

PATHWAY SIX: EFFECTIVE CURRICULA, INSTRUCTION, AND CHILD ASSESSMENT

Effective curricula, instruction, and child assessment are essential for enhancing development and learning in young children, especially those at risk for academic failure due to poverty, disability, or other factors. Learning is most meaningful when integrated across domains. Using high quality, appropriate, and effective curriculum and instruction can stimulate children's motivation and enthusiasm as well as support development in all domains and foster academic growth.



Key Understandings

There are many definitions of curriculum. Goodlad and Su (1992) define curriculum as a plan that consists of learning opportunities for a specific time frame and place. The authors explain that curriculum is a tool that aims to bring about behavior changes in students as a result of planned activities, and it includes all learning experiences received by students with the guidance of the school. It is important to note that educators typically use a combination of curricula to meet the range of student abilities in their classrooms.

A special focus on curricula, standards, teaching, and assessment can enhance development and learning so children enter the next level with appropriate skills and knowledge, potentially narrowing the achievement gap. Curricula should include:

- ▶ Solid evidence-base;
- ▶ Effective instruction;
- ▶ Strong focus on meeting state learning standards;
- ▶ Horizontal and vertical alignment within the standards;
- ▶ Intentional interactions and teacher supports;
- ▶ Responsiveness to individual interests, needs, and learning styles;
- ▶ Strategies for meeting the needs of ethnically diverse and low-income children; and
- ▶ Alignment and planning within and across programs and grade levels.



The Work

Community-District Teams should examine ways to increase achievement in schools and explore how administrators and policymakers can best integrate this knowledge into their decision-making. Specifically, Community-District Teams advocate for and facilitate strategies to improve academic achievement by enhancing the connections and alignment between PreK-3 curricula, state standards, instruction, and assessment using data to inform their efforts. This can be accomplished by researching effective curricula, materials, and programs that address the needs of diverse populations of children (e.g., ELLs, learning disabilities, etc.); involving stakeholders from the community in the process; and encouraging effective training and professional development on appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Effective curricula allow for instruction, on-going assessment, and child achievement among diverse populations of students (Barnett, 2008; Galinsky, 2006). Understanding where kids came from, where they currently need to be, as well as where they are going in terms of state standards is crucial. The challenge for Community-District Teams is to try to influence decision-making at the district-level based on data.

Implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive, and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.

– NAEYC Position Statement



Who is Involved: Why and What are Their Roles?

Curriculum, instruction, standards, and assessment discussions can involve stakeholders from both the district and the community such as district-level administrators, principals, and teachers; business partners; families; early childhood educators and program directors; service providers; and others. Community-District Teams can encourage collaborative decision-making in regards to curriculum, assessment, and instruction by making presentations to the district and groups representative of the community. By advocating for collaborative decision-making, Community-District Teams can enhance communication, encourage buy-in, and gain additional support within the community and district.

District and School Administrators: Administrators lead advocacy efforts to ensure that families and community leaders have a voice in improving early learning outcomes and implementing intentional curriculum and effective teaching strategies. Administrators provide release time, substitute teachers, and subsidies so teachers have adequate planning time, collaboration time, and can take advantage of professional development that helps them understand how young children learn and develop and to help them implement specific curricula and assessments used by the district. District personnel also align PreK-3 curricula, teaching strategies, and assessment with state standards to increase student achievement and state level outcomes.

Schools: School personnel research and implement with fidelity high quality instructional programs with a strong evidence base and alignment with state standards. They are responsive to families and communities when presented with input for decision-making. School leaders implement and sustain over time a whole school model of professional development involving principals, teachers, staff, early childhood professionals, and families.

Teachers and Early Childhood Professionals: Teachers and early childhood professionals join together to explore how schools and other early childhood education settings are selecting and implementing curricula, instruction, and assessment for all young children, including those at risk for academic failure. They collaborate to make sure children are learning what they need to be successful as they smoothly transition out of preschool and into Kindergarten and other grades. They use appropriate interactive instructional methods and materials tailored to individual needs and interest, and they conduct regular assessments to inform practice and gauge achievement and progress.



Sustainability

Effective teachers implement the selected curriculum so as to align effective instructional strategies, educational goals/state standards, and children's needs in an effort to enhance academic achievement (Curriculum Collaboration Toolkit, 2011). Using a curriculum over a period of time can allow stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of and expertise in the chosen curriculum so they can make connections about how to best utilize the tools and strategies to enhance learning and meet state standards. By collaborating with community stakeholders, the Community-District Team may increase buy-in and offer professional development and other supports to educators which will in turn encourage effective instruction and active learning.

In order to sustain appropriate efforts in the Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment Pathway, the Community-District Team must watch for changes in legislation and policy impacting

curricula (e.g., the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and the Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers). For example, as of June of 2011, North Carolina adopted the Common Core State Standards in K-12 Mathematics and English Language Arts, with full implementation expected for the 2012-2013 school year. One responsibility of the Community-District Team is to make sure this change is communicated to stakeholders, educate stakeholders about the change, and revisit alignment of the curricula, instruction, and assessments currently in use with the new standards or policies and make recommendations for revisions or changes where appropriate.

Adult Learning Communities (ALCs) or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), are small teams of teachers who can discuss student data and educational research to inform their instructional strategies and decisions. Teacher mentors provide scaffolds and additional support for district-wide implementation and sustainability of specific curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Another idea is to have early childhood, PreK, and Kindergarten-3rd grade teachers and educators visit and share professional development nights with one another to build effective connections. For example, PreK teachers could explain play-based learning at a professional gathering while Kindergarten staff could share how play skills developed in PreK support the achievement of Kindergarten objectives and state standards.

The Community-District Team can further facilitate sustainability by educating the community about what appropriate, effective, and research-based curricula and early instruction should look like. There are very common misunderstandings and misperceptions of what should be happening in early learning settings, especially those for children from birth to age 5.



Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

1. Does your Community-District Team support effective, appropriate, evidence-based curricula that align from early childhood through grade three?
2. Does your Community-District Team use assessment results to formulate a district-wide Team action plan for improving and aligning curriculum, standards, instruction, and assessment?
3. Does your Community-District Team advocate for the communication of assessment results in a family-friendly manner?
4. Does your Community-District Team support accommodations and inclusion for children with disabilities and English Language Learners to access the curriculum?
5. How does the Community-District Team ensure that stakeholders are involved in decisions about the curriculum, instruction, and assessment?
6. Does the curriculum allow for responsiveness to individual interests, needs, and learning styles?
7. Are district and early learning policies, standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned horizontally and vertically to create a learning continuum within which all children can develop and learn at their own pace?





Taking Action

Key Strategies

1. **Effective Research:** Research effective curricula and instruction methods for preparing diverse learners for active, engaged, and appropriate learning.
2. **Advocacy:** Advocate for effective and useful professional development on curriculum, standards, instruction, and assessment to encourage success of implementation.
3. **Community Stakeholders:** Involve community stakeholders in curricular discussions and conversations in efforts to enhance knowledge, buy-in, and sustainability.



Issues/Challenges/Barriers

The U. S. Department of Human and Health Services (2011) suggest several critical components for effective curriculum implementation:

- ▶ **Fidelity of implementation:** Fidelity of implementation is the delivery of instruction in the way in which it was designed to be delivered including using appropriate materials, sequencing, and instructional methods (Gresham, MacMillan, Boebe-Fran-kenberger, & Bocian, 2000). Research has shown the important role of fidelity of implementation in increasing program effectiveness (see Foorman & Moats, 2004; Vaughn, Hughes, Scham, & Klinger, 1998).
- ▶ **Professional development support:** Professional development supports staff by effectively training them to implement the curriculum by understanding the goals, procedures, and tools for instruction (Barnett, 2008).
- ▶ **On-going assessment of child learning:** The Community-District Team can promote the analysis of district-wide data on a consistent basis to ensure children's progress is monitored and encouraged.

Influence: The Community-District Team must have enough influence to make a difference at the district level where most curriculum decisions are made. Teams must be representative of the roles and diversity of the community. Teams should also ask themselves, "Do the members on the Team have influence in their respective groups?"

Alignment: Alignment between standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction across PreK-3rd grade is very important. Bridging the philosophical and communication divide between preschool programs and Kindergarten can be especially challenging.



Ready Schools in Action:

Effective Curriculum Efforts in Catawba and Carteret Counties

The Catawba Community-District Team highlighted the relevance of involving the business community in curricular decisions. The Team reported that engaging in discussions with local business leaders was one successful strategy. During these discussions, Team members communicated benefits of participation for businesses. One major benefit for businesses of participation in curricular decision-making is the opportunity to influence curriculum and embed desired technical knowledge, workforce skills, and dispositional characteristics in curriculum design and content. Early childhood provides a foundation for which all subsequent knowledge and skills are based and must be included in the discussions for true alignment to occur.

Carteret County educates families regarding curriculum and involves families in instruction by embedding curricula and instruction in family-friendly activities during classroom events. For example, teachers ask families to lead activities in centers. In this manner, families learn how to implement the activities so that they can replicate them at home. Also, teachers design center activities to include make-and-take games for families to bring home to use and play with their children. There are many ways in which families can support the curriculum if they are knowledgeable about the objectives: sorting laundry, buying groceries, and interacting with friends and family can all provide important learning opportunities for children.



Strategies for Overcoming Issues/Challenges/Barriers

Community-District Teams can support schools in delivering the curriculum with a high level of fidelity by advocating for educational professionals who are knowledgeable about the programs they deliver. Professional development should emphasize using consistent and on-going assessment to ensure children are gaining the needed skills. Research (NRCLD, 2006) recommends that trainings on implementation fidelity include effective connections between instruction and outcomes, clear responsibilities for educational providers, data analysis for measuring fidelity, systems for providing training, and mechanisms for providing feedback on effectiveness. The Community-District Team is responsible for promoting and facilitating this professional development.

Another strategy recommended by current Community-District Team members is to bring together curriculum specialists (maybe one from the school or district level, one specializing in early care and education, and one from a university or college). These specialists could communicate with and educate each other about their knowledge and experiences in their specific domain. These conversations can help improve communication and understanding among educators.

For additional resources (from other Pathways) to support the Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment Pathway, please see the following appendices:

1. Appendix A, Resources for Getting Started
 - » A variety of instruments and websites are highlighted to support this Pathway.
2. Appendix D, Resources for Pathway Three: Transitions
 - » Resources for understanding connections between PreK through 3rd grade.
3. Appendix E, Resources for Pathway Four: Respecting Diversity
 - » Resources for understanding culturally competent curricula and how to meet the needs of diverse learners.

For more resources see Appendix G, Resources for Pathway Six: Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment at the end of the Toolkit.

Pathway References

- Barnett, W.S. (2008). *Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.
- Department of Public Instruction Early Childhood Section. (2002). *Learning Through the Eyes of a Child*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncprek.nc.gov/Foundations/pdf/learning.through.the.eyes.pdf>
- Foorman, B. R. & Moats, L. C. (2004). Conditions for sustaining research-based practices in early reading instruction. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*(1) 51- 60.
- Galinsky, E. (2006). *The economic benefits of high quality early childhood programs: What makes the difference?* Washington, D. C.: The Committee for Economic Development.
- Gresham, F. M., MacMillan, D. L., Beebe-Frankenberger, M. E., & Bocian, K. M. (2000). Treatment integrity in learning disabilities intervention research: Do we really know how treatments are implemented? *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 15*(4), 198-205.
- Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., Schumm, J. S., & Klinger, J. (1998). A collaborative effort to enhance reading and writing instruction in inclusive classrooms. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 21*, 57-74.