

How State 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 state and system 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. Research 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 state leaders do to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula?

Even in states that emphasize local control over curriculum decisions, state leaders can play an important role in promoting the use of high-quality preschool curriculum. The report's [recommendations](#) for state leaders focus on supporting the use of **evidence-based curricula** (curricula that have been shown to support positive child learning outcomes through one or more well-designed, rigorous research studies). Four key recommendations include:

1

Support the revision of existing curricula and development of new curricula (following rigorous, empirically driven, iterative design and evaluation processes).

2

Transition to adopting and implementing evidence-based curricula that support the learning and development of the whole child.

3

Develop policies, provide technical assistance, and target funding to support ongoing professional development for educators for strong curriculum implementation, including regular in-classroom coaching, and access to materials tied to the implementation of evidence-based curricula.

4

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

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 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.*

How can states support the use of high-quality comprehensive and/or domain-specific preschool curricula?

States that are looking to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula can consider four broad approaches:

1. Support the use of evidence-based or promising research-based, high-quality comprehensive curricula.
2. Partner with curriculum developers/suppliers to: i) improve the quality of widely used comprehensive curriculum that lack elements of high-quality and evidence of efficacy on child learning outcomes OR ii) develop a new, high-quality comprehensive curricula for use across the state.
3. Support the integrated use of multiple, evidence-based domain-specific curricula.
4. Support the supplementation of comprehensive curriculum with one or more evidence-based domain-specific curriculum/a.

What specific policy levers can states employ to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula?

State leaders can consider several policy levers to support the use of high-quality preschool curricula aligned with the latest research on what supports children's learning outcomes:



Update preschool curriculum policy and guidance:

- Assess alignment of current preschool curriculum policy and/or guidance for state-funded preschool programs with the elements of quality identified in the NASEM report and update policies and/or guidance to address areas of misalignment.



Establish or update preschool curriculum review processes:

- Develop a preschool curriculum review process that aligns with the elements of quality identified in the NASEM report or,
- Assess alignment of current preschool curriculum review process with the elements of quality identified in the NASEM report and update to address areas of misalignment.



Develop or update QIS/QRIS indicators focused on curriculum:

- Develop curriculum quality indicators that align with the elements of quality identified in the NASEM report or,
- Assess alignment of current curriculum quality indicators with the elements of quality identified in the NASEM report and update to address areas of misalignment.



Offer incentives for the use of high-quality preschool curriculum:

- Provide incentives that encourage use of high-quality preschool curriculum, such as allowing state preschool funding to be used only for approved, high-quality curriculum; negotiating rate agreements with high-quality curriculum providers; providing additional program funding for the use of high-quality preschool curriculum; publishing curriculum quality ratings for programs.



Provide preschool curriculum implementation supports:

- Provide or fund support for high-quality preschool curriculum implementation, such as professional development and training; ongoing personalized coaching; and a teacher resource portal.

“High-quality preschool curriculum is a structural and process-based determinant of the quality of children’s experiences and their outcomes. That is, a program may adopt a validated curriculum, whether domain-specific or comprehensive; but if it is to be effective, teachers need to implement it with fidelity and to individualize and adapt their instruction in culturally and linguistically responsive ways based on regular assessment of children’s progress. These elements are all interrelated.”³

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“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>