

Issue Brief 2025-01: The What, Why & How of Curriculum



The Importance of Curriculum
in Early Care & Education

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Department of
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ISSUE BRIEF 2025-01: THE WHAT, WHY, & HOW OF CURRICULUM

In this Issue Brief, we describe three things: (1) What is curriculum? (2) Why is it important to use a curriculum when caring for and educating young children? And (3) How will implementing a high-quality curriculum get us to our goals?

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

Curriculum is the set of steps for learning that we follow to teach something. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines curriculum as the “plans for the learning experiences through which children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and understanding.”¹ Often people think it’s just what we do in schools, but curriculum can be applied to everything we ultimately come to know, including walking, changing a tire, using a smartphone, cooking, and algebra.

WHY USE A CURRICULUM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

What we know about young children and how they develop is that their brains are built over time, with experiences impacting the physical make-up of the brain and its capacity.² We no longer falsely argue about nature versus nurture because we now know it is both. This means that our genetics, our environments, and the experiences we have with others shape how we learn, grow, and develop.^{2,3} More importantly, the most explosive time for learning happens in the first five years of life,² when our capacity for learning is at its greatest.

Because science has identified how children learn from birth until a child attends kindergarten⁴, we know what children of different ages are capable of doing.⁵ Infants cannot walk, talk, or use a fork when eating; but most three-year-olds can do all of those things. Children learn everything from peers and adults they spend time with, and they learn through playing and interacting.¹ This does not mean that individual children do not learn in special ways that are different from their peers, it just means that we know, in very predictable ways, how most children gain knowledge, skills, and behaviors over time.

Every child who will eventually run must first learn how to stand, balance, and walk; in that order. There are known steps to learning and because we know what these are, we need to use curricula that know these too. We want every adult who spends time with a young child to understand these steps to learning so that they have realistic expectations for children’s behavior and can provide experiences that are developmentally appropriate. We also know how people become literate or learn to read. You may have heard the term “science of reading,” which is the collective body of knowledge that comes from scientific research.⁶

Since we know the steps of teaching and learning⁷ that lead to the ability to read, we must require that the teaching and learning that happens in our early care and education settings lay the foundation of knowledge and skills necessary for being able to read. Being able to read is the critical foundation of all school-based learning and for being able to function effectively in society. Being able to read has also been associated with greater employability, economic security, better physical and mental health, and increased empathy for others.⁹ At its most

basic, reading allows us to take medications as prescribed, read signs on streets, and complete forms needed for services, opportunities, and identification.

HOW WILL A CURRICULUM HELP US ACHIEVE OUR GOALS?

In Ohio's early care and education settings, we require the use of a research-based curriculum that is aligned to Ohio's Early Learning & Development Standards (ELDS) and the science of reading because there is proof it does what it says it does. Alignment to ELDS and the science of reading means the plan for teaching is done in ways that are play-based, developmentally appropriate, adaptable to include all, and progresses in structured, sequential, and skill-building ways. Simply put, we require these things because they are what we scientifically know about how children learn. Requiring these basics gives our children the best chance, regardless of what their life circumstances are, for a bright and successful future to become and do whatever they hope to.

At the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, we want every child in our state to have high-quality early childhood experiences that prepare them for kindergarten. Children who demonstrate kindergarten readiness predict later academic success, which predicts social, academic, and economic achievements into adulthood.¹⁰ As we have proven through research, the early childhood years are unparalleled for learning and brain development.^{1,2,3,4,5} In order to proactively invest in the people of this state and to ensure economic prosperity and our ability to live full, productive lives, young children need to be exposed to the brain-building teaching that science supports.

We know that only 36.5% of our children are demonstrating kindergarten readiness in Ohio, we want to increase this to at least 60%. The only way we will see more of our Ohio children demonstrating readiness for kindergarten is if we require that research-based curricula aligned to Ohio's ELDS and the science of reading are used every day in every early care and education classroom, family child care, and child care center. The Department of Children and Youth is here to support you in your efforts to educate the children in your care in exactly the way they deserve.

¹ <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/planning-curriculum>

² <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/prevention/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/prevention.html

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>

⁵ <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Early-Learning-Content-Standards/Early-Learning-and-Development-Standards.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

⁶ <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Literacy/Read-Ohio>

⁷ <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Literacy/Literacy-Academy/Literacy-Academy-on-Demand/Overview/The-Simple-View-of-Reading-1>

⁸ <https://www.gcu.edu/blog/teaching-school-administration/importance-and-impact-of-reading>

⁹ <https://snapreads.com/magazine/why-is-reading-important/>

¹⁰ [Impact Brief 2024-01](#)