Early Learning Curriculum & Assessment

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) does not endorse specific curricula for use in Preschool for All (PFA) classrooms. However, programs must consider the following criteria when selecting a curriculum:

- Alignment with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDs)
- Inclusion of content to be taught with intentionality and integration
- Provision for child initiation and engagement
- Use of content based on research of how young children learn
- Provision for parent involvement through meaningful communication with families
- Alignment with an authentic assessment tool that is ongoing and comprehensive
- Consideration of the child’s linguistic and cultural background
- Consideration of the range of experience and qualifications of early childhood teachers
- Consideration of a wide range of children’s abilities, including those of children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Provision of research evidence of the effectiveness of the curriculum

An applicant’s proposal will not be rejected solely based on the curriculum included; however, ISBE must determine that a curriculum is appropriate (based on the criteria above) before it will permit any project to use state funds for such curriculum.

Curricula that have been reviewed and are aligned to the Illinois Early Learning Guidelines for Children Birth to Age Three Years and the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards for Preschool 3 years old to Kindergarten Enrollment Age may be found at the ExceleRate website. Even though a curriculum is determined to be aligned with the Illinois Early Learning Guidelines and/or the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, it may not meet all criteria as set forth by PFA guidelines.

Best Practices for the PFA Classroom

- Provides for interactive/hands-on learning that promotes the child’s construction of learning
- Allows for concept learning and skill development in an integrated and natural way
- Allows for active learning and permits children to frequently make their own meaningful choices
- Provides opportunities to explore and inquire instead of focusing on “right” answers or “right” ways to complete a task
- Promotes the development of higher-order abilities, such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and decision making
- Promotes and encourages social interaction among children and adults
- Builds and elaborates on children’s current knowledge and abilities
- Encourages development of positive feelings and dispositions toward learning while leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills
- Provides activities that promote feelings of success, competence, and enjoyment of learning
- Utilizes a variety of learning experiences, such as interest areas furnished with materials based on program goals and children’s interests and their abilities, as well as small group and large group activities
- PFA staff is actively involved in implementing all aspects of the curriculum
- Skills are embedded in naturalistic environments using ideas from the children or contributions by the teacher

Curriculum components not appropriate for a PFA classroom include, but are not limited to:

- Use of workbooks, worksheets, flashcards, and/or other materials that do not engage children’s interests
- Limited materials, used day after day, with few choices and little variety in materials and activities
• Use of curriculum without alignment to a research-based assessment tool that informs instruction to meet individual and group needs

Field Trips
PFA programs may choose to include educationally appropriate, local field trips into regular curriculum to enhance the classroom learning experience. All children in the program should be able to participate and the activities should be affordable for parents, should they want to replicate the trip. The following questions should be considered when planning field trips:

• Is the field trip destination within a reasonable distance from the program site or community?
• Does the activity support and enhance the parent-child relationship?
• Does the activity offer an opportunity for enhancing language and developing and supporting literacy?
• Does the activity provide an experience that is affordable and repeatable by parents outside the program?
• Does the activity offer the opportunity for a structured agenda to support budgetary and fiscal requirements?

Assessment
Characteristics of Authentic Assessment

• Is ongoing and a natural part of what teachers do
• Observes all areas of a child’s growth and development over time
• Occurs in a naturalistic environment
• Uses information from a variety of sources
• Helps teachers plan, measure progress, work with families, and individualize curriculum

The following excerpt is taken from *Authentic Assessment and Early Childhood Education—an Update and Resources*, a publication of the ISBE Early Childhood Education Division.

Preschool or early childhood assessment can be seen in the context of the larger push for accountability. It can indicate which skills children in a particular preschool classroom or program have that are needed for the academics associated with elementary education beginning in first grade. State Early Learning Standards are partly an attempt to put early childhood learning on a continuum that leads to higher and different expectations of achievement. The use of formal research-based student assessment is a requirement for funding of all state-supported Preschool for All and Early Childhood Special Education programs.

Early childhood assessment cannot follow the standardized testing or student assessment model that may be appropriate for higher grade levels. Students who are 3 to 5 years of age are developing rapidly, at individual paces, and with different interests. It is important to document their successes and their progress, rather than their failures or lack of progress, as they grow. Some formal testing, of course, is appropriate for diagnostic purposes to prepare for special interventions that may be needed to deal with physical, psychological, or behavioral circumstances. Evaluation for diagnostic or special education eligibility purposes should be distinguished from “authentic assessment.” Young students learn through play; authentic assessment aims to document a student’s development and progress in a way that is non-intrusive and captures how a student uses his or her skills while engaging with materials, teachers, parents, and peers. Authentic assessment involves the teacher as an observer and a researcher – working from a background of solid education and specialized training, collecting data over time, selecting and organizing evidence (the portfolio), preparing a hypothesis that can be tested (the curriculum), sharing conclusions with parents and others to refine what will work best in guiding a student to develop to his or her potential, and developing lesson plans that will help students individually progress toward meeting learning expectations.
John Dewey, the progressive educational reformer who spent an important part of his career in Illinois more than one hundred years ago, recognized that education strikes a balance between imparting necessary knowledge and letting students pursue their own learning interests as individuals. He would have been fascinated by the modern trend in early childhood education that recognizes a child at play as a child who is learning, the preschool teacher as guide and facilitator rather than dispenser of information, and the use of authentic assessment as an appropriate way to document development and guide a student’s education.

**Portfolios**

Portfolios that document student progress over time are a required component of all PFA programs. Collections contained in the portfolio should be representative of the work done by the student illustrating his/her progress over time. Anyone who works with the student should contribute to collecting documentation. In many early childhood programs, younger students spend time working on tasks that are not easily saved for future reference. For example, building with blocks can be an involved activity that a child might pursue with vigor. Progress in the student’s ability to work with blocks can be documented over time by taking photographs of the various structures built. A collection is then available for future reference and can serve as a topic of discussion with the family and the student.

A portfolio for each child contains:

- A research-based developmental checklist that measures progress over time with three reporting periods
- Individualized collections such as work samples, photos, anecdotal notes, etc. that reflect the IELDS
  - FY 16 portfolios reflect, at a minimum, two benchmarks from the language arts, math, social-emotional, and English Language Learning (ELL) (if applicable) domains of the IELDS per reporting period
  - FY 17 portfolios reflect, at a minimum, two benchmarks from the language arts, math, social-emotional, science, physical, and ELL (if applicable) domains of the IELDS per reporting period
  - FY 18 portfolios reflect, at a minimum, two benchmarks from the language arts, math, social-emotional, science, social studies, physical, fine arts, and ELL (if applicable) domains of the IELDS per reporting period
- Narrative summary reports used to share assessment information with parents/guardians
  - Should be factual, brief, and relevant
  - Contain name, date collected, domain, and IELDS objective or the indicator from the program’s researched-based assessment tool that is aligned with the IELDS

Teachers should choose a benchmark to show progress that documents the integration of many skills and capabilities of the child. It should also show the unique ways a child goes about doing something and show how a child is growing and learning over time. After collecting and documenting information, teachers should use it to reflect on the child and drive instruction. Some questions to guide reflection include:

- What was my purpose for observing?
- What similarities or patterns do I notice?
- What do these observations suggest?
- What else might be going on?
- What else do I want to observe or find out?
- How does this observation fit with other things that I know about the child from previous observations?
- How will I document my interpretations?

The Child Portfolio Teacher Reflection Tool may be used by teachers and administrators to improve the quality of child portfolios.
Lesson Plans
The development of thoughtful lesson plans is a requirement for all PFA educators. Thoughtfully constructed lesson plans take into account the unique learning needs of each student and demonstrate a clear understanding of the content and the curriculum expectations of the young learner. Samples of lesson plans can be found on the PFA website under resources.

Required Components within a PFA Lesson Plan:
- Show connection with IELDS benchmarks (use key phrases from IELDS benchmarks or objectives from the program’s research-based curriculum that are aligned with IELDS)
- Outcomes build on child’s prior knowledge to move learning forward
- Learning activities are aligned to instructional outcomes
- Use of worksheets is not evident
- Designed to meet individual child’s needs
- Formative assessment selected matches instructional outcome(s) and evidence exists to support possible adjustments made based on formative assessment data
- Based on assessment data

Common Core and IELDS
The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have implications for preschool in terms of content and skills expected for success upon entry to and during kindergarten and beyond. While the CCSS are written to K-12, early childhood educators should take time to carefully reflect on the developmental needs of the preschool student and how early childhood education can align to the CCSS. Vertical alignment was completed to ensure that Illinois Early Learning Guidelines for Children Birth to Age Three align with IELDS and IELDS align with CCSS.

Technology
2011 Caring for our Children Recommendations: STANDARD 2.2.0.3: Limiting Screen Time – Media, Computer Time indicates that children should have a maximum of 30 minutes per week using technology with a maximum of 15 minutes per day, including computers, laptops, tablets, smart boards, television, movies, etc. When whole group technology lessons are being conducted, an alternative non-technology option must be offered.

Additional Resources
Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
- Little Prints – Authentic Assessment and Early Childhood Education – an Update and Resources
- Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
- Resources

Colorado Department of Education
- Results Matter Video Library
- Observation: The Heart of Authentic Assessment

Division for Early Childhood (DEC)
- Frameworks for Response to Intervention in Early Childhood: Description and Implications

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8
- Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation
- Where We Stand on Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)
- Preschool Curriculum Decision-Making: Dimensions to Consider

National Public Radio (NPR)
• Q&A: Blocks, Play, Screen Time and the Infant Mind
University of Illinois at Chicago
Common Core State Standards and Early Childhood Literacy Instruction: Confusions and Conclusions