

# CURRICULUM

## Introduction

Curriculum encompasses the full range of the child's experience at school. The term *curriculum model* refers to an educational system that combines theory with practice. A curriculum model has a theory and knowledge base that reflects a philosophical orientation and is supported by child development research and educational evaluation. Curriculum models are essential in determining program content, training, and supervising staff to implement high-quality programs. Curriculum models include the skills, knowledge and concepts to be supported, and the plans for learning experiences through which progress occurs. The practical application of a curriculum model includes guidelines on how to:

- Set up the physical environment;
- Make decisions about learning objectives as well as specific methods to accomplish objectives that support specific child interests and/or emergent curriculum;
- Structure activities that are responsive to a variety of ability levels and populations, such as dual language learners and children with Individualized Education Plans;
- Interact with children and their families; and
- Support staff members in their initial training and ongoing implementation of the program.

Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) subrecipients implement a comprehensive, child-focused, constructivist curriculum model for all enrolled children, as is widely espoused for preschool and supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.<sup>1</sup> In a constructivist curriculum model, there is an appropriate balance of child-initiated activities and adult-guided active learning. Throughout each classroom session, teaching teams (Lead and Associate Teachers) intentionally interact with children to build on their understandings and enhance learning. Play and peer-to-peer interaction are vital to provide children with opportunities to engage in abstract thinking, develop self-regulation skills, problem-solving and oral language skills. GSRP subrecipients reflect the value of play in a written philosophy statement, the comprehensive curriculum, and teacher-parent communication. Teaching teams must have training in the curriculum from a certified trainer of the curriculum to implement an appropriate curriculum.

Regardless of which approvable curriculum is chosen, the GSRP indoor physical space is organized into clearly defined interest areas that can be recognized by the children and have enough space for several children to play at once. GSRP classrooms do not have a large portion of the room reserved for whole group instruction and/or a cluster of tables for group activities such as journaling, penmanship, worksheets. Classroom interest areas and materials are labeled and arranged to support the 'find-use-return' cycle. Teachers and children use labels of many types (tracings, photographs, actual objects, words). Materials in all areas are plentiful and carefully selected, predominately open-ended and include many real/sensory items versus toy/plastic models. Additionally, materials which reflect

the lives of enrolled families and the community are integrated into classroom activities. A variety of individual and project work of the children in the classroom is displayed at the child's level; only essential adult-made/commercial displays are present.

Together, learner-centered and learner-driven play = playful learning. Adult-initiated GSRP classroom activities include large-, small group and transition times. During these portions of the daily routine, adults select concepts, activities and materials based on children's strengths and interests. Adults plan possible scaffolding strategies for children at emergent, middle and later developmental stages. Adults comment on what children are doing/saying, imitate and add to children's actions, use materials with children and support children as leaders. Children are engaged as active, participatory learners during adult-initiated activities. Children contribute their own ideas and are involved at their own developmental levels. Children have the highest level of control during uninterrupted child-initiated play, where children make many choices about where and how to use materials and carry out their activities. In this portion of the day, adults are partners in children's play; they observe and listen before entering play, assume roles as suggested by children, follow children's cues about content and direction, imitate children, encourage children to talk about what they are doing, use children's words and comment specifically on children's activities.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) does not identify one 'best' curriculum model, but rather supports preschool curriculum models that meet specific criteria. Approved curriculum models must align with the Michigan [Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten](#) (ECSQ-PK), ensuring horizontal alignment among early learning expectations and preschool program standards, practice and assessment, as well as ensuring vertical alignment within Michigan's early childhood and education system and with kindergarten through twelfth grade standards.

## Selecting Curriculum

It is important when selecting a curriculum model from those approvable for use in GSRP, not only to refer to the program's student population and philosophy, but to ensure alignment with the early learning expectations and program standards of the ECSQ-PK. The following questions can serve as a tool for guiding curriculum selection:

- Is the curriculum model research-based and research-validated? Are elements of the curriculum clearly based on research about the development of young children? Has research demonstrated the effectiveness of the curriculum model in improving comprehensive outcomes or results for children?
- What domains are included? Are there learning experiences and activities in all areas of development outlined in the ECSQ-PK? Does the methodology promote important development in "approaches to learning" such as initiative, persistence, and imagination?
- Does the curriculum include guidelines on setting up the indoor and outdoor learning environments? Are materials available throughout the learning

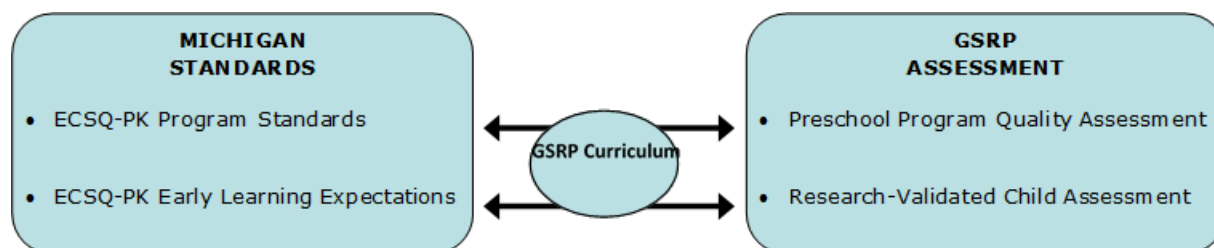
environment to support systematic child observation to assess what children know and can do?

- Is the curriculum child-focused, supporting emergent and meaningful curriculum for currently enrolled children? Does the curriculum promote active, participatory learning through all portions of the daily schedule?
- Are the materials for children's use appropriate? Does the curriculum model include or promote many 'real' items in place of 'toy replicas?' Are the materials appropriate for the age and level of development of four-year-old children, including children with special needs and those who may be more advanced in certain areas? Are the materials free of cultural bias? Do the materials reflect the interests and home cultures of enrolled children and the local community? Do the materials represent a balance of the need for teacher planning and child initiation of learning activities?
- Is there a balance of teacher-planned and child-initiated activities? Does the daily routine support a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities? Does the curriculum model encourage teachers to plan topics of investigation based on the interests of the children?
- Is there evidence that authentic assessment (see [Child Assessment](#) section) for instructional purposes is integral to implementation of the curriculum model? Is there evidence that family engagement is valued and that interaction with families is focused on partnership in their child's development?
- Are the resources for teaching staff sufficient and appropriate? Is there adequate explanatory material on how to make decisions about learning objectives as well as specific methods to accomplish objectives? Is there adequate explanatory material to structure activities that are responsive to a variety of ability levels and populations, such as dual language learners and children with Individualized Education Plans?
- Do the authors or publishers of the curriculum model offer professional learning opportunities to support staff members in their initial training and ongoing, full implementation of the model?
- Horizontal Alignment: Has the publisher provided horizontal alignment with the early learning expectations and program standards of Michigan's ECSQ-PK? Are the contents of ECSQ-PK, curriculum model, and child assessments aligned?

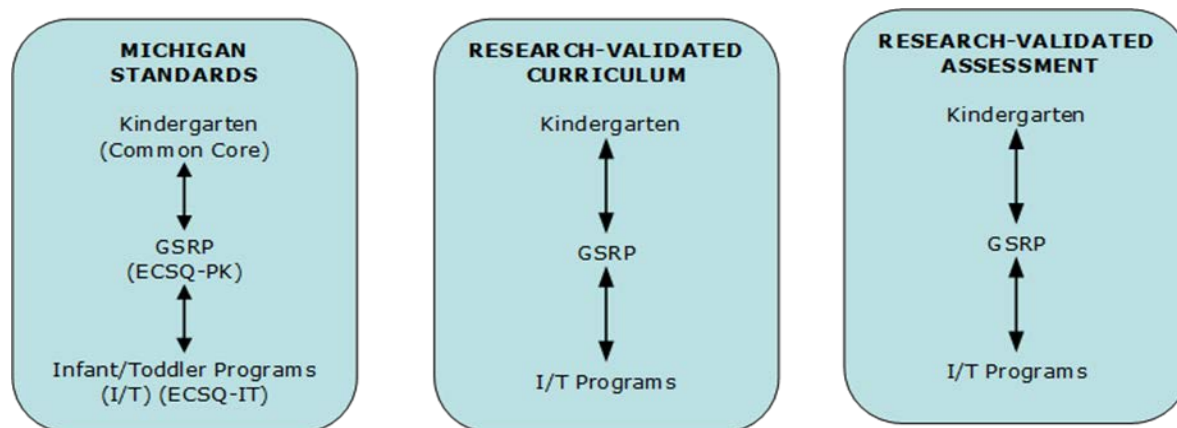
## Alignment

Early care and education alignment focuses on the content and format of children's experiences across settings, through age eight. Educators are concerned with both horizontal and vertical alignment.

Horizontal alignment refers to the agreement among standards, curriculum and assessment within a given age or grade level. This alignment defines expectations for children, families, and teachers and ensures that child assessment reflects state-level early learning expectations. Horizontal alignment of program standards and program assessment allows program administrators to measure the quality of the program based on the standards and research-validated curriculum. For GSRP, the research-validated curriculum model, developmental screening and authentic/comprehensive child assessment align with the ECSQ-PK. In kindergarten, there should be alignment among the Michigan curriculum standards for kindergarten, the local kindergarten curriculum and kindergarten assessments.



Vertical alignment refers to the agreement of the standards, curriculum, and assessments between age or grade levels. This ensures consistent expectations and quality from year-to-year for children, families, teachers, and administrators. MDE vertically aligned the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Infant and Toddler Programs*, the ECSQ-PK, and the kindergarten curriculum standards. Additionally, some research-validated early childhood curriculum-and child assessments have both infant-toddler and prekindergarten versions.



## Commonly Used Curriculum Models Validated by Research

GSRP grantees are required to use a research-validated curriculum model that aligns with the ECSQ-PK. The following curricula are currently allowed in GSRP classrooms. Descriptions below are adapted from linked websites.

### **Tools of the Mind:**

Tools of The Mind combines a comprehensive early childhood curriculum with an innovative approach to teacher professional development to transform early childhood teaching and learning, and improve child outcomes. Tools instructional interactions are designed to help teachers be more effective in identifying teachable moments, assessing children's development and differentiating instruction. Teachers focus on helping children become intentional and reflective learners. In a Tools preschool classroom, an adaptable play theme unifies the room. Children engage in activities designed to support the development of literacy, math and science skills at the same time as self-regulation and executive functions skills are developed. Most learning takes place in small groups and partnered activities, engaging children in interacting with one another to learn, build social relationships and create a positive classroom culture.

### **Reggio Emilia:**

Distinctive traits of the Reggio Emilia approach include collegial and relational-based provocative experiences, the importance of environments and spaces, intense co-participation of families, affirmation of competencies in children and adults, educational documentation, listening and intentional, flexible planning for children. Guiding principles include:

- A strong and optimistic image of the child who is born with many resources and extraordinary potentials.
- Participation values and fosters dialogue and the sense of belonging to a community.
- The flow of quality information via documentation introduces parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes expectations.
- Research represents one of the essential dimensions of life of children and adults, a knowledge-building tension that must be recognized and valued.

### **Project Approach:**

The Project Approach refers to a set of teaching strategies that enable teachers to guide students through in-depth studies of real-world topics. Projects have a complex but flexible framework within which teaching and learning are seen as interactive processes. When teachers implement the Approach successfully, students feel highly motivated and actively involved in their own learning, leading them to produce high-quality work and to grow as individuals and collaborators. A study may be carried out with an entire class or with small groups of students. Projects typically do not constitute the whole educational program; teachers use them alongside systematic instruction and as a means of achieving curricular goals.

### **Montessori:**

The Montessori curriculum focuses on five areas: practical life, sensory awareness education, language arts, mathematics and geometry, and cultural subjects. Components necessary for a program to be considered authentically Montessori include multiage groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activity. In addition, a full complement of specially designed Montessori learning materials are meticulously arranged in an aesthetically pleasing environment. The classroom is prepared by the teacher to encourage independence, freedom within limits, and a sense of order.

### **HighScope:**

The HighScope Preschool Curriculum is based on the principles of active learning and support of a child's positive interactions with adults and peers. The curriculum is a comprehensive model that addresses all areas of development through eight content areas and 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs). Each KDI is connected to and reinforced by scaffolding strategies to support and gently extend children's learning. While learning in content areas prepares children for later schooling, HighScope features methods that promote independence, curiosity, decision making, cooperation, persistence, creativity, and problem solving in young children. The website offers [alignment](#) between the curriculum and Michigan's ECSQ-PK.

### **Creative Curriculum:**

Creative Curriculum helps teachers create a high-quality learning environment and build a thorough understanding of best practices. Daily Resources help teachers plan and manage every moment of their day. Through studies, which are hands-on, project-based investigations, The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool helps teachers build children's confidence, creativity and critical thinking skills, and promote positive outcomes.

### **Connect4Learning**

Connect4Learning (C4L) is a research-based curriculum that is comprised of six units and 32 weeks of learning centers and lessons. It aims to synthesize research-based approaches in four domains of learning: mathematics, science, literacy, and social-emotional development. Connect4Learning uses a project-based approach, in which children work toward a larger goal, such as playing a coral-reef scavenger hunt or converting their classroom into a museum throughout a curriculum unit. Each lesson can be tailored to fit the schedule and requirements of any classroom setting. Observation opportunities and individualized instruction strategies are built into the curriculum.

## **Supplementing a Comprehensive Curriculum**

When data reveal that many children are presenting differently than expected in any developmental domain, the next course of action is always to ensure staff have focused professional development in the domain in question. The professional development must have strong connections to the comprehensive curriculum and the ongoing child assessment tool. The ECS supports staff as skills are strengthened, practiced, and subsequent data are collected on child development. If, after focused staff support, data show many children are still not making expected developmental gains, a process to approve supplemental curriculum may be implemented.

This usually occurs in one of two ways. The subrecipient may want to utilize resources from a supplemental curriculum or the program may request permission to fully implement a supplemental curriculum. In either case, the GSRP model must be maintained (comprehensive curriculum, daily routine, authentic ongoing assessment, class-size and ratio, etc.).

Using supplemental curriculum as resources in the classroom means occasionally choosing materials (books, songs, poems, manipulatives) from the supplemental for

use within the daily routine (at large or small group, in the reading area). In this case, the ECS and ISD must ensure that the resources and teaching practices align with the comprehensive curriculum and grant guidance. In other words, using the materials of a supplemental curriculum as an occasional resource means that it is not regularly reflected on lesson plans. The following chart and questions can assist ISDs to determine if a program is using a supplemental curriculum or using materials (books, songs, poems, manipulatives, activities) as a resource.

Supplemental Curriculum	Curricular Resource
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent, frequent use of materials and/or activities</li> <li>• Daily routine modified to include activities</li> <li>• Reflected on the daily lesson plan</li> <li>• Materials or activities are done in order and/or in total</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional use of materials (books, songs, poems, manipulatives) and/or activities</li> <li>• Incorporated into a daily routine that meets grant expectations</li> <li>• Not regularly reflected on lesson plans</li> <li>• Activities and/or materials are chosen based on strengths, needs, or interests of children</li> </ul>

If the answer to any of these is yes, the program is likely implementing a supplemental curriculum and must go through the approval process described below.

1. Are the activities and/or materials used by teachers with children on a consistent schedule, i.e. every day or more than once per week?
2. Has the daily routine been modified to include time for the use of the activities and/or materials?
3. Are activities and/or materials reflected regularly on the lesson plan?
4. Has the lesson plan format been modified to include use of the activities and/or materials?
5. Are the materials and/or activities used or completed in a specified order?
6. Is there an expectation that all of the activities will be completed?

If use of supplemental curricula strategies/resources go beyond minor episodic use to augment the comprehensive curriculum, then a tiered approach to approve supplemental curriculum may be implemented. A process for preliminary ISD approval of the supplemental curriculum must be completed. A subrecipient using or planning to use a supplemental curriculum must make a formal request to the ISD; the Great Start Collaborative School Readiness Advisory Committee is an appropriate decision-making body for decisions on supplemental curriculum. To be considered for approval, the request must utilize the applicable *GSRP Supplemental Curriculum Request Form*, available as a [resource](#) to this section of the manual. It includes features such as:

- Relevant baseline child assessment and program quality data indicating a need for a supplemental curriculum. Approvable program quality data will document that the comprehensive curriculum is implemented at a high-



quality level for all children and that grant expectations are met related to daily routine and partnership with parents on child development.

Approvable child assessment data will originate from use of the comprehensive and authentic child assessment tool;

- Description of focused training, coaching, subsequent child outcome data, and data analysis expressing educated opinion on why children are still not making expected developmental gains;
- Questions on the process for selecting a curriculum;
- How the requested supplemental curriculum will fit into the typical GSRP classroom daily routine, how it aligns with the GSRP philosophy on active learning and play; and
- An explanation, if the supplemental being requested is not related to the comprehensive curriculum used.

Decisions on supplemental curriculum are reported annually to MDE. Per P.A. 108 of 2017, "If the department objects to the use of a supplemental curriculum approved by an Intermediate School District, the Superintendent of Public Instruction shall establish a review committee independent of the department. The review committee shall meet within 60 days of the department registering its objection in writing and provide a final determination of the validity of the objection within 60 days of the review committee's first meeting".

If the department objection is upheld, the ISD may choose to eliminate use of the supplemental and refocus teaching teams in related curriculum areas, per grant guidance above. In this instance, the ISD may additionally indicate any plans to move forward with data collection in order to justify the use of a supplemental curriculum in the future. Alternately, the ISD may choose to reduce use of the supplemental to a resource as earlier described and refocus teaching teams on specific areas of the comprehensive curriculum. In all instances, ECSs are intimately involved in coaching and mentoring for high-quality foundational curriculum implementation.