Choosing a

Curriculum

A Guide for Churches

We are grateful to the Office for Education and Faith Development of the Reformed Church in America for graciously allowing us to quote and adapt material used in their product *Curriculum Evaluation: A Tool for Selecting Curriculum.* Specifically, the “3-F” approach, as well as certain procedural suggestions and many evaluation criteria were taken from or based on this source.

*Choosing a Curriculum: A Guide for Churches,* © 2014 Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49508. All rights reserved.

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at editors@faithaliveresources.org.

Permission is granted to duplicate the worksheets.

Contents

Dear Evaluation Team Member Page 3

Outline of the Process Page 4

Curriculum Evaluation Checklist Page 7

Curriculum Comparison Chart Page 15

Appendix: Multiple Intelligences in Christian Education Page 16

Dear Evaluation Team Member,

The happy fact that you’re reading this demonstrates your commitment to choosing the best possible curriculum for your church. You’re giving it some prayerful consideration instead of heading down the path of least resistance. You’re not going to be taken in by a cool student handout or a nifty teacher’s kit. And you’re not about to mindlessly kowtow to Aunt Thelma’s insistent recommendations either.

We’re grateful for that—whether you end up choosing Faith Alive curriculum or not. You’re in the best position to pick what’s right for your church, and we pray that this guide will help you make the right decision. When it comes to church school, curriculum isn’t the only thing, of course. Arguably it’s not even the most important thing. But it matters. It won’t put halos over your kids’ heads. It won’t transform your staff into super-teachers. But it *will*

• focus your church school on key biblical events and teachings;

• guide your teachers and kids in connecting the Bible stories to the one great story of God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus;

• apply biblical teaching to daily life; and

• suggest many everyday opportunities for spiritual growth.

Those are awesome contributions to require from stuff that gets dumped on your church’s doorstep in a cardboard box. We’ve designed this guide to help you tease out the features that really matter and to evaluate the effectiveness of each curriculum in providing them.

We’ll try to help you be as objective as possible as you wade into that sea of stuff spread in front of you. But we’ll confess to a number of biases (not prejudices—we’ve thought these through).

• We give more weight to biblical and theological soundness and solid pedagogy than other considerations.

• We specifically test for a Reformed interpretation of Scripture because we see that as the most biblically faithful approach.

• We offer criteria that clearly assume that faith is not just conviction but also assurance and commitment (to put it another way, it involves head, heart, and hands).

You have an important and challenging job ahead of you! We pray that God’s Spirit will give you lots of wisdom, insight, energy, and joy in your work so that you will choose wisely.

Robert De Moor

Editor in Chief

Faith Alive

Outline of the Process

Select Your Team

OK, so you’re ready to take a look at that great new curriculum that’s so highly recommended by the folks at the church down the street. This tool will help you do that, even if you’re doing it without any help from anyone else. We suggest, though, that you round up a few others from church to give you a hand. That will make the job a lot easier, far less time-consuming, and generally give more reliable results. While you’re at it, take a look at more than one curriculum—we suggest at least three.

Ideally, you will need two people for each grade level being evaluated, for a total of eight to twelve people (reduce this to one person per grade level if you have to). You’ll want to include church school teachers, your director or coordinator of Christian education, your pastor(s), and someone from your church’s education committee. Given the (suggested) extra weight given to the “faithfulness” criteria of this evaluation tool, it is especially important that you have someone trained in theology on your team. A professional educator is also a bonus. Other members could include parents and teens (if you’re evaluating curriculum for junior and senior high).

Check Your Vision

Selecting an appropriate curriculum will be easier if your congregation has a vision statement (or stated goals) for its education program. Having a vision statement will help you avoid choosing a curriculum that’s attractive or inexpensive but doesn’t match the stated educational goals of your congregation.

If you have such a statement, post it and take a few minutes to review it before you begin the evaluation process described below. If your congregation doesn’t have a vision statement for its educational program, you may want to track down a statement or two from neighboring churches that you know have strong education programs. Use one or more of those statements or set aside some time to develop your own statement. It’s also helpful to check your congregation’s overall vision and mission statements. These statements can give you clues about the kind of education and nurture church members will need to accomplish your church’s mission and honor its vision.

Order Samples

We suggest ordering curriculum samples from three to five publishers. If possible, try to obtain a complete unit or quarter. Ask for a price list and an overview of the entire curriculum, as well. You can obtain *Faith Alive* curriculum samples by calling
1-800-333-8300 or at www.FaithAliveResources.org.

Evaluate

Use the checklist to answer three basic questions about each curriculum you are evaluating. This “3-F” approach was developed by John C. Purdy in an article entitled “Before You Choose . . . Questions to Ask About Curriculum,” *Alert* magazine, May 1988. Used by permission.

• **Is it faithful?** Is it true to the best you know of the Bible, theology, educational method, and human development? In other words, is it biblically sound? Does it reflect the latest educational theory? Is it Reformed in its theological position? Is the material appropriate at each age level? Will it help people grow in faith? *Note: We ­suggest double-weighting this section when you average the checklist ratings on page 17. This reflects the importance of selecting a curriculum that is biblical and uses sound ­educational methods.*

• **Is it friendly?** Is it inviting to both learners and leaders? Is the leader’s guide easy to follow, even for new leaders? Is it familiar enough that you could easily imagine teaching it? Fresh enough to be fun to use? In emphasizing “easy to use” qualities, has the subject matter been compromised or have different learning styles been ignored? Is it engaging without being gimmicky or patronizing?

• **Is it fitting?** Does it easily adapt to your needs for space, resources, time? Does it suit the needs and abilities of leaders and learners?

Have the entire evaluation team look at one curriculum at a time, dividing into pairs for each grade level (or assign one person to each grade level, if your team is small). Each pair completes a checklist for their grade level, using the 1-5 rating scale for each item and averaging the three categories as directed.

When all the pairs for each grade level are finished, they should meet briefly with the other pairs and use the Curriculum Comparison Chart to combine and average all scores for all grades levels, thereby arriving at an “overall curriculum rating” for that particular curriculum. Pairs should then move on to evaluate another curriculum, repeating the procedure described above for each curriculum they evaluate.

Suggested time for pairs to evaluate and score one curriculum at one grade level is about one hour. Allow a few minutes more for arriving at an overall curriculum rating with the total evaluation team.

*Note: The specialists on your team—theologians and professional educators—could be assigned “floating” positions, making themselves available for questions from the other reviewers. Or they could attempt to read and evaluate only one part of the checklist for several grade levels (for example, a theologian could look at the biblical and theological sections, an educator at the educational and developmental concerns).*

Additional Tips for Reviewers

• Take a quick look at the table of contents (leader’s guide), goals, and the overview of the unit or quarter, so that you have a general sense of where the material is headed. You should also look at the outline of the entire course for your age level. How is it organized—by biblical chronology, by theme, by liturgical season?

• Be sure to fill in the preliminary information on the top of the check list. A website or catalog from the publishers is usually the best place to locate pricing information. When checking costs, include *all* components for leaders and students. If publishers have reproducible pages, remember that photocopying isn’t free.

• Check the introduction to the leader’s guide for information on the various components of the course. For example, is there a leader’s kit? What format is used for the student materials (take-home leaflet, reproducible pages, and so on). Lay out the various components of the session(s) you are evaluating.

• Read carefully through at least one session of your material, approaching it as if you were a teacher about to use this material with age-group children. Read more rapidly through the rest of the unit you are evaluating.

• Complete the checklist, using the 1-5 rating system for each item. Jot down any questions or comments in the “comments” column.

• When you reach the end of each of the three major sections of the checklist (Faithful, Friendly, Fitting), divide by the number of statements in that section to arrive at an average score for the section. Please note that we’ve left a couple of blank spaces at the end of each category to allow you to list any additional criteria of your own, should you wish to do so.

• When you are finished with your grade level, work with the other reviewers to average all scores for all grade levels, thereby arriving at an “overall curriculum rating” for each curriculum. Use the Curriculum Comparison Chart for this activity. We suggest you do this immediately after finishing one curriculum and before proceeding to the next; this will help keep the group focused on one curriculum at a time. However, an alternate method is to review all curriculums then go back and complete the Comparison Chart.

Decide

When you’ve completed the Comparison Chart for all the curriculums you’ve reviewed, it may be obvious that one particular curriculum clearly scores higher than any other. However, be open to the possibility that one of your other choices may have scored slightly lower overall but may be stronger in areas that are most important to your education program. Also, the highest-rated curriculum may be beyond your budget (but, as John Purdy says, “Can you afford, in any way you look at cost, to spend money on a curriculum that is not faithful, friendly, or fitting?).

In general, use the ratings as a guide to an informed decision.

Prepare for Use

Order the selected curriculum with plenty of time left over to introduce it to your teaching staff. Then plan a meeting to distribute the material and allow teachers to become familiar with the various components and how they are used.

Many publishers supply webinars and/or teacher training workshops that you can use to introduce the new material to teachers. For example, contact Faith Alive Resources
(1-800-333-8300) for webinars and workshops that introduce their curriculums.

Evaluate

Once you’re actually using the curriculum you’ve selected, make sure it’s living up to your expectations. After a few weeks of use, hold a teachers’ meeting and talk about how things are going with the new curriculum. Do teachers need more training? Do they need more supplies? Is there enough time to complete the sessions as outlined by the leader’s guide? Are students interested or bored? Also encourage teachers to complete the evaluation forms that many publishers include with their materials.

Curriculum Evaluation Checklist

*(photocopy and give several copies to each review team)*

Curriculum: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Publisher: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Copyright date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Grade level: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Per student cost: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Per teacher cost: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Additional resource cost: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Dated (month, day, year on each lesson) or nondated? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Bible version used: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Components: Leader’s/Teacher’s Guide: \_\_\_\_\_\_ Kit of audiovisual aids: \_\_\_\_\_\_

Format of student materials (leaflet, book, magazine, reproducible pages, and so on): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Is It Faithful? **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Biblically

 1. Bases sessions on the Bible. 1 2 3 4 5

 2. Holds up Scripture as the inspired, authoritative,
and living Word of God. 1 2 3 4 5

 3. Develops the major themes of the Bible (creation,
fall, redemption, covenant, kingdom). 1 2 3 4 5

 4. Presents Bible stories accurately and shows biblical
characters as real people. 1 2 3 4 5

 5. Interprets passages in their historical/redemptive
context rather than use them primarily to teach
moral lessons. 1 2 3 4 5

 6. Clearly applies biblical teachings to daily life and
social issues. 1 2 3 4 5

 7. Offers an appropriate balance of Old and New
Testament passages. 1 2 3 4 5

 8. Uses a version of the Bible appropriate for learners
and consistent with our congregational use. 1 2 3 4 5

 9. Provides a biblical memory passage for each session
or unit. 1 2 3 4 5

 10. Promotes use of Bible by students as well as leaders. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Biblical score (total questions 1-10):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Theologically

 11. Develops trust and belief in God. 1 2 3 4 5

 12. Encourages a living faith in Jesus Christ and
nurtures a continuing commitment to Christ in all
areas of life. 1 2 3 4 5

 13. Grounded in Reformed/Presbyterian teachings. 1 2 3 4 5

 14. Salvation presented as God’s unmerited gift. 1 2 3 4 5

 15. Teaches Reformed/Presbyterian view of the
sacraments. 1 2 3 4 5

 16. Teaches older students a basic “faith vocabulary.” 1 2 3 4 5

 17. Promotes a strong sense of the church as a
community of which persons of all ages and ethnic
backgrounds are valuable members. 1 2 3 4 5

 18. Encourages efforts to transform our world and
society for Christ. 1 2 3 4 5

 19. Clearly relates Reformed teachings to daily life. 1 2 3 4 5

 20. Dispels the notion of “biblical heroes,” focusing
instead on God’s powerful grace working through
sinful people. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Theological score (total questions 11-20):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Educationally

 21. Includes a focus statement or key concept, along
with goals for the session or for each step. 1 2 3 4 5

 22. Relates all learning activities to key concept and
goals. 1 2 3 4 5

 23. Appeals to a variety of learning styles (see
Appendix for multiple intelligence information). 1 2 3 4 5

 24. Encourages biblical/theological reflection on life
experiences. 1 2 3 4 5

 25. Offers active, experiential learning. 1 2 3 4 5

 26. Includes service opportunities or outreach projects. 1 2 3 4 5

 27. Uses activities that build community. 1 2 3 4 5

 28. Promotes independent thinking and questioning. 1 2 3 4 5

 29. Is creative, engaging, and fun for leaders and
students. 1 2 3 4 5

 30. Reflects current educational theory. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Educational score (total questions 21-30):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Developmentally

 31. Uses activities and content appropriate to age-group
characteristics. 1 2 3 4 5

 32. Uses Scripture/story that’s appropriate to age level. 1 2 3 4 5

 33. Matches reading difficulty to age level in student
materials. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Developmental score (total questions 31-33):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Additional “Faithful” Criteria of Our Own

 34. 1 2 3 4 5

 35. 1 2 3 4 5

 36. 1 2 3 4 5

 **“Faithful” category average score:**

 *(Add theological, biblical, educational, and developmental
 scores and divide by 33 or by figure that includes any
 additional criteria you added.)*

Is It Friendly?  **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

To Students/Learners (Student Materials)

 1. Art illustrating Bible stories is accurate, consistent
with Scripture. 1 2 3 4 5

 2. Art and photos, layout, use of color are inviting and
attractive. 1 2 3 4 5

 3. Illustrations and photos are contemporary,
up-to-date. 1 2 3 4 5

 4. Formats are age-appropriate and interesting. 1 2 3 4 5

 5. Type size is appropriate for age level. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Student materials score (total questions 1-5):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

To Leaders/Teachers (Leader’s Materials)

 6. Leader’s guide has clear, uncluttered layout that is
easy to follow. 1 2 3 4 5

 7. Biblical/theological background material inspires as
well as informs. 1 2 3 4 5

 8. Offers options and enrichment activities. 1 2 3 4 5

 9. Includes worship suggestions and music for each
session. 1 2 3 4 5

 10. Helps develop leaders’ skills. 1 2 3 4 5

 11. Includes a list of supplemental materials (videos,
CDs, books, and so on). 1 2 3 4 5

 12. Offers an effective and easy-to-use kit of
audiovisual aids. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Leader materials score (total questions 6-12):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

To Parents/Families

 13. Suggests practical ways to involve students’ families
in learning process. 1 2 3 4 5

 14. Encourages regular faith conversations at home. 1 2 3 4 5

 15. Includes a resource that teachers can send
to parents. 1 2 3 4 5

 *Parent/family score (total questions 13-15):*

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

In General

 16. High quality of materials, including take-homes. 1 2 3 4 5

 17. Recommended by those we know and trust. 1 2 3 4 5

 *General score (total questions 16-17):*

**Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Additional “Friendly” Criteria of Our Own

 18. 1 2 3 4 5

 19. 1 2 3 4 5

 20. 1 2 3 4 5

 **“Friendly” category average score:** *(Add student, leader, parents, and general scores and divide by 17 or by figure that includes any additional criteria you added.)*

Is It Fitting?

 1. Includes sessions that are appropriate for Christmas
and Easter (check course outline). 1 2 3 4 5

 2. Models healthy family relationships in a variety of
family structures (single parent, grandparent, and
so on). 1 2 3 4 5

 3. Presents diverse lifestyles and settings (rural, urban,
and cultural). 1 2 3 4 5

 4. Text and art reflect diversity in racial/ethnic groups,
gender, age, social/economic status, culture, and
physical abilities; avoid paternalism and stereotyping. 1 2 3 4 5

 5. Sessions can be completed within the time frame
we have available. 1 2 3 4 5

 **Rating Scale Comments/Questions**

 Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

 6. Session plans will work with the number of
students we have in each class. 1 2 3 4 5

 7. Suggested activities are possible with the space
and resources we have available. 1 2 3 4 5

 8. Assists in enhancing congregation’s vision for
education 1 2 3 4 5

 9. Value relative to cost. 1 2 3 4 5

 10. Affordable for us? 1 2 3 4 5

Additional “Fitting” Criteria of Our Own

 12. 1 2 3 4 5

 13. 1 2 3 4 5

 **“Fitting” category average score:**

 *(Add questions 1-10 and divide by 10 or by figure that
 includes any additional criteria you added.)*

Additional questions/clarifications about this curriculum that need to be addressed:

Do you recommend this curriculum? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Reviewed by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Curriculum Comparison Chart

*Reviewers: When you are finished with your grade level and have arrived at a “curriculum rating” for that grade level, work with the other reviewers to average all scores for all grade levels. For example, if you have five teams working on five grade levels, you would determine the faithfulness score by adding the total scores for each grade level and dividing by five. In this way you’ll arrive at an “overall curriculum rating” for each curriculum you evaluate.*

 Publisher Publisher Publisher Publisher Publisher

 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Find average of all “Faithfulness”**

**scores and multiply times 2:**

**Average of all “Friendly” scores:**

**Average of all “Fitting” scores:**

**Overall Curriculum Score:**

*(Add the 3 scores above.
Total is out of a possible 20 points.)*

**Curriculum selected:** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Additional questions/clarifications about this curriculum that should be addressed:

Appendix: Multiple Intelligences in Christian Curriculum

How do children learn? The answer to that question can be almost as varied as the children in a given church school class. Some learn best through words. Others through music or art. Still others learn best by classifying and categorizing information. And some students learn best by working with others, through “hands on” activities, or through quiet reflection.

When you evaluate curriculum, look for activities that appeal to the wide variety of ways children learn. In recent years Howard Gardner described eight “intelligences” or ways of learning that are described below.

As you teach, you’ll begin to get a sense for how the children in your group learn best. Children who are

 **‑Word Smart** learn best through verbal activities (listening, reading, or speaking), including discussions, worksheets, writing, reading, storytelling, and word games.

 **‑Number Smart** learn best by exploring patterns and relationships through activities such as problem solving, logical puzzles or games, making charts and graphs, or putting things in sequence.

 **‑Picture Smart** learn best by visualizing concepts. These kids enjoy viewing maps, slides, pictures, videos, and diagrams; making jigsaw puzzles; and expressing their ideas with shape, color, and design.

 **‑Body Smart** learn best by using their bodies, acting things out, using puppets, moving—anything hands-on.

 **‑Music Smart** learn best through sound, music, and rhythm—playing musical instruments, writing their own songs and raps, listening to recordings, singing, and so on.

 **‑People Smart** learn best through doing things with others, cooperating and working in small or large groups, role playing, conversations, brainstorming, and other interactive exercises.

 **‑Self Smart** learn best by working independently through such things as writing in a journal, meditating, reading, and reflecting.

 **‑Earth Smart** learn best through activities connected to living things and natural phenomena, through nature walks, examining plants and animals, nature experiments, and activities that focus on ecology.

—The ideas on this page are based on material from the following resources: *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*by Thomas Armstrong, © 2000, and a chart prepared by Donald L. Griggs, Livermore, California.