

How District and Program Leaders Can Support Use of High-Quality Preschool Curriculum



Based on the National Academy of Science's report,
A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum (2024)

In April 2024, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released a landmark report, [A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum](#). The report:

- Synthesizes the latest research on preschool curricula,
- Identifies criteria for high-quality preschool curricula, and
- Offers recommendations for district and program leaders on how they can support the use of high-quality preschool curricula that promotes child learning outcomes.

Why is the use of a high-quality preschool curriculum important?

Decades of research show that attending preschool better prepares young children for kindergarten, with long-term effects on school and life outcomes. However, preschool programs are not equally effective. Recent research shows that public preschool programs commonly underperform in the area of instructional quality. But research also shows that **curriculum is a potent opportunity to improve instructional quality and “a critical determinant of the quality and effectiveness of a preschool program.”**¹

“A well-planned, research-based, and preferably validated curriculum provides an essential scaffold that can guide early childhood educators on what to teach and when; how to engage children; and how to support adaptation for individual, cultural, and linguistic diversity. This scaffolding is particularly important if educators have had minimal teacher preparation; lack deep content knowledge; have little classroom support; or teach in classrooms in which the children have a wide range of abilities, cultures, and languages.”²

What does the report recommend district and program leaders do to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula?

District and program leaders often decide which preschool curriculum(a) will be used by preschool programs. The report's [recommendations](#) for these key decision-makers focus on supporting the use of **high-quality curriculum(a)** that demonstrates the quality criteria discussed in the NASEM report as well as ensuring that teachers are supported to implement curriculum effectively. Four key recommendations for district and program leaders include:

1 - Curriculum Adoption

Transition to adopting and implementing high-quality, evidence-based or promising research-based curricula that support the learning and development of the whole child. Consider how to engage community stakeholders in the evaluation and selection of high-quality curriculum(a) that demonstrate critical elements of quality discussed in the NASEM report.

2 - Educator Support

Ensure that educators receive professional development, regular in-classroom coaching, and access to materials tied to the implementation of high-quality, evidence-based curricula.

3 - Continuous Improvement

Adopt a continuous improvement model to coordinate and optimize improvement efforts, understand specific needs and circumstances, eliminate ineffective practices, and prioritize the needs of underserved populations. This includes promoting the **use of assessment to inform instruction and monitoring fidelity of curriculum implementation.**

4 - P-3 Alignment

Implement a coherent curricular vision across the transition from preschool to early elementary, including the development of clear curriculum and instructional alignment for pre-K through grade 3 at the district and school/program levels.

Which preschool curricula are high-quality?

While the NASEM report does not evaluate individual curriculum products, it does offer [detailed guidance on elements of high-quality preschool curriculum](#). At a high-level, high-quality preschool curriculum:

- “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 follow children’s ways of thinking and learning with research-validated learning trajectories, are culturally and linguistically affirming, and include effective supports for children with disabilities
- Demonstrate effectiveness in yielding positive school and life outcomes for the children and families they are intended to reach.”³

District and program leaders can use [this guide](#) to navigate the NASEM report and use its guidance to support decisions regarding preschool curriculum quality. Further, [EdReports is currently working on developing reviews of pre-k curricula](#) to assess the extent to which pre-k curricula are aligned with the elements of quality discussed in the NASEM report. The first EdReports pre-k curriculum reviews are expected to be released in 2026.

Which preschool curricula are evidence-based?

Two primary types of curricula are used in preschool programs:

Comprehensive curricula

(also called whole child or global curricula), which address all or most developmental domains (cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical)—and content areas, such as literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, health and physical education, and the arts

*Comprehensive curricula are most commonly approved or required for use across state- and federally-funded preschool programs. However, **across multiple rigorous research studies, the most commonly used comprehensive curricula have little to no evidence of improving children’s learning outcomes.** Yet, it’s critical that preschool curriculum(a) address all of the domains of early learning and development.*

Domain-specific curricula

(also called content-specific), which address one or a limited number of developmental domains or content areas

*Domain-specific curricula are infrequently approved or required for use across state- and federally-funded preschool programs, but **several have strong evidence of supporting improved child learning outcomes.** Yet, it can be challenging for teachers to implement multiple domain-specific curricula in an integrated, cohesive way that covers all domains of early learning and development.*

What approaches can district and program leaders use to support the use of high-quality comprehensive and/or domain-specific preschool curricula?

District and preschool program leaders that want to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula can consider three broad approaches:

1. Support the use of an evidence-based or promising research-based, high-quality comprehensive curriculum.
2. Support the integrated use of multiple, evidence-based domain-specific curricula.
3. Support the supplementation of a comprehensive curriculum with one or more evidence-based domain-specific curriculum/a.

References

- ¹“Preface.” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.
- ²“Preface.” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.
- ³“S-1, Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum.” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.
- ⁴“1 Introduction.” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27429>.