language learners, children with special needs, and children who experience poverty. The report, *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum*, included recommendations to improve preschool curriculum.

FINDINGS

There is an urgent need to improve the quality of preschool curriculum to align it with what research has shown to work. Effective preschool curriculum that is well implemented has been shown to promote equitable outcomes in math, language, literacy, and social-emotional skills seen at kindergarten entry—particularly for Black and Latine children and for children living in poverty. High-quality curricula can help to ensure that children experience safe, healthy, affirming, and enriching learning opportunities that promote success in school and life. Policymakers should support investments in careful, long-range preschool development and evaluation efforts that ensure all children have access to high-quality curricula, including children from diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities.

RESEARCH PROVIDES EVIDENCE ON WHAT MAKES PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM HIGH QUALITY

High-quality curricula are coherent, equitable, culturally relevant, linguistically supportive, affirming, flexible, and adaptable—while also demonstrating effectiveness in yielding positive life outcomes for children and families. High-quality curricula should assist teachers with building on children’s individual strengths and cultural assets to promote positive self-identity, resilience, and growth and achievement in all content and developmental domains. Essential features of research- and evidence-based curricula include developmentally appropriate learning goals, a scope and sequence, coherent alignment with specific domains, and rich content.

AVAILABLE CURRICULUM DO NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF TODAY’S YOUNG CHILDREN

For example, nearly one-third of young children in the United States are growing up with exposure to more than one language in the home and should be considered multilingual. However, curricula are rarely developed specifically for multilingual learners, most programs do not provide dual language instruction, and there are too few bilingual early childhood educators qualified to support home language development or provide dual language instruction. Few commercially available preschool curricula are designed for family

child care settings nor do they offer guidance in adapting the curriculum or sequencing content for mixed-age groups. Most preschool programs, including Head Start, use comprehensive preschool curricula that intend to address all domains of children’s learning and development—and may be required to do so by their funding agencies. But the most widely used of these have been studied and found to show significantly smaller gains than domain-specific curricula in the targeted outcome domains such as math, science, literacy, and social-emotional development at kindergarten entry.

SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH AND INVESTMENT ARE NEEDED TO DEVELOP HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM

Federal agencies, state, and school district policymakers—along with researchers, funders, publishers, and educators—can play a role in revising existing curricula and developing new curriculum that is high quality. Research should focus on developing implementation systems to support the transition to evidence-based curricula that are practical and accessible.

A NEW VISION FOR PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM

High-quality preschool curricula must consider the learning experiences that each child has access to, the varied opportunities to experience engaging content that can spark their curiosity and desire to learn, and the ways in which teaching and learning can be adapted to support the child and their individual strengths and needs.

Research shows that a high-quality preschool curriculum should:

- Incorporate the perspectives, experiences, cultures, languages, strengths, and needs of a diverse range of children, families, and workforce settings;
- Include rich and meaningful content that centers child engagement and agency;
- Include well-designed learning experiences, intentional responsive teaching strategies, well-defined objectives and outcomes, embedded

formative assessments, and differentiation based on understanding children’s ability levels, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, interests, and dispositions;

- Have a scope and sequence that follows children’s ways of thinking and learning with research-validated learning trajectories that are culturally and linguistically affirming and that include effective supports for children with disabilities; and
- Demonstrate effectiveness in yielding positive learning and developmental outcomes for the children they are intended to reach.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers can support the development of high-quality preschool curricula by:

- Supporting the development and transition to new curricula that replace or update existing curricula to be aligned with the new vision.
- Ensuring that educators receive professional development, regular in-classroom coaching, and access to the materials that are tied to the implementation of evidence-based curricula, including supports for delivering curricula in children’s home language alongside English.
- Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and state early childhood education agencies, should
 - create a research-practice-partnership network of diverse researchers and early childhood programs that are willing to engage in research to study curricula and practices aligned with the committee’s vision;
 - create a data system to capture details on curricula being used in programs along with characteristics of the children being served, the

quality of programs, and a comprehensive set of outcomes;

- align quality metrics, measures, and rating systems with the new vision of curricula and associated practices;
- incentivize the adoption and use of high-quality curricula that are in alignment with the new vision; and

- provide quality improvement supports and resources to address equity and inclusion gaps.

- Investing in ongoing research aimed at developing implementation systems to support the transition to evidence-based curricula that are practical and accessible.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This issue brief was prepared by the Committee on a New Vision for High-Quality Pre-K Curriculum based on the report *A New Vision for High Quality Preschool Curriculum (2024)*. The study was sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences W.K. Kellogg Foundation Fund. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. This Consensus Study Report is available from the National Academies Press | (800) 624-6242 | <http://www.nap.edu>.

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