

IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Alabama

First Class Pre-K: the Alabama Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (FCVPK) program began in 2000 serving 750 children and has grown steadily to serve more than 14,000 children in 2016-2017 in a full-day education program through its mixed-delivery system. In 2014, Alabama met its goal of having at least one pre-K classroom in each of its 67 counties.

Funds for First Class Pre-K are distributed by the Alabama Education Trust Fund Budget on a competitive basis to programs running full-day, school-year programs. Grantees must locally match the award, and sliding-scale fees can be included in the matching funds.

Essential Elements

Fifteen Essential Elements clustered in three categories—Enabling Environment, Support for Educators and Young Learners, and High-Quality Instruction—have been identified among exemplary pre-K programs (Minervino, 2014). Note: practice in the field may vary so as to be either better or worse than might be expected based on specific policy or guidance. Consistency or quality of practice across large-scale programs is more difficult to assess than policy.

Enabling Environment		Rigorous, Articulated Early Learning Policies								Strong Program Practices				
Political Will	Strong Leaders	BA + comp	Class size	Two Adults	Hours/ Dosage	EL Standards	Effective Curriculum	Special Ed	DLL support	HQ Teaching	PD	Child Assessments	Data Driven	Integrated System
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●

Key: ● Fully Met ○ Partially Met – Not Met ND Not determined

Political will. Alabama benefits from a particularly strong enabling environment formed by the collaborative work of elected officials, state agencies, business leaders, advocates, and philanthropy, all of which are focused on delivering high-quality pre-K for every 4-year-old—and proud of their success. Gov. Kay Ivey’s (R) education initiative, " Strong Start, Strong Finish," focuses on three stages of education, beginning with early childhood education.

Enrollment in First Class Pre-K has been steadily increasing since 2012. In 2016-2017, the program served more than 14,000 4-year-olds in a full-day education program, which is approximately 24% of the state’s 4-year-old population. Enrollment increased by approximately 2,700 children from the prior school year. This increase is partially supported by a \$17.5 million federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) awarded to Alabama in 2014 to expand pre-K access across the state in high-risk areas. In spring 2018, the legislature moved forward on the FY 2019 Alabama Education Trust Fund Budget (HB 175)



which appropriates a total of \$96 million to First Class Pre-K; \$18.5 million more than the program's current funding level.

Alabama's business community has extended significant support to preschool since 2009-2010, when business leaders recommended the state legislature increase funding for preschool education. The Business Council of Alabama collaborated with the Alabama School Readiness Alliance to create a pre-K task force that developed policy recommendations in 2012 for increasing access to high-quality prekindergarten throughout the state. Leadership also extends to advocates, business, and philanthropy, most notably the Alabama Power Foundation and PNC, which have a history of effectively working together to advance high-quality early education; including a commitment to funding.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. Effective August 1, 2015, First Class Pre-K's administering agency, the Department of Children's Affairs, was renamed the Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE). Appointed by former Gov. Bentley, Jeana Ross remains DECE head but her status as Commissioner changed to Secretary, now serving on the Governor's Cabinet.

DECE is responsible for administering First Class Pre-K (11.25 FTEs are assigned to pre-K) through its Office of School Readiness (OSR). Other early learning efforts the office supervises include the regional Alabama Children's Policy Councils, the Head Start State Collaboration Office, the Children First Trust Fund, the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council, and the Office of Early Learning and Family Support with its First Teacher home visiting program. Alabama remains one of the few states consolidating authority for pre-K, child care, and related functions within a single department, with a goal of facilitating efficiency and consistency throughout all regions of the state.

Education and compensation. Alabama requires each classroom to have a lead teacher with a BA plus a minimum of 18 hours of coursework in early childhood or child development. In 2015, policies were introduced to support salary parity. First Class Pre-K teachers are now compensated for having a master's degree (up to \$5,000) and pay parity is in alignment with public school teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. All classrooms have a 1:9 staff to child ratio and a maximum enrollment of 18 students with the exception of Head Start, which is allowed to have a 1:10 staff to child ratio and maximum of 20 students.

Learning time. Children attend First Class Pre-K five days per week during the school year and services are provided for a minimum of 6.5 hours per day. Wrap-around services extending the length of the school day are common in most nonpublic school settings.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (Standards) were last revised in 2012. Each First Class Pre-K classroom is assigned a coach who works directly with teachers on best practices and self-reflection, including incorporation of the Standards into daily planning and child assessment practices. The Standards are vertically aligned with Alabama's College and Career Readiness Standards as well as horizontally aligned with Teaching Strategies GOLD.

System that ensures effective curriculum. The state does not endorse any particular curriculum, but rather, requires that the one selected by a program must promote appropriate instructional practice

and enhance learning and development while being consistent with the intent of the Office of School Readiness First Class Pre-K Framework (Framework). The selected curriculum is also expected to be aligned with the state required assessment tool, Teaching Strategies GOLD. Implementation of the curriculum is embedded into the Alabama Reflective Coaching Model that includes effective teaching practices, curriculum content based on the Standards, and professional development. Monitors work with program administrators to ensure that First Class Pre-K grants are properly administered, including implementing the Framework with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. OSR supports diversity and encourages that children with special needs be integrated into the pre-K classrooms. It is strongly recommended by the state that First Class Pre-K classrooms carefully consider and plan for children with disabilities to ensure that resources are in place, including consultation with their local education agency special education staff for resources available through the federal Office of Special Education Programs. In addition, coaching of preschool teachers about children with special needs is required. In 2016-2017, First Class Pre-K enrolled 492 children who had existing IEP/IFSP prior to entering pre-K and an additional 601 who were referred during pre-K, resulting in an IEP; thus, 7% of the First Class Pre-K students had an identified special education need.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Alabama reported that in 2016, 713 of the 14,032 First Class Pre-K students (5%) were English Language Learners (ELLs). State policy that supports ELLs include having an approved written plan for supporting these children. In addition, Alabama has partnered with the University of Alabama Birmingham to participate in a Dual Language Learner (DLL) Professional Development grant that will offer DLL language and literacy supports to teachers who choose to participate. First Class staff members are required to do a book study as part of their professional development plan on DLLs in order to better support teachers who have DLL children in their classrooms.

High quality teaching. In 2016-2017, average CLASS scores for First Class Pre-K classrooms were 6.05 on Emotional Support, 5.79 on Classroom Organization; and 3.32 on Instructional Support.

Professional development. Alabama's Pre-K program uses a tiered model of coaching, the teacher is regularly setting goals and self-reflecting throughout the year. A full-time coach may work with up to 20 classrooms and a part-time coach, up to 12 classrooms. This number varies due to the distances a coach travels or where the teachers fall on the tiered coaching model (emerging, progressing, or refined). Individual PD plans are required of lead and assistant teachers as specified in the Alabama Reflective Coaching model. Both lead and auxiliary teachers must be compensated and are expected to work for at least 187 days per year; 180 days are for classroom instruction, 7 days are for professional development to improve classroom practice.

Child Assessments. All pre-K programs use Teaching Strategies GOLD as a formative assessment, continually throughout the year. It has been aligned with the Standards. Data from the assessment are used to guide teacher training and professional development and to make adjustments to the curricula. As previously noted, the First Class Pre-K classroom's assigned coach works with the teachers on child assessment practices.



Data-driven decision-making. All First Class Pre-K classrooms are observed, more than one time per year using CLASS. The data collected from observations are used for a variety of purposes, including professional development, monitoring and evaluation, and research. DECE staff conduct the observations and reliability is ensured through double coding and CLASS developed calibration.

The first 30 days the DECA-P Reflective Checklist is completed by a coach for each classroom. Information collected during monitoring processes and activities are used at both the state and at the local level for program improvement. Data described in the high-quality teaching section of this scan is available for public review on the DECE website.

In addition to Teaching Strategies GOLD data being used locally and at the state level, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) in collaboration with the University of Alabama-Birmingham is currently collecting PPVT data as part of a longitudinal study. PARCA released (2017) results of a First Class Pre-K report finding that participation in First Class Pre-K narrows the gap in reading and math proficiency, especially for those children in poverty and for Black and Hispanic children. The First Class Pre-K evaluation with PARCA is ongoing.

Integrated System. The aligned standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction are key components of Alabama's integrated system emphasizing data-driven decisions on state, local, and program levels. The decision to focus professional development on teacher-child interaction using CLASS was based on child assessment data and feedback from coaches, monitors, and teachers. The state has the capacity to support this integrated system through regulation and guidance.