PATHWAY SIX: EFFECTIVE CURRICULA, INSTRUCTION, AND CHILD ASSESSMENT

Effective curricula, instruction, and child assessment foster motivation and enthusiasm for learning, support development in all domains, and build academic knowledge and skills.

Priorities include:

➤ Projecting an open, child-focused, and welcoming atmosphere characterized by friendliness, respect, and high staff morale.

➤ The school diligently employing educational methods and materials shown to be effective in helping a diverse population of children achieve appropriate academic growth to reach essential standards.

➤ Accomodating and including children with disabilities and other special needs to the maximum extent possible in the regular instructional programs.

➤ Aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment within a classroom, within a grade level, and across grade levels from preschool through the elementary grades and beyond.

➤ Using research and data to help drive instructional practice, and teachers planning within and across grade levels to ensure alignment and multi-level intervention strategies.

> ntentionality is "directed, designed interactions between children and teachers in which teachers purposefully challenge, scaffold and extend children's skills."
>
> – Pianta, 2003

Key Understandings

Teachers must be prepared to understand both academic standards and child development to design effective learning experiences for young children.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Alignment

➤ Effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment are appropriate for young children's development and responsive to individual interests and needs and sensitive to children's cultural and linguistic contexts. Developmental needs and learning styles in the primary grades lend themselves to an integrated approach to curriculum.

➤ Aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment horizontally and vertically creates a learning continuum within which ALL young children can develop and learn at their own pace.

➤ The continuing achievement gap requires in-depth analysis of instructional practices and environments for poor and minority children.

➤ Linking assessment directly to curriculum and instruction generates meaningful data needed to inform instructional practice. Using appropriate formative assessment to refine instruction and provide individualized support helps ensure that young children make continuous academic progress and develop in all domains.

Learning and Development

> Intentional teachers make thoughtful choices about classroom environment, curriculum, and student interactions. Young children learn best when they are provided with meaningful instructional experiences that build upon and connect to their previous experiences and everyday lives. Naturally curious, young children work and play to make sense of the world around them. Their developmental needs and learning styles in the primary grades, kindergarten through 3rd grade, lend themselves to an integrated approach to curriculum rather than that of a stand-alone, content-specific nature.

> Children's learning cannot be left to chance. Effective teachers use a variety of approaches, strategies, contexts, and materials to support children's interests and abilities in each learning domain. Young children's learning is determined most significantly by what teachers do and how they interact with each child. A good curriculum is important, but teacher decisions and interactions are paramount.

> Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.

> Inclusion is valued and practiced as it supports the right of all children, regardless of their diverse abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their school environment. Inclusion of children with disabilities and other special needs in the regular instructional program, combined with specialized instruction and support to reach each child's individual goals, helps to ensure optimal development and learning for ALL young children.

Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

As schools continue to explore this pathway, Ready Schools invites school teams and communities to reflect upon the following questions:

- Do policies and educational practices support the learning of all students?

- Are we implementing research and evidence-based best practices?

- Do curricula and instructional practices support the whole child or do they primarily address reading, writing, and math?

- Do teachers incorporate a balance of learning environments and teaching approaches each day?

- What does children's work tell us about their response to instruction?

- How do children's mistakes provide information about instruction?

- What alternative strategies can be used to increase learning?

- Do all teachers know the academic standards for the grade they teach, as well as the standards for the previous and succeeding grades?

  » Do they understand how the standards build upon one another from one grade level to the next?

  » Is there alignment between early learning standards and school-age standards?

Taking Action

To ensure that young students are provided optimal and appropriate learning experiences staff members first must understand the principles of child development and learning. Staff members also must:

› be clear about academic expectations;

› know effective instructional strategies; and

› understand the value of sound and appropriate assessment practices for young children.

Understanding and Implementing Child Development Principles

Children grow and develop through predictable stages, but at individual rates. Every child is different. Learning is not a lockstep, linear progression; effective schools and classrooms must respond to the unique needs and learning styles of diverse children. Teachers should employ various child development methods to respond to each child's social-emotional and cognitive needs.

All children can learn and, in appropriate settings, want to learn. Children are persistent, curious, and creative; they want and need to make sense of their world. Experience, knowledge, curiosity, and a sense of wonder are foundations for learning.

Development and learning are rooted in culture and supported by family. Language, traditions, and family expectations are the primary influences on children's development. Cultural and linguistic diversity should be embraced as meaningful opportunities to expand children's learning.   Learning is enriched and strengthened by stable, nurturing relationships within the family and community.

Action Steps:

› Form vertical teams of PreK-3rd grade teachers focused on typical and atypical child development in the primary years. Read and discuss the implications of recent research. Invite a local expert from a college or university to summarize recent research about young children's development from ages 3 through 8 to help guide your discussions.

› Allocate funds to purchase memberships for teachers in professional organizations focused on the education of young children, such as National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC).

› Plan and teach intentionally with specific goals in mind for children's development and learning in all domains. Provide a variety of learning areas/centers for active exploration that address all developmental areas (cognitive, language, physical, social-emotional). Look for ways to incorporate materials and activities that bring children's culture, language, community, and family into the classroom in meaningful ways.

Effective Child Assessment

Early childhood assessments should give children numerous opportunities to show what they have learned and how they can apply their knowledge. These assessments should be integrated into daily routines and become progressively more challenging. Assessments benefit children by showing teachers what children have mastered and where further instruction is needed, enabling all children to make continuous progress. Children are more likely to perform at their best when engaged in interesting and meaningful classroom projects and experiences of their choosing.

Action Steps:

➤ Observe and document children's performance during daily assignments and play. If they demonstrate understanding of a concept consistently, it is not necessary to re-assess it formally. Use the results of formative assessment to differentiate instruction. Identify and strengthen students' weak areas, create lessons to engage students who are uninterested, and develop new challenges for students who are exceeding standards.

➤ Collaborate in grade-level groups to make a list of appropriate formative assessment strategies such as rubrics, record-keeping forms, portfolio criteria, etc., for assessment related to essential standards. Work in teams to develop observable criteria for learning. ("What does it look like when students have learned it?") Work in teams to develop methods for communicating ongoing progress to families, based on the results of formative assessments. Staff members at the same grade level use common assessments of student learning and development and align assessments vertically. Assessment results are shared across grade levels.

➤ Assess and record the progress of children with disabilities toward Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives using authentic assessment methods including observation during everyday activities. Methods and materials used to assess children with disabilities accommodate their developmental and disability-specific characteristics.

➤ Engage in action research to identify and test strategies and tools for assessing children's learning and development.

➤ Develop a list of websites where teachers can locate information and resources for assessing young children.

Assessments for Young Children

Assessments for young children are:

☑ Artifacts of children's understanding;

☑ Ongoing, strategic, purposeful, and embedded;

☑ Aligned to academic standards; and

☑ Used to inform practice.

Assessments are not:

✗ Pen-and-pencil tests;

✗ Infrequent events;

✗ Out of context;

✗ Used to judge children's abilities; or

✗ Administered by an adult the child does not know.

Authentic assessments for young children include:

☑ Observations,

☑ Ongoing documentation of children's work,

☑ Work samples,

☑ Running and narrative records, and

☑ Interviews with children and their families.

Effective Curriculum and Instruction

Children learn and grow in an integrated manner. Learning is most meaningful when integrated across all domains. All domains of development and learning – physical, social/emotional, and cognitive—are equally important and are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains. The first step toward integration is deep knowledge of the state's learning standards. This knowledge enables teachers to integrate curriculum in natural ways that are meaningful for children.

Children learn quickly when material is presented in meaningful ways at appropriate times. Children learn best when actively involved in activities in which they have a role in initiating. Teachers should incorporate an appropriate balance of teacher-directed and child-directed learning activities, including play, into curriculum and instruction. They must intentionally incorporate standards-based learning objectives into rich, inquiry-based activities that are meaningful, interesting, and motivating to young children.

The early childhood curriculum is the planned management of time, materials, experiences, and activities to guide children's learning and development. It is an organized framework that delineates:

➤ The content children are to learn;

➤ The processes through which they achieve the identified curricular goals;

➤ What teachers do to help children achieve these goals; and

➤ The context in which teaching and learning occur.

Action Steps:

➤ Work in grade-level teams to develop, implement, and evaluate integrative units of study that are aligned with essential standards across content areas. Use technology such as a Wiki or a Blog to explore effective teaching strategies and share successful lesson plans that integrate curriculum across multiple content areas and developmental domains.

➤ Integrate topics based on children's interests, ideas, and discoveries into the everyday experiences of the classroom. Develop and implement schedules with large chunks of time for exploration and inquiry-based learning that enable children to become deeply engaed. Take advantage of teachable moments to weave important learning objectives into child-centered experiences, based on a deep knowledge of essential standards. Provide opportunities for children to participate in project-based learning experiences.

➤ Foster children's active engagement through conversation and dialogue about their experiences. Young children are concrete, active learners who construct knowledge based on direct sensory experiences as well as previous knowledge. Discovery learning, activities involving concrete objects or manipulatives, and multi-sensory experiences enhance learning in young children by helping them understand the world and how things work. For children, play is serious work and is an important vehicle to promote language, cognition, social competence, and self-regulation.

> Identify the learning styles and preferences of each student and design instruction to meet individual needs. Offer multi-sensory experiences and use a wide array of effective instructional strategies.

> Engage in intentional teaching. The term "intentional teaching" refers to teachers acting with specific goals in mind for children's development and learning.

> Provide ample opportunity for play. Play is a primary vehicle for young children's development and learning, especially in the earliest grades. Effective teachers provide many opportunities for age-appropriate play in its various forms, including active physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, and games with rules.

> Provide professional development focused on the value of play and how it provides a vehicle for children to explore and elaborate on their understandings of the world.

> Use developmental, cultural, linguistic, and age appropriate strategies for relationship-building and integration of curricula.

> Engage families in discussions about how learning goals are met through play, inquiry-based activities, and daily classroom routines.

> Arrange classrooms for optimum movement and interaction for students. Take learning activities outdoors, and bring the natural environment into the classroom. Align learning center experiences to the essential standards in the state's standard course of study. Use technology appropriately to expand learning opportunities for students of all ages, including applications that promote creativity and open-ended thinking.

> Create a varied and balanced program where every child can be successful. Both teacher-directed and child-directed experiences are found in intentional and effective classrooms (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2009).

Content and Learning Experiences are Aligned Horizontally and Vertically

Children learn best when there is an alignment between standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment in early childhood education settings and the elementary school, within a classroom, within a grade level, and across grade levels.

Curriculum should be mapped across grade levels, by utilizing child development principles and standards to align curriculum and instruction both vertically and horizontally. Curriculum should be integrated and aligned in ways that are meaningful to students. Staff members collaborate with child care, community preschools, Head Start, and other programs serving children who will later attend the school to align curriculum and instruction vertically across programs using early childhood standards and the state's K-3 standard course of study.

Action Steps:

› Develop vertically aligned curriculum maps based on *Foundations* (or your state's early learning standards and your state's standard course of study).

› Meet regularly as vertical teams and use the Department of Public Instruction's essential standards as they are implemented to map curriculum from preschool through 3rd grade and beyond.

› Use curriculum maps to identify curricular gaps or redundancies (Ohio, 2008).

› *"Determine key areas for vertical alignment of standards-based lessons from preschool through grade three"* (Ohio, 2008).

Fidelity of Curriculum Implementation/Training

Teachers must understand both academic standards and child development to design effective learning experiences for young children. Embedded, sustained professional development should be infused within and beyond the school year to ensure staff receives the training and materials necessary to understand child development, the standard course of study, system-mandated curricula, and evidence-based best practices for instruction.

Authentic professional learning communities (PLC) should be developed and woven into the tapestry of each Ready School. It is critical that staff members be provided time to collectively examine their practices and beliefs. This structure provides a context of collegiality, which supports teachers and administrators in improving their practice via increased reflective/collaborative time. This time should be utilized to learn new curriculum and instructional strategies and differentiated methods for interacting meaningfully with each child.

PLCs create opportunities for professional staff to look deeply into the teaching and learning processes in order to become more effective in their work with students.

Action Steps:

› Become familiar with the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy and the state's essential standards as they are implemented.

› Work in grade-level teams to assess the fidelity of current curriculum methods and materials to learning standards and the state board of education's recommended practices.

› Use mentor teachers to ensure that teachers who are new to the school understand and know how to implement the DPI-mandated methods and materials currently in use at the school.

› Work in teams to explore how standards-driven lessons differ from topic-driven lessons, and how topics of interest to children and teachers can be woven into standards-driven lessons.

› Develop a curriculum fidelity checklist and use it as a tool for observation and self-assessment of lessons and units.

Student-Teacher Interactions

Children learn best when their physical and emotional needs are met and they feel safe and secure. The child's self image strongly affects his or her eagerness to learn and ability to do so. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers. Nurturing relationships are vital to fostering self-esteem and a strong sense of self-efficacy, capacity in resolving interpersonal conflicts cooperatively, and the sociability to connect with others and form friendships. Further, by providing positive models and the security and confidence to try new experiences and attempt new skills, such relationships support children's learning and the acquisition of numerous capabilities.

Sensitive, responsive teacher interactions with children during instruction build the kind of positive relationships that contribute to children's sense of safety and security in the classroom. Positive teacher-child interactions during instruction are essential to optimal learning and development.

PreK-3rd grade teachers voluntarily met over summer vacation to explore the integration of social studies into their literacy block during the first four weeks of school. During this time teachers thought about the kinds of things children may worry about as they enter school (finding the bathroom, bus, or cafeteria, making friends, older students, new rules) and designed experiences to alleviate those worries, some of which included:

- A "Welcome to South Lexington" campaign was created to address the needs and concerns of children and families new to the school, as well as new to grade levels.

- Students developed maps and brochures for visitors and new students.

- Older students became buddies and mentors to younger students.

- During family orientation everyone had a chance to meet the important members of the school staff and positive relationships were established.

When teachers affirm their efforts, give constructive feedback, and avoid negative interactions that shame them, students develop a sense of competence and confidence. Teachers actively encourage and facilitate positive interactions and friendships between ALL children, including those with disabilities and their typically-developing peers.

Action Steps:

- Implement professional development strategies focused specifically on the quality of teacher-child interactions during instruction, such as peer observations or walk-through teams to document teacher-child interactions.

- Create school and classroom environments that facilitate and promote positive interactions with children and among adults. Consistently implement a developmentally appropriate, school-wide program to encourage positive student behavior. Staff will respond rather than react to student behavior and be empowered to create environments supporting pro-social behaviors. Social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community will be emphasized.

- Develop self-monitoring tools to support high quality teacher-child interactions. Use case studies and scenarios to analyze challenging situations and interactions with students. Videotape teacher interactions with children during play, inquiry-based learning activities, and large group lessons and use these videotapes as tools for reflection.

Inclusion

Inclusion of children with disabilities in classrooms with their typically developing peers is valued because all children benefit. In a high-quality inclusive classroom, children with disabilities learn from peer models, and children without disabilities develop appreciation for the strengths of diverse classmates. The mission statement of every school mandates learning for "all children." Inclusion is a philosophy of ensuring that all children, including those with special needs, have access to curriculum that is appropriate for them in settings with their grade-level peers. Ensuring that all children have access to the general curriculum is a first step towards reaching all children. Inclusion is more than being included for lunch, recess, or enhancement classes.

Classroom teachers who include children with disabilities in their classrooms receive the necessary resources and support to provide appropriate instruction for ALL children in the classroom. Staff members should value accommodations and adaptations that will allow inclusion and the integration of children of varying abilities. They must know how to apply various practices such as tiered interventions and be willing to share responsibility for meeting the needs of all children in the least restrictive environment. Staff in an effective inclusive classroom provide the intensive, specialized instruction needed to help children develop in an optimum manner and progress toward their IEP goals.

Action Steps:

› Invite an expert on special needs to provide ongoing training and support on inclusion. Develop a "toolkit" on ways to differentiate instruction to meet the needs for all children.

› Develop a school-wide action plan (steps) for increasing the level of inclusion. Provide environments that incorporate a wide variety of materials and adaptations to allow all children to access and use the materials. Promote high, yet achievable expectations for all students.

› Develop an inclusion support team to monitor the effectiveness of the program. Invite Exceptional Children program staff to grade level team meetings.