

Maryland Committee for Children

Baltimore City Head Start

Maryland State Department of Education

Maryland Department of Human Resources/
Child Care Administration

Conversations on Curriculum

Conference 2002



executive summary

January 15, 2002

“The essence of this conference can be summed up with this: There is no difference between care and education in early childhood. And curriculum is one of the keys to quality care and education.”

Joan Lombardi, The Children’s Project, conference facilitator

The Curriculum Conference featured presentations by Dr. Samuel Meisels, President of the Erikson Institute, and Dr. David Weikart, leader of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the High/Scope Curriculum Comparison Project. Specific “lessons learned” about early care and education programs, for children ages zero to five, include:

- 1** Care and education programs should address the whole child. Social, emotional, and physical development are just as important as linguistic and cognitive competence.
- 2** One of the elements of quality in childcare and early education is the use of a curriculum. A well-planned curriculum, implemented by people trained in its use, works to ensure that children have the experiences, acquire the knowledge and language, and are exposed to the thought processes, classroom structures, and discourse patterns that make them better prepared for the complex demands of school.
- 3** Not all curricula are created equal. Curricula that are based primarily on direct instruction (teacher-directed activity) do not engender thinking and problem solving skills. A more balanced curriculum that supports young children’s initiative is essential to having high quality programs that produce lasting benefits. In particular, the High/Scope Curriculum Comparison Project suggests that education officials who promote teacher-scripted instruction with young children living in poverty are pursuing a very risky path.
- 4** Each curriculum should be validated. This means that it must be based on developmentally valid theory. It must be documented, validated by research, and used on a wide scale and in a wide range of settings to be sure it actually works.
- 5** Staff training and professional development are critical. It requires skill and training for a teacher to implement a curriculum and to nurture individual growth by building on children’s initiative and extending their learning opportunities. Each curriculum should include a validated training system, so that it can be implemented in a wide range of classrooms or care settings. On-going professional development should include opportunities for teachers to apply the latest methods, to compare their experiences with others, and to record which strategies really work with which groups of children.
- 6** In Maryland, child care and Head Start programs should align their curricula with the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR). This means that curricula should include activities that lead to mastery of the school-readiness skills/knowledge set forth by MMSR as those children need in order to enter school ready to succeed.

7 A curriculum should include an instructional assessment that has the potential to enhance teaching and to improve learning. A curriculum-embedded assessment, based on the student’s typical classroom performance, clarifies what students have mastered and guides instructional decision making so that teaching can be enhanced and learning can be improved. It is not designed to rank and compare students or to be used for high stakes like promotion or retention. Rather it is a tool for the teacher, and its value is linked to its impact on instruction.

8 Young children who are living in circumstances that place them at risk for school failure – poverty, low level of maternal education, maternal depression, etc. – are much more likely to succeed in school if they attend high quality early care and education programs. Nonetheless, outcomes are enhanced when parents and early care professionals work in concert, and early care programs should strive to communicate school-readiness strategies to parents.

9 The early care community and local school systems should implement transition practices between preschool-level programs and kindergarten. These should include communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers, between parents and teachers, and among the children themselves as they prepare to move into the school environment. Assessments and/or portfolios should pass from preschool to kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers should find opportunities to explain school-readiness expectations to parents and child care providers.

10 All appropriate curricula require considerable skill and training on the part of teachers and caregivers. The low-levels of compensation that characterize the early care profession hinder the recruitment and retention of skilled individuals. Significant improvements in compensation must accompany training and professional development.

11 The advantages associated with use of a well-planned curriculum and the considerations about curriculum selection apply equally to all settings – family child care, child-care centers, Head Start, etc. Curriculum use will help ensure that children have similar learning opportunities in all settings.

12 In Maryland, resources, training, and technical assistance are available to early care and education programs that want to implement a curriculum, to align it with the school-readiness indicators defined by MMSR, or to use past-year school-readiness data to determine the skill areas (domains) and/or special student populations that need to be especially supported. See the Training and Resource list in the full conference report.

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