Our mission is to coalesce, inspire and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.

Instructional Models Brief: Curriculum and Fidelity

Bellwether Education Partners’ Leading by Exemplar: Lessons from Head Start Programs

This brief focuses on the instructional models of five exemplary Head Start programs from the Leading by Exemplar research project. Below you’ll find details on the curriculum used by each program and how they each ensure fidelity of instruction in the classroom. Each of these programs does something different, but have proven impacts on the children they serve.

One Size Does Not Fit All: Developing and Supplementing Curricula

Acelero developed their own curriculum, Ready to Shine, and an associated fidelity tool. Acelero designed their own curriculum because they felt that teachers creating their own lesson plans and activities created too much variability across classrooms. Ready to Shine includes all content, materials, and activities needed to implement. Acelero’s self-developed fidelity tool, the Teacher Success Rubric, clearly outlines what fidelity looks like across several subdomains and includes an observational tool for coaching.

Educare Miami-Dade uses emergent curriculum and developed their own curriculum rubrics. With emergent curriculum, teachers plan lessons around the interests and needs of children, rather than following a rigid curriculum. This allows for significant flexibility in the classroom, but Educare Miami-Dade still pushes fidelity amongst its teachers. Their curriculum rubrics outline certain behaviors and actions that should be seen in the classroom, which gives a roadmap to teachers and guidance to master teachers who provide coaching.

Fairfax County also uses a locally designed curriculum. As part of the public school district, Fairfax County Public Schools has a self-developed curriculum that is aligned with both the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and the Virginia Early Learning Foundations. The Program of Studies is a vertically-aligned curriculum from early childhood through high school graduation. There is no specific implementation tool or rubric that their classrooms use to ensure fidelity.

CAP Tulsa supplements Creative Curriculum with a math curriculum, Building Blocks, and has their own implementation tool. They implemented Building Blocks after finding that children’s math scores were consistently lower than literacy scores. CAP Tulsa ensures fidelity using their own tool, the Preschool Classroom Implementation Guide, which includes a checklist of what classroom activities and the environment should look like. This allows teachers to self-assess and adapt their practice.

Utah Community Action uses a variety of supplementary curricula in addition to the Creative Curriculum. These include Second Step for social-emotional development and two additional math curricula, High Five Mathematize and Count on Math. They use the standard tools created by Teaching Strategies, the fidelity tool and the classroom environment checklist, to support faithful implementation of the main curriculum.

Key takeaway

None of the programs use existing curriculum straight out-of-the-box. Instead, they all supplement or create their own curriculum in order to meet the needs of the children in their program. They use an implementation tool to ensure fidelity of their practice across classrooms, while also training and empowering teachers to individualize instruction.