

Using Curriculum and Assessment to Strengthen Classroom Practice

Curriculum can be a confusing concept. Varied definitions and descriptions may create challenges for practitioners as they strive to implement good programming for children and families and to make prudent decisions about the use of standards, teaching practices, and assessments for their classrooms. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for practitioners who are:

- Learning to define curriculum and its importance for high quality early learning and school-age programs.
- Reviewing their current curriculum and assessment materials or considering the purchase of new materials.
- Seeking a set of resources for further reading and/or reference to improve curriculum implementation.

I. What is curriculum?

Curriculum is a description of the content or information that is going to be taught and the methods that are going to be used to teach that content. This content information is based on scientifically-researched information and reflects age, culture, and linguistically appropriate skills and developmental stages of the children in your program. While books, guides and the Learning Standards are powerful resources to help practitioners plan the content for children, curriculum decisions come from three sources: the children themselves, their families, and the teachers or adults with whom they interact.

Children: The children's interests, their developmental levels, their personalities or temperaments and their individual needs provide important information about the experiences that should be provided, both for a class or group and individually. This understanding of each child becomes the backbone of curriculum and defines the types of activities and experiences that are presented through intentional classroom planning. Practitioners who can capitalize on children's interests and strengths to develop new skills are helping to maximize children's opportunities to learn.

Families: Families' cultures and background provide valuable insight to a provider's curriculum. Every parent/guardian has hopes or aspirations for their children and their family. These goals, along with family values and customs, can influence the types of activities that are presented for children. Linguistic preferences and lifestyles are also important elements to consider. Together, they provide an important picture and element of curriculum.

Teachers: Teachers are facilitators of children's skill development. In addition to understanding children and their families, teachers' personal insight into their own cultural backgrounds and experiences, personality, interests and needs provide the third element that guides programs' curriculum design. Teachers who combine personal experiences with their knowledge of child development and their familiarity with their children and families build strong opportunities for learning and development. Teachers scaffold learning by building on children's prior knowledge to introduce new ideas and information.

When combined, children, teachers and families offer essential and valuable information that help to create the framework for curriculum. For this reason, no two providers' or classrooms' curricula will look the same. Just as we know that infant and toddler activities must differ from school-age experiences, so too should a rural classroom's content differ from an urban, and a half day preschool's curriculum may differ from a day long child care situation. While there are basic elements that will remain the same, such as Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood, the adaptations each teacher makes to accommodate the uniqueness of that classroom's clients makes curriculum fluid and individualized.

Curriculum, then, is dynamic. It will change from program to program and from classroom to classroom. It may also look different from year to year within the same teacher's classroom. As teachers practice good instructional practice, annual re-assessment of the curriculum resource materials will assure responsive, intentional teaching methods that will maximize children's learning.

On the other hand, a program's Curriculum Statement, the framework for classroom practice, will remain the same. This written curriculum statement describes the philosophy that guides curriculum decisions. It includes information about the development of instruction or teaching methods that considers teaching strategies, content and resource materials, clientele, the learning standards, etc. (*See Section II: How Do I Write a Curriculum Statement?*)

Other important components of curriculum include:

Environment: Programs must be careful to design a classroom environment that is stimulating, yet warm and welcoming - a positive setting that will set the stage for successful learning experiences. Environments should use materials and equipment that are in good repair, are culturally, linguistically and age appropriate, and that reflect opportunities for active engagement (or hands-on learning). The Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) and national accreditation standards such as NAEYC and National AfterSchool Association) offer good insight into the key elements for high quality classroom environments.

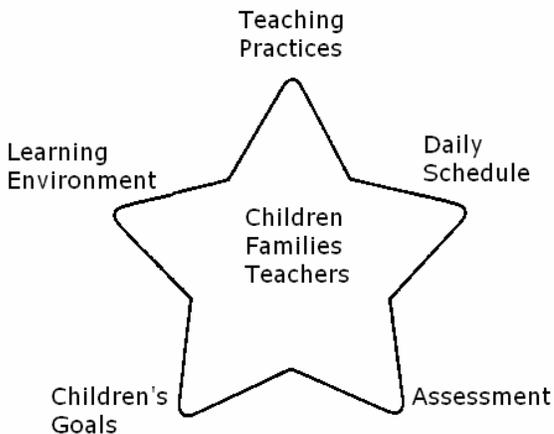
Daily Schedule: Children's everyday routines offer rich opportunities for learning. Routine activities such as hand washing and meals provide learning experiences that can promote a variety of skills. Other parts of a daily schedule should include opportunities for child-initiated exploration and engagement with materials and equipment that capitalize on children's interests and needs. Schedules should offer children a well-balanced complement of:

- active and quiet times,
- teacher and child-directed experiences
- indoor and outdoor activities
- individual, small group and large group experiences

A mental model of curriculum

Appropriate curriculum promotes a balance between planned experiences that help children progress toward defined goals, the experiences that emerge from children's interests and unexpected events that are "incorporated into the program in ways that comply with standards and curriculum goals."¹

An easy way to understand curriculum is to think about it with this mental model, the curriculum star. Utilizing a star theme, the points of a star outline the important "points" to remember when implementing good curriculum:



1. Learning environment:

Create a classroom environment that reflects the Key Learning Areas of the Learning Standards, is inviting and stimulating and keeps children involved in learning.

2. Teaching methods or instructional practices

Use child observations to make careful, intentional decisions about what children should learn, using the Learning Standards as a guide. Consider the resources needed to develop activities and experiences that motivate children to explore and stay actively engaged.

3. Daily Schedule:

Capitalize on both routines and planned experiences to build children's growth and development and learning opportunities through a balanced and varied schedule that is flexible, yet consistent.

4. Assessment:

Assess individual children, the classroom as a group, instructional practices, and the experiences that are provided to determine how children are learning or making progress in skill development. Determine adaptations or revisions that may need to occur to enhance learning.

5. Children's Goals:

Develop individualized goals for children that include experiences and activities that are challenging, yet achievable.

¹ National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) & the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE), *Position Statement: Early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation: Building an effective, accountable system in programs for children birth through age 8* (Washington DC: NAEYC. 2003, November), 8.

II. How Do I Write a Curriculum Statement?

The key to developing a responsive curriculum begins with your curriculum statement. Careful consideration about the delivery of content to children assures you and the families you serve that children will be provided with experiences that are unique to your center's classroom make-up. Your curriculum statement is a plan or description that includes information about:

- **Program philosophy:** How does your agency believe children learn and develop? How do your program and its practitioners support this learning?
- **Children's goals:** How do you develop goals for children? How are you individualizing for children or differentiating their learning? *Differentiated learning refers to the specific planning that occurs to ensure that each child's individual needs will be addressed throughout the program year.*
- **Enrollment:** What is the make-up of your program? What are the cultures of the children who attend your program? What are the ages of the children who attend? Are there unique life experiences that children are a part of? For example, are many children's parents teens who attend high school in a nearby location? Or, are the children from primarily low income families?
- **Content:** What are the experiences and activities that will be developed that will provide exploration of the key learning areas of development? Are there any areas that will be stressed more than others? How will they be integrated? As an example, an arts immersion program may stress creative arts, but will have specific strategies integrating other learning areas throughout their content delivery. Or, an afterschool gymnastics program may be stressing motor skills and health content while incorporating other areas of development and learning.
- **Teaching Strategies:** How will the content be delivered? What strategies will teachers and other program adults use to help children learn and grow? What materials will be provided that support children learning? What does your daily schedule look like? How will you use classroom routines to promote learning?
- **Environment:** What is the design of your classroom and/or center environment? How does your program environment promote best practices in learning and development? How will your environments reflect the program philosophy, the cultural make-up of your center and the content that you've determined is important for children?
- **Learning Standards:** What strategies have you put in place to ensure the content is reflective of all the Key Learning Areas as written in the learning standards? Pennsylvania has learning standards for infants and toddlers, pre-kindergarten (ages 3-5) and for kindergarten. A draft of first and second grade standards will be published in spring, 2008. Teachers in school-age classrooms should use the Pennsylvania Academic Standards as a reference. Each classroom's content should utilize the appropriate-aged standards for a responsive and well-designed curriculum.
- **Resources:** What curriculum tools or materials are you going to use to create strong classroom plans that are comprehensive in approach to reach all Pennsylvania's Key Learning Areas, rich in experiences, and culturally, linguistically, and age appropriate? These resources can include published curriculum tools or locally designed (homemade) materials or a combination thereof.
- **Professional Development:** How will your agency support teachers' ongoing learning so they can provide optimal learning experiences for the children you serve while enriching their background knowledge?
- **Parent Involvement:** What is your program philosophy for engaging parents in program activities and children's learning? How do you include parents in developing goals or delivering the content?
- **Assessment:** What are your program's strategies for assessing children's knowledge and acquisition of skills? How does your assessment plan coordinate with the content you are teaching and the resources you are using?
- **Inclusivity:** What strategies have you built to provide good learning opportunities for all children? How do you assure that all children are given rich experiences that are appropriate for their abilities and levels of development?

How can you develop a curriculum statement?

The most comprehensive statements are written through careful planning. Gather a team of teachers, parents, and early childhood experts in your community to help you write a plan that considers the elements described above. An over-arching statement, followed by strong descriptions of each aspect will spell out sure success when you are thinking about content resources and strategies for children's success.

III. How do I choose good curriculum resources?

Most early learning programs utilize a published curriculum resource such as Creative Curriculum, High Scope or Opening the World of Learning (OWL). These materials have used research and knowledge about age appropriate activities to develop ideas and information that can be adapted for the children in your program. Some of these resource materials are comprehensive and provide information about all aspects of children's skill development. Other curriculum resources are specific and focus on a specific cognitive area such as language and literacy or math.

Occasionally, early learning and school age programs have developed their own curriculum resources (you may hear this called "locally designed"). Locally designed materials that have used scientifically based research, are comprehensive, and align with the provider's curriculum statement can be equally responsive to children and have value.

PA Pre-K Counts and Keystone STARS require that every program utilize a curriculum that is aligned with Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood. Whether it is locally designed or a published resource, providers must demonstrate the way in which their materials are linked to the Standards, are comprehensive (focusing on all or most of the key learning areas of development) and age appropriate, using the Standards document that best matches the age of the children.

What do we mean by comprehensive?

Comprehensive curriculum resources are ones that provide information on all or most of the areas of children's development, including social, physical (motor), linguistic (language) and cognitive (intellectual). These areas are also described as Key Learning Areas in the Learning Standards and they provide a holistic view of children's growth and skill development.

How do I know if my curriculum resources are comprehensive?

Pennsylvania has worked with many publishers to match their curriculum resources with the Early Childhood Learning Standards. These crosswalks give us a clear picture about the learning areas and specific standards that are included in their materials. This information can be found at:

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/cwp/view.asp?a=316&q=124386&early_childhoodNav=|10698|&early_childhoodNav=|6356|#Assessments

Review these crosswalks to determine how closely aligned your materials are to Pennsylvania's Standards. If your investigation demonstrates that your curriculum resources are not comprehensive (or do not address all or most of the Standards' Key Learning Areas), you may need to supplement your current materials with additional resources. You may also choose to explore alternate curriculum resources that are more fully aligned with the whole of children's development and with Pennsylvania's learning standards. Remember, the resources you select should match your curriculum statement – your philosophy for curriculum implementation. If you need additional help with choosing curriculum resource materials, you can contact your Regional Key. *(See the flow chart at the end of this document for a description of the steps providers should take to align their curriculum materials).*

What if I use a locally designed curriculum resource?

Locally designed curriculum resources are acceptable as long as they are:

- Comprehensive and address all or most of the Key Learning Areas in the Early Learning Standards
- Reflective of your program's curriculum statement
- Connected to a child assessment tool that is valid and reliable and will provide information on children's outcomes

Programs that use locally-designed resource tools will need to demonstrate alignment to the Learning Standards as part of their STARS requirement. A resource document, "Curriculum Alignment Chart", is available at www.pakeys.org. This chart will help you link your curriculum materials with each of the Learning Standards.

Can I use the Learning Standards as my curriculum content?

The Standards themselves are a framework from which good curriculum (and assessment) decisions can be made. They provide the key learning areas on which your curriculum resources should focus and help you to understand age appropriate expectations for learning – what children should be able to learn and do. The Standards also help practitioners develop strategies for the development of goals and the design of classroom environments and materials. They promote strong curriculum statements or plans that are comprehensive in nature and include decisions about the children, families and teachers. However, they are not a curriculum.

Pennsylvania has learning standards for different age cohorts: Infant-Toddler, Pre-Kindergarten (ages 3-5) and Kindergarten. First and second grade standards are under development, with a draft document to be published in the spring, 2008. Each of your age groups' curriculum materials must be reviewed with the appropriate set of Standards. For example, your toddler classroom's materials should use the Infant-Toddler Standards as a framework for its curriculum. School-age programs should utilize the Third Grade Standards as an indicator for content areas.

IV. How do I link curriculum to assessment?

Assessment for children is a critical piece of the puzzle. Curriculum, standards and assessment join together to help you provide the best learning experiences for children. Practitioners should assess children's progress on the curriculum content that is presented to children. The information teachers gather about children's progress helps determine how to design the classroom, the kinds of experiences, and the content that will help children learn new skills. Regular (or ongoing) assessment gives you the information you need for lesson planning and helps you create stimulating learning environments for children. For more information on assessment, view Pennsylvania's report, Early Childhood Assessment, Birth to Age 8 at:

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/cwp/view.asp?a=316&q=124386&early_childhoodNav=|10698|&early_childhoodNav=|6356|#Assessments

What kind of assessment(s) should I be using?

Authentic or observation-based is the most useful assessment in early childhood programs. The Pennsylvania report, "Early Childhood Assessment for Children from Birth to Age 8" states:

"The ideal method of assessing children is through authentic, naturalistic observations that occur on an ongoing basis. The observations should occur during daily activities, teaching, and care routines to describe the development and learning of children. The assessment is not a one-time event since it is difficult to gather valid and reliable indicators of development from this type of information.² Methods of engaging in ongoing assessment include portfolios, observations, anecdotal notes, and checklists, to name a few. ...

...it is conducted serially over time to document progress and growth during the child's participation in high-quality care and education programs, including both preschool and elementary school. It is not primarily comparative, but rather individualized so that each child's previous performance is viewed as the reference point to make individual comparisons about progress and gains due to the program and/or curriculum being implemented (i.e., criterion-referenced)."

How does assessment inform children's outcomes?

PA Pre-K Counts providers, Early Intervention practitioners and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program grantees currently provide information on children's outcomes. Outcomes are the recorded results of a well-balanced review of children's skill development, based on teachers' assessments. Teachers use reliable and valid assessment instruments to guide their collection and documentation of children's progress for reporting.

² Ibid.

Should my assessment match up with my curriculum?

It is important to assess children on the information you are providing through assessment. As an example, an assessment of children's writing skills is inappropriate if there are no writing implements or writing opportunities in the classroom schedule. Use curriculum content resources and assessment measures that work together to provide rich opportunities for learning. Both the curriculum content resources and the assessments should be aligned with the Learning Standards for Early Childhood.

How do I find out more information about curriculum design and implementation, assessment or the learning standards?

Your Regional Key can be a valuable resource. STARS technical assistance staff can work with providers to understand the STARS standards about curriculum as well as how to design a curriculum statement and curriculum content.

The Regional Keys, along with the Office of Child Development and Early Learning/Pennsylvania Key continue to develop professional development events that focus on assessment, curriculum and standards. Visit the online calendar to determine the opportunities that are available in your region.

In addition, there are many excellent summaries that have been written by early childhood specialists to help us understand curriculum.

Resources on Curriculum, Assessment and Standards:

A collection of these resources can be found on PDE's website at:

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/cwp/view.asp?a=316&q=124386&early_childhoodNav=|10698|&early_childhoodNav=|6356|#Curriculum

(Hold down the "Control" key on your computer while you click your mouse over the address above).

Additional resources on curriculum and assessment can be found on the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) website: www.naeyc.org/ece/.

Books to read to learn more include:

Basics of Assessment: A Primer for Early Childhood Professionals by Oralie McAfee, Deborah J Leong and Elena Bodrova

Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction to Teachers of Children 3 to 6 by Carol Copple, Ph.D. and Sue Bredekamp, Ph.D.

Educating and Caring for Very Young Children: The Infant/Toddler Curriculum by Doris Bergen, Rebecca Reit, and Louis Torelli

Emergent Curriculum by Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo

The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning by Ann S. Epstein

Making Early Learning Standards Come Alive by Gayle Gronlund

Reaching Potentials, Volumes 1 and 2: Transforming Early Childhood Curriculum and Assessment, Sue Bredekamp and Teresa Rosegrant, editors

Spotlight on Young Children and Assessment by Derry Koralek

Windows on Learning by Judy Harris Helm, Sallee Beneke and Kathy Steinheimer

Resources for School-Age Programs:

C.S. Mott Foundation Committee on After-School Research and Practice. Moving Towards Success: Framework for After-School Programs. Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group, 2005.

http://www.publicengagement.com/Framework/images/framework_61505.pdf

- McElvain, Carol K., Judith G. Caplan, Krista C. Diedrich, Seth Kaufman, and Katie E. Walter. Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective Afterschool Programs. 3rd ed. Includes DVD and workbook. Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates. <http://www.beyondthebell.org/>
- National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning. "Afterschool training toolkit: Building quality enrichment activities." Web page, Available at <http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/>
- National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning. "Curriculum database." Web page, Available at <http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/>
- Newman, Roberta. Creating Portfolios with Kids in Out-of-School Programs: IDEAS for Communicating with Parents and Enhancing Program Quality. Cape Charles, VA: Newroads Media, 2005.
- The National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Links to Learning: A Curriculum Planning Guide for After-School Programs. Nashville: TN: School-Age NOTES, 2005. <http://www.schoolagenotes.com>

I use a published curriculum resource that has been crosswalked to the Early Learning Standards



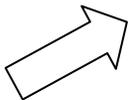
The crosswalk demonstrates alignment with most or all of the Learning Standards



You have fulfilled the Keystone STARS requirement for level 3.

**Curriculum Alignment:
Meeting the Keystone STARS requirement**

I use a published curriculum resource that has not been crosswalked to the Early Learning Standards



Use the "Crosswalk Document" to align the materials with The Learning Standards



The crosswalk demonstrates alignment with most or all of the Learning Standards



You have fulfilled the Keystone STARS requirement for level 3.



The crosswalk demonstrates alignment with few or some of the Learning Standards



Select supplementary or new curriculum content materials that demonstrate alignment with most or all standards.



You have fulfilled the Keystone STARS requirement for level 3.

I use a locally-designed curriculum resource



I have crosswalked this to the Learning Standards using the "Crosswalk Alignment"



The crosswalk demonstrates alignment with most or all of the learning Standards



You have fulfilled the Keystone STARS requirement for level 3.



The crosswalk demonstrates alignment with few or some of the Learning Standards



Select supplementary or new curriculum content materials that demonstrate your curriculum's alignment with most or all of the learning standards.



You have fulfilled the Keystone STARS requirement for level 3.