

A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum: Implications and Opportunities for State Early Education Leaders

In April 2024, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released a landmark consensus study, [A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum](#). The study synthesizes valuable insights from the latest research on what constitutes high-quality preschool curriculum and offers actionable steps for early education leaders on how to foster the selection and effective implementation of high-quality curricula at every level: federal, state, district, and program.

This brief distills the most critical findings and recommendations from the consensus study, and provides an overview of several key efforts the Gates Foundation is sponsoring to support the early learning field in applying these findings to inform pre-k curriculum selection and implementation. The four sections of the brief cover the following questions:

- [What is the new vision for high-quality preschool curriculum?](#)
- [What quality characteristics constitute a high-quality preschool curriculum?](#)
- [How can state leaders use the consensus study to support the selection and implementation of high-quality preschool curriculum?](#)
- [What support is available to help states implement guidance from the consensus study?](#)

What is the new vision for high-quality preschool curriculum?

“The committee’s vision for high-quality preschool curricula aims to fulfill the promise of an education that fosters holistic and healthy development and learning for every child, regardless of place or socioeconomic status, and affirms children’s full identities, including race, culture, home language, gender, and ability. It is grounded in an equity and justice- oriented perspective from inception to implementation and evaluation, and therefore is designed with an understanding of the diverse contexts of children’s development, including adverse and traumatic conditions. Curricula aligned with the committee’s vision would:

- 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; and
- Demonstrate effectiveness in yielding positive school and life outcomes for the children and families they are intended to reach." ([S-3](#))

What quality characteristics constitute a high-quality preschool curriculum?

The consensus study summarizes key characteristics of high-quality, equitable preschool curricula:

- Research-based
- Evidence-based for child outcomes
- Scope and sequence
- Focus is across developmental domains and content areas or coherently incorporates domain-specific curriculum
- Covers content and learning domains in depth
- Clearly defines specific developmentally appropriate learning goals
- Includes well-designed learning experiences and interactions
- Emphasizes responsive, intentional teaching
- Provides guidance to prepare developmentally appropriate, engaging learning environments, materials, and schedules
- Supports culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching and learning
- Supports multilingual learners and various language systems
- Provides individuation and effective supports for children with identified disabilities
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- Supports individualized instruction for every child
- Supports family engagement
- Includes ongoing assessment tools and strategies aligned with goals and experiences
- Provides professional development ([Chapter 4, p. 108-110](#))

Moving Beyond False Dichotomies

Play	_____	Academics
Emergent	_____	Highly scripted
Child-initiated	_____	Teacher-directed
Exploratory	_____	Content-focused
Comprehensive/whole child	_____	Domain-specific
Active	_____	Passive acquisition
Investigatory	_____	Didactic
Social-emotional	_____	Cognitive
Spontaneous	_____	Deliberate
Out-of-school Language and Reasoning	_____	School-based Language and Reasoning

The study highlights several false dichotomies based on “either/or” thinking are common in early education, and calls for “resolving the tensions and complexities inherent in educational decisions [by] rejecting these false dichotomies and moving to both/and thinking (Bredekamp & Willer, 2022) that also considers multiple ways of thinking of different cultural groups as well as individual children (Boutee, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2023; Souto-Manning et al., 2019; Wright & Counsell, 2018).”

Throughout the study, detailed additional guidance is offered to provide specificity on the quality characteristics summarized above, such as:

- **Integrated content and play-based learning:** “Content learning can occur in ways that are opportunities for developmentally appropriate practice, and can include opportunities for play and playful activities” ([Chapter 4, p. 99](#))
- **Educative curricula:** Curriculum “designed to support both teacher and child learning, including resources and structures that help teachers gain profound knowledge of the content to be taught as well as knowledge of children’s thinking and learning and how to support their learning” ([Chapter 4, p. 146](#))
- **Supports for multilingual learners:** Curriculum that “address the specific strengths and needs of multilingual learners and promote early bilingualism” ([Chapter 4, p. 103](#); see also [Chapter 7](#))
- **Supports for students with disabilities:** Curriculum, “designed for inclusive settings with evidence-based adaptations and accommodations embedded throughout to facilitate the active engagement of children with disabilities” ([Chapter 4, p. 102](#); see also [Chapter 6](#))

The study also highlights the critical importance of curricula that are **evidence-based for child outcomes**, and notes that comprehensive preschool curricula, which are overwhelmingly used by preschool programs, have less evidence of efficacy compared to domain-specific curricula ([Chapter 2](#)).

How can state leaders use the consensus study to support the selection and implementation of high-quality preschool curriculum?

The study discusses the critical role state policies, guidance, and supports play in influencing preschool curriculum selection decisions and the quality of implementation, noting that early education leaders can:

- Support the development and transition to high-quality curricula that replace or update existing curricula to be aligned with the new vision;
- Ensure 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;
- Create a research-practice-partnerships with diverse researchers and early childhood programs that are willing to engage in research to study curricula and practices aligned with the committee's vision;
- 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.

(Source: [A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum: Policymakers Brief](#))

In practice, state early education leaders could consider various ways to implement the report's recommendations, such as through the following examples:

- Update state pre-k curriculum policy, curriculum guidance, and/or pre-k curriculum review process to reflect the quality criteria offered in the consensus study
- Consider supporting the use of evidence-based domain-specific curriculum
- Align quality improvement system (QIS) curriculum indicators and supports with consensus study recommendations
- Partner with researchers and curriculum developers to improve widely used comprehensive curriculum
- Provide technical assistance and targeted funding to provide ongoing PD to support the effective use of evidence-based curricula.

What support is available to help states implement consensus study guidance?

Informed by deep early education field research, including conversations with over 30 state early education leaders and focus groups with 65 preschool teachers, the Gates Foundation is sponsoring several initiatives to support the early education field's use of the consensus study's recommendations:

- **CCSSO High-Quality Instructional Materials - Pre-K (HQIM-Pre-K) state cohort:** The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is creating a cohort of states to develop strategic plans to use the consensus study recommendations to improve the selection and implementation of high-quality pre-k curriculum in their state, with attention to K-3 curriculum alignment. Participating states will receive technical assistance and expert guidance. CCSSO plans to develop a HQIM-Pre-K Policy Roadmap as a field resource, informed by the state cohort work.
- **EdReports pre-k curriculum reviews:** Informed by diverse early education stakeholders, EdReports is developing a process to review pre-k curriculum using the quality criteria discussed in the consensus study. Once developed, EdReports will apply this review process to pre-k curriculum products to offer the early learning field updated, unbiased, and independent curriculum review information to inform pre-k curriculum decisions.
- **National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** are incorporating the consensus study into their field-reaching early education resources.
- **Pre-k curriculum research agenda:** A diverse expert technical advisory group is developing a research agenda to address current gaps in pre-k curriculum research. This agenda will build upon the recommendations outlined in the consensus study and offer a framework for cohesive research projects that can advance the early education field's evidence base in ways that can support high-quality preschool curriculum development and implementation.