



Getting Ready: Curriculum Elements for Early Learning

Experts in early care and education agree that a solid curriculum is an essential ingredient in the formula for a successful early learning program. A curriculum is an intentional plan for stimulating experiences and materials to help children learn and develop. While the word “curriculum” may bring to mind a program that focuses entirely on intellectual development, in this context the term applies to a more holistic approach to development that includes physical, social, emotional and intellectual components, with a strong emphasis on language growth. Because brain development and social-emotional progress are happening at such astonishing rates in the first five years, the elements of a good early learning program support and enhance this multi-faceted growth.

This brief examines relevant research on curriculum, components of well-designed curriculum, and implications for public policy in Wisconsin.

Relevant Research

Brain research

Research on brain development confirms that the foundation for intellect, personality and skills are formed by age five. A strong foundation sets the stage for success, while a poor foundation may leave a child with deficits that are very difficult to overcome.

“...emotional well-being, social competence, and emerging cognitive abilities are highly inter-related, and together they are the bricks and mortar that comprise the foundation for human development.”

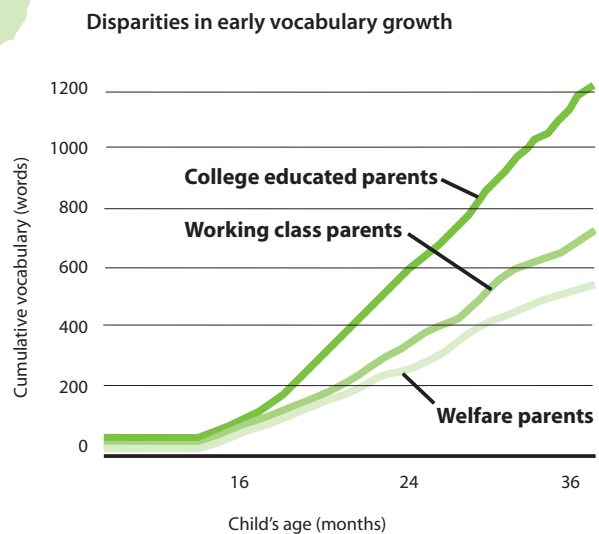
—Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

For optimal development, all children need nurturing, responsive caregivers that provide a language-rich environment. For instance, the foundation and initial vocabu-

lary for language development is formed in the first three years. Research has found dramatic differences in vocabulary growth which tends to lead to disparities in later language, reading and school achievement.

The graph below illustrates differences found in children from different socio-economic backgrounds.¹ In general, children who grow up in homes with high income and high parent education levels have more than twice the expressive vocabulary of children raised in homes with low socioeconomic status.

No matter whether children are at home with their parents, in the care of relatives and friends, in foster care, or in early care and education programs, research confirms that interactions with caregivers or teachers are crucial to their development. With so many children now spending significant time in child care and preschool settings, it is more important than ever that those settings include an intentional, well-planned approach to early learning and development to ensure optimal growth.





Research Findings Relevant to Program Quality

The National Research Council, which reviewed several decades of research about early development, identified several key findings related to the features of quality programs for young children, including the following:

- Cognitive, social-emotional and physical development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth, all requiring active attention in the preschool years.
- Responsive interpersonal relationships with teachers nurture young children's dispositions to learn and their emerging abilities.
- Children who attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling.
- More extensive language development, such as rich vocabulary and listening comprehension, is related to early literacy learning.

“Children who attended center-based preschool arrive at kindergarten with higher achievement, providing the potential to reduce inequality by the time students reach kindergarten.”

—Economic Policy Institute, *Inequality at the Starting Gate*, 2002.

Curriculum in Wisconsin

While only minimal data are available about the extent to which Wisconsin early childhood program include well-designed curriculum, it is likely that practices vary dramatically, and that a large percentage of child care and preschool programs do not follow a thorough early learning curriculum.

Curriculum Requirements

Curriculum requirements range widely across early care and education settings.

- **Head Start and Early Head Start** both have extensive curriculum requirements. Programs must follow a curriculum consistent with Head Start federal performance standards, including guidelines on social and emotional development, creative expression, language development, literacy, and physical development.
- **Four-year-old kindergarten** curriculum is deter-

mined at the local school district level, with schools required to provide an instructional program based on learning standards. Guidance from the Department of Public Instruction emphasizes learning by doing and exploration in an integrated curriculum, with learning centers and thematic approaches.

- **Children with disabilities** served through the special education program in public school for children ages 3-5 and through the Birth to 3 Intervention Program have individualized plans to meet their specific needs for development.

- **Child care centers** are required to have a *written* program of activities suitable for children's development levels, including promotion of communication skills, social interaction, creative expression and intellectual growth, but a curriculum is not required.

- **Family child care programs**, both licensed and certified, are required to have a program of learning and activities to promote language development, creativity, and social skills, but a curriculum is not required.

It appears that the requirements are lowest in the child care sector, which is made up almost entirely of private entities operating in a free market.

Wisconsin Child Care Study

In 2001 the Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership published a study of Wisconsin child care centers that received Wisconsin Shares subsidies for low-income children. The study found that most programs did not meet good or excellent standards, either for infants and toddlers or for 3- to 4-year-olds.² While most programs appeared to be safe and to meet the basic needs of children, only 15 percent met standards that indicated high-quality early learning opportunities for children.

A follow-up survey by the researchers indicated that only a small percentage (less than 20 percent) of child care centers used a formal curriculum. The most frequently mentioned curricula were Creative Curriculum, High/Scope, and Whole Child. Some programs reported piecing together a program approach by drawing from multiple sources.

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards

Wisconsin has developed a tool that is helping programs decide on the appropriate curriculum to use. The tool is Wisconsin's Model Early Learning Standards, which specify developmental expectations for children from birth through entrance to first grade.³ The standards are not a curriculum. Rather, they focus on what children should be able to do—an expectation level—in five developmental domains:



- Health and physical development
- Social and emotional development
- Language development and communication
- Approaches to learning
- Cognition and general knowledge

The standards were designed to align with Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for students in kindergarten through grade twelve.

These early learning standards are research-based, and they can provide a roadmap for appropriate curricula. The 2008 edition has extended the standards to children under age 3, and includes sample behaviors of children and sample strategies for adults. Training on the model early learning standards continues across the state.

The standards are the *what*—what are the developmental expectations for children birth to 5. Curriculum addresses the *how*—how early childhood programs can help children meet those expectations.

The Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners website provides information on what curricula are aligned with the standards, and a wealth of other information about the standards.⁴ So far the website includes the following curricula that have been assessed for alignment with the standards and assessment tools: Creative Curriculum, High Reach Learning Preschool Curriculum, High/Scope Preschool Child Observation Record, New Portage Guide, and Preschool First.

Other Efforts Related to Curriculum Standards

Three other efforts in Wisconsin have influenced curriculum and classroom environment:

1. NAEYC Curriculum Standards: The National Association for the Education of Young Children has set high-quality standards for early childhood education programs for over 20 years. The standards emphasize active

learning, design of the environment, opportunities for creative expression, and self-initiated learning.⁵ To become NAEYC accredited, programs must meet an extensive range of quality criteria. As of July 2008, 142 Wisconsin programs were accredited, less than 6 percent of Wisconsin's 2,500 licensed child care centers.⁶



2. City of Madison Accreditation: In the 1970s the City of Madison established quality standards for child care programs, and began providing on-site consultation and monitoring to help programs meet and maintain the standards. Today, Madison has standards, including curriculum, that are similar but less detailed than those of NAEYC, but which have met the individual needs of early childhood care and education programs in the community. The strength of Madison's approach is the ongoing on-site consultation, training, and grants. As of July 2008, 149 child care center and family child care programs were city accredited.⁷

3. Environmental Rating Scales: Researchers have developed environmental rating scales that assess early care and education environments. While these rating scales address health and safety and other program dimensions, they include a particular focus on learning environment. These rating scales have been used extensively across the state as a way to help programs improve their early learning materials and practices.

Implications for Wisconsin Public Policy

Several public policy options could help enhance early learning curriculum in Wisconsin child care and early education programs.

1. Establish quality benchmarks that include curriculum standards.

For many programs, the only high-quality standards they are aware of are NAEYC standards, which often seem out of reach. Wisconsin could set a single or multiple quality benchmarks to strive for that are higher than basic regulation levels, but not as high as national accreditation levels. For instance, quality criteria could recommend that teachers be trained in the Model Early Learning Standards and that the curriculum they use be aligned with those standards. Setting benchmarks may inspire programs to improve, and could also result in the involvement of the private sector to help programs in their community reach those benchmarks. The quality rating system proposed, but rejected, in recent budgets is a way to set quality benchmarks for early care and education.

2. Resources to help programs improve curriculum

Many early childhood programs want to improve, but lack resources or assistance. A combination of staff training, on-site consultation, and fiscal incentives or grants can help programs develop effective early learning programs. The City of Madison's experience demonstrates that programs can improve their early learning practices with intensive consultation and other supports. Fiscal incentives, such as



tiered reimbursement rates through the Wisconsin Shares child care program, could encourage programs to improve curriculum and other quality elements of their programs. Paying higher rates for higher quality makes sense.

3. Higher curriculum standards through regulation

Most regulation focuses primarily on health and safety. Given what we now know about the importance of early development, some standards for early learning curriculum and activities could be added to licensing and certification rules.

4. Raise requirements related to public funding

Programs that receive public reimbursement like Wisconsin Shares child care funds could be required to meet certain early learning curriculum benchmarks as a condition of funding. Currently, programs need only be licensed or certified to be eligible for public child care funding. As some other states do, Wisconsin could require that basic early learning curriculum elements be implemented as a condition of program eligibility.

Conclusion

The body of research on the benefits of early learning is impressive. After reviewing the research, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child concluded that there is compelling evidence for investing in early education, particularly where there are serious risk factors.⁸

The public policy question is how Wisconsin will respond to the scientific evidence and to the growing concerns about families and children. With a new Department of Children and Families established, this may be the time for Wisconsin to review its current investments in early education and to design a more coherent approach to early care and education services for children and families.



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Endnotes

¹ Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

² Riley, D.A., Roach, M.A., Adams, D.B., and Edie, D. (2001). Wisconsin Child care Research Partnership Issue Brief #6. *Quality of subsidized child care in Wisconsin*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension. Website:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/wccrp/pdfs/brief6.pdf>

³ *Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards*. (2008) website: http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/EarlyLS_docs.htm

⁴ Website: <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/EarlyLS.htm>

⁵ National Association for the Education of Young Children, (2005). *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria*. Website: <http://www.naeyc.org/academy/standards/>

⁶ NAEYC website: <http://www.naeyc.org/academy/search/>

⁷ Information from Jolene Ibeling, City of Madison. E-mail communication

⁸ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2007). *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children*. Website: <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

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