

# High Quality Curricula Help Young Children Learn

Effective curricula attend to the special ways that young children grow and make sense of their worlds. From birth through the 3rd grade, young children move from concrete to abstract and symbolic thinking. At the same time, they develop the ability to regulate their emotions, collaborate with their peers, and understand others' perspectives. Shifts in cognition manifest in all aspects of their development, which are deeply interrelated. Indeed, young children's "emotional, social, physical, and thinking abilities are intertwined like a multi-fibred weaving. Each strand forms an essential part of the whole."<sup>1</sup> In light of the way young children learn, effective early childhood and elementary curricula are comprehensive and integrate learning across developmental and content areas. Instruction is intentional, responsive, and builds on children's backgrounds and interests. In fact, a substantial body of evidence shows that teacher-directed instruction actually limits children's learning, creativity, and curiosity. High quality curricula strike a balance between child-initiated play in the

presence of engaged teachers and focused experiential learning guided by teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Early childhood curricula describe the content and structure of the educational experience that teachers plan and execute when caring for and teaching their students, and

*“evidence-based curricula with proven results share common characteristics: “a concentration on interesting and relevant content across subject areas, combined with a deliberate and intense focus on language development through meaningful interactions among children and between children and their teachers.”*

addresses major learning goals in all developmental domains. Curriculum is a crucial choice for teachers and administrators. It can shape the interactions, content, and structure of teachers' practices. There are a variety of curricula used throughout New York State's prekindergarten, kindergarten, and early grades classrooms. Some curricula suggest precise content; others provide a framework for the activities and interactions that can take place in the classroom. Some curricula address all areas of development; others focus

only on particular developmental domains such as emerging literacy and mathematics. Some are for specific age groups; others are more expansive.<sup>3</sup> In light of these differences and the many choices available, all curricula should be selected after teachers and the administration carefully research and consider the benefits of a curriculum for the individual and communal interests of their students.

The research base that has examined the effectiveness of curricula is expansive. Despite tremendous variation, **evidence-based curricula with**

**proven results share common characteristics: “a concentration on interesting and relevant content across subject areas, combined with a deliberate and intense focus on language development through meaningful interactions among children and between children and their teachers.”<sup>4</sup>**

■ **In prekindergarten**, teachers use curricula that address learning in all developmental domains. Effective curricula are engaging, aligned with children's developmental level, and focused on key constructs within learning sequences. Teachers weave vocabulary development throughout the curriculum. When teachers implement curricula, they provide time for sustained play in which children can develop their attention, memory, and self-regulation.<sup>5</sup>

■ **Kindergarten** teachers implement a curriculum that meets the needs of their students, who have a wide range of abilities. Teachers need to ensure that curricula align with the first grade expectations and reflect the children's prior experiences. The curriculum helps children acquire a

focused set of key learning goals and also provides kindergartners with the tools to explore many concepts independently. Excellent kindergarten teachers connect curricula to children's interests, culture, and experience to ensure the content is meaningful and engaging.<sup>6</sup> As teachers implement curricula, they can adapt and individualize instruction based on their understanding of their students' abilities and each child's progression in reaching the learning goals.

■ **1st to 3rd grade** teachers balance focused instruction within an integrated curriculum because young students crave connections between new concepts and prior learning.<sup>7</sup> An integrated curriculum

provides young students with multiple opportunities to engage in the new material that spans disciplines. Research shows that “primary grade children do not distinguish learning by subject area (“Now I'm learning a math concept”, “Now I'm building my vocabulary”). In fact, the brains of children in this age span are looking for meaningful connections when presented with new information.”<sup>8</sup> Within an integrated framework, young students benefit from dedicated time to explore and investigate new concepts. When students have the opportunity to study a topic over days or even weeks and through multiples means, children make gains in all developmental domains.<sup>9</sup>



## High Quality Curriculum in Action

A first grade teacher's math curriculum provides guidance on teaching addition and subtraction to 10.<sup>10</sup> Based on her lesson plan, the teacher introduces the content in a large group setting, and then has the children work independently to add and subtract using manipulatives. The children then form small groups to share and explain their work. The teacher reinforces the math concepts during child-initiated play in learning centers. In dramatic play, for instance, a cash register has the appropriate currency to encourage understanding of addition and subtraction to 10. The block area, a favorite choice for many of her students, includes blocks that she has grouped in piles of 10 to see how the

children can use the blocks in different and creative ways. As the children build their structures, the teacher moves to the block area to where she uses math talk and poses addition and subtraction problems. During this center time, children have the opportunity to playfully apply the math content knowledge, as well as use social and emotional skills as they work with their peers. By providing a variety of opportunities for her students to use this new content, they gain a deep understanding of the foundational skills found in the New York State Learning Standards, and teachers are also supporting social and emotional goals for their students.

## Effective Curricula supports Address the Essential Capacities of the New York State Learning Standards

The New York State Learning Standards promote college and career readiness by describing the knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language that students should gain as they advance through the grades. Like developmentally appropriate practice, the New York State Learning Standards Support interdisciplinary

learning, higher order thinking, creativity, and the use of language and literacy skills throughout the day. As students master the standards, they gain seven essential capacities that promote their intellectual development.<sup>11</sup> The effective use of curricula support each capacity.



Essential Capacities	Characteristics of High Quality Curricula
Demonstrate independence	Ensures that children have a variety of opportunities to exercise their independence through child-initiated learning. A comprehensive curriculum also provides ample opportunity for children to acquire self-help skills.
Build strong content knowledge	Includes developmentally appropriate learning goals that can be individualized to support the naturally occurring wide range in young children's knowledge and abilities.
Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline	Includes an intense focus on language development and attends to children's communication skills during whole group, small group, and individual interactions. Children have a variety of ways to express their ideas – through verbal and non-verbal communication – throughout the school day.
Comprehend as well as critique	Is balanced to provide students with ample opportunity to process new information and share their understanding of new ideas with their peers and teachers.
Value evidence	Provides young learners with many opportunities to produce work that demonstrates their reasoning for taking a particular position. It also encourages teachers to help children find answers to their questions through research and investigation.
Use technology and digital media strategically and capably	Uses technology to support children's learning carefully, ensuring that children are interacting with technology and digital media in meaningful ways.
Understand other perspectives and cultures	Is culturally appropriate and expands children's understanding of themselves and others.

### Strategies For Teachers

- Understand the sequence of learning new content and skills to appropriately scaffold and differentiate the implementation of the curriculum<sup>12</sup>
- Connect curriculum with children's interests, prior learning, family experiences, and cultures
- Integrate ideas from multiple domains and disciplines to help children gain deep content knowledge and make connections
- Use curriculum frameworks to plan lessons that will help children master a comprehensive set of key learning goals

### Strategies For Leaders

- Select curricula that prioritize hands-on learning opportunities through a balance of whole group, small group, and independent work
- Ensure curricula address all aspects of young students' development
- Verify that curricula account for the natural variation in children's development and provide guidance on differentiating instruction
- Align curricula from prekindergarten through 3rd grade so children's learning builds on their prior experiences, knowledge, and learning skills
- Ensure curricula are aligned with developmentally informed practices, learning standards, and assessments.
- Provide teachers within and across grade levels sufficient time to work together to develop lesson plans and review and support one another's practice

To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address curriculum, the classroom environment, instruction and interactions, assessment and family engagement, please visit the New York ECAC website at [www.nysecac.org](http://www.nysecac.org) or contact us at [ecac@ccf.ny.gov](mailto:ecac@ccf.ny.gov)

Photo courtesy of Community Playthings



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## Comprehensive Curricula in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade: Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards

As members of the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council, the NYS Head Start Collaboration Office, the NYS State Education Department, and the NYS Association for the Education of Young Children providing guidance to support our youngest students, their families, teachers, and leaders by highlighting key features of high quality early childhood teaching. **We firmly believe that young students can best meet New York State Learning Standards when they have effective teachers who use intentional, experiential, and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.** This brief provides helpful strategies related to setting up a classroom environment that will help to put the State's young learners on a path to social and intellectual success as they master the foundational skills to meet the New York State Learning Standards.



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# CURRICULUM

### Resources

- **Choosing a Preschool Curriculum**  
*Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL)*  
[www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/ta-system/teaching/docs/preschool-curriculum.pdf](http://www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/ta-system/teaching/docs/preschool-curriculum.pdf)
- **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**  
*National Association for the Education of Young Children*  
[www.naeyc.org/DAP](http://www.naeyc.org/DAP)
- **Montgomery County Public Schools. Curriculum 2.0**  
[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/2.0/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/2.0/)
- **New York State Education Department**  
[www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov)

### Sources

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- <sup>2</sup> Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2011). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. Alliance for Childhood. Retrieved January 14, 2014 from [www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten\\_report.pdf](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf)
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- <sup>4</sup> Frede, E. & Ackerman, D. (2007). Pg. 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Bodrova, E. & Leong, (2010). *Curriculum and play in early child development*. In *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development, Montreal, available at: [www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Bodrova-LeongANGxp.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Bodrova-LeongANGxp.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> Biggam, S. C. & Hyson, M. C. (2014). *The common core state standards and developmentally appropriate practice: Creating a relationship*. In C. Copple, S. Bredekamp, D. Koralek, and K. Charner (Eds.). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Focus on Kindergartners*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- <sup>7</sup> Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school: Expanded Edition*. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Copple, C., Bredekamp, S. Koralek, D. & Charner, K. (2014). *Developmentally appropriate practice: Focus on kindergartners*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children
- <sup>9</sup> Spada N. & Lightbrown, P.M. (2008). *Form-focused instruction: Isolated or integrated?* *TESOL Quarterly*, 42(2) 181-207.
- <sup>10</sup> This construct is conveyed in the *New York State Common Core Curriculum module 1 for first grade and relates to several of the Common Core Standards, Focus Grade Level Standards for first grade math*. The curriculum module was retrieved January 24, 2014 from [www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/g1-m1-full-module.pdf](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/g1-m1-full-module.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> *New York State Education Department*. (2010). *New York State P-12 New York State Learning Standards for English language arts and literacy*. Retrieved February 27, 2014 from: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/standards/>
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## Comprehensive Curricula in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade:

Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards



### Guidance from

New York State Head Start Collaboration Office

New York State Association for the Education of Young Children

New York State Education Department

