

A PROGRAM LEADER'S GUIDE

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# How to Choose High-Quality Instructional Materials for Your Early Childhood Program

*A clear, step-by-step process for selecting curriculum that meets your state standards, fits your program's identity, and strengthens your QRIS and grant positioning.*

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Choosing curriculum is one of the highest-stakes decisions a program director makes. The materials your teachers use every day shape how well children are prepared to meet state early learning standards — and increasingly, that choice affects your program's QRIS rating and grant eligibility. Here's a clear process for getting it right.

### Start with Your State Standards

Before you look at a single curriculum, pull your state's early childhood learning standards. This document is your starting point and your benchmark — every curriculum you evaluate gets measured against it. If you don't have a current copy, your state's department of education or early childhood licensing site will have one.

### Define What Makes Your Program Unique

Standards alignment is necessary, but it isn't sufficient. Your program also has its own identity, and your curriculum needs to support it. Before you start searching, write down what makes your program distinct: Are you faith-based? Do you teach a second language? Is nature play core to your philosophy? Do you have a strong play-based or Montessori orientation?

Getting this on paper before you start vetting curricula saves you from wasting time on materials that check the standards box but don't fit who you are.

### Search With Your Specifics, Not Generic Terms

Once you know your standards and your identity, search with both in mind. Instead of searching “preschool curriculum,” search something like “language-based toddler curriculum” or “nature-based pre-K curriculum.” The more specific your search terms, the more relevant your results.

This part of the process is not fast. Plan to review each curriculum that looks promising — its philosophy, structure, and materials — before moving to the next step.

### Check for State Alignment Documents

This is the step that separates a high-quality instructional material from one that simply looks good. For every curriculum you're seriously considering, look for its standards alignment document for your specific state. Most reputable curriculum publishers provide these, and the absence of one is a red flag.

A growing number of states also publish their own lists of pre-vetted high-quality instructional materials. If your state has one, start there — it can save you significant time, since the standards-alignment work has already been done for you.

### Consider Pairing Materials

You may not find one curriculum that does everything. It's common — and completely workable — to pair a state-standards-aligned core curriculum with supplemental materials that reflect your

program's specific identity, whether that's religious content, a foreign language component, or another distinctive that the core curriculum doesn't cover. The core curriculum carries your high-quality instructional materials status; the supplements carry your program's character.

### **Look Beyond the Lesson Plans**

Once you've confirmed standards alignment, evaluate the full package:

- Does the curriculum include built-in professional development for your teachers?
- What assessment tools come with it, and do they give you meaningful data?
- How much instructional support — coaching guides, pacing calendars, embedded teacher prompts — is actually provided day to day?

These factors determine how well your teachers can implement the curriculum with fidelity, which matters as much as the curriculum's content.

### **Take the Time This Decision Deserves**

Selecting high-quality instructional materials is not a one-afternoon task, and it shouldn't be. Working through your standards, your program identity, your search, and your alignment review takes real time — but it's time that pays off in stronger QRIS standing, better grant positioning, and classrooms that are genuinely meeting the standards your state has set.

## Need Help Working Through This Process?

If this process feels like a lot to navigate on top of running your program, Early Ed Essentials can help. We work with program directors on curriculum selection, QRIS compliance, and grant readiness — reach out to talk through your options.

**Email:** [hello@earlyedessentials.com](mailto:hello@earlyedessentials.com)

**Schedule a call:** [Book time on our calendar](#)

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*Early Ed Essentials provides grant support, compliance advisory, and curriculum guidance to early childhood program leaders outside Maryland.*