

# IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Arkansas

The Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program began in 1991 as a part of a statewide education reform initiative. Act 49 (2003) created the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABCSS), which includes priorities for funding for 3- and 4-year-olds up to 200% of the federal poverty level. Districts that have 75% of their children scoring below proficient in literacy and math on the State Benchmark exams and those children in schools designated as in "school improvement status" received funding priority. ABC/ABCSS classrooms operate within Head Start, education service cooperatives, public schools, private business, family care homes, and nonprofit organizations.

### 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 that 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/ Ratio	Two Adults	Hours/ Dosage	EL Standards	Effective Curriculum	Special Ed	DLL support	HQ Teaching	PD	Child Assessments	Data Driven	Integrated System
●	●	–	●	●	●	●	○	○	–	ND	–	●	○	○

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

**Political will.** Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R), is the state’s third governor to embrace early childhood in the state, and the first Republican. After his election, Gov. Hutchinson made public comments about supporting pre-K and noted his support for the state’s bid for a federal preschool expansion grant. In 2017, he promoted adding \$3 million to the preschool program to assist with teacher support for training, and offering some incentives for teachers meeting requirements and for unique ideas such as exploring transportation, mental health, etc.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is active and was a driving force in gaining strong support for quality pre-K in Arkansas; resulting in an increase from \$10 million to \$111 million for ABC. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation are involved in the ForwARd Campaign, to improve educational opportunities in Arkansas with pre-K as a priority, and that will continue to be a strategic initiative.

In December 2014, Arkansas was awarded a competitive federal Preschool Development Grant for \$14.9 million. This grant afforded the state an opportunity to expand quality services to an additional 1,364 four-year-old children and enhance preschool services for 1,506 children enrolled in the ABC/ABCSS programs. In 2016-2017, ABC/ABCSS served 19,120 children, 31% of the state's 4-year-olds and 18.5% of 3-year-olds. In 2002, Arkansas served only 6% of 4-year-olds and 3% of 3-year-olds.

**Compelling vision and strong leadership.** Act 1132 (1997) established the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE) within the Arkansas Department of Human Services to enhance the coordination of child care and early childhood education programs within the state. DCCECE includes 11 staff focused on pre-K. ABC programs are funded through an appropriation in the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) Public School Fund budget. ADE contracts with DCCECE to administer the programs. DCCECE is responsible for all operational duties associated with pre-K and providing reports to the Joint Legislative Committee on Education and the State Board of Education who has the final authority for approval of rules and grants. DCCECE works closely with ADE, and partners with universities (University of Arkansas and Arkansas State) for evaluation and monitoring.

**Education and compensation.** In Arkansas, teacher requirements are for the pre-K site, not the classroom. At least one teacher in a public school site, not classroom, must hold a standard Arkansas teacher license with P-4 certification. In a non-public school, at least one lead teacher must have a minimum of a BA in early childhood education or child development. For all programs with multiple classrooms at a single location, the teacher of the second classroom shall hold, at a minimum, an associate degree in early childhood education or early childhood development. More than 90% of teachers are reported to have a BA or higher degree, despite the fact that this is not required in every classroom.

From 2004 to 2007, Arkansas began developing a salary parity initiative; however, the state has not had an increase in funding since then to support maintaining the parity and the salary schedule for pre-K teachers is based on 2007 data.

**Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom.** Arkansas has a maximum class size of 20 for both 3- and 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:10.

**Learning time.** All state-funded preschool services are expected to operate for a minimum of seven hours per day, 178 days per year. This is considered the regular school day and not an extended day in Arkansas.

**Age-appropriate learning standards.** The Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards: Birth through 60 Months was approved in 2016 replacing the Arkansas Early Childhood Education Framework for Three- and Four-Year-Old Children. The new standards encompass birth through five years of age and are aligned with the Arkansas Academic Standards for K-4/Language Arts and Math. The state supports the use of the ELDS and funding is provided to contractors to disseminate ELDS training statewide.

**System that ensures effective curriculum.** Arkansas has a requirement that programs can only use curricula on an approved list. The review committee categorizes these as either comprehensive,

covering all domains of child development or supplemental. Currently there are seven curricula on the approved list.

During the grant application process, potential ABC programs are required to identify a selected curriculum and describe the plans for implementation of responsive instruction and learning environments that are aligned with the state's early learning standards. It is up to the programs to ensure teachers have adequate training on curriculum and implement the curriculum with fidelity. ABC funds may be utilized for professional development in curriculum instruction.

**Support for students with special needs.** In 2016-2017, 1,478 children, 7.2% of the total enrolled in ABC were identified as having special needs. The Special Education Program for children ages 3 to 5 years, is administered through Early Childhood Special Education at the ADE and viewed as "active partners with ABC to assist children with special needs." ABC teachers are expected to work closely with the Early Education Special Education teachers assigned to the ABC classrooms, thus ensuring that the IEPs are implemented in the natural and least restrictive environments.

**Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL).** Arkansas is able to report the number of DLLs who were enrolled in ABC in 2016-2017 (2,301), 11% of the preschool population. This percentage is greater than the 9% of DLLs in the state. State policy to support DLLs is limited to requiring translated materials for parents, such as enrollment applications, learning standards, etc. Local programs make decisions which languages according to the local population.

**High quality teaching.** CLASS or ECERS scores are not available for review.

**Professional development.** The professional development requirements were changed in 2015 to require no less than six days of professional development per year. Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, educators are required to obtain a minimum of 30 hours per year of professional development for licensure renewal and contractual agreement. Classroom-embedded support, such as coaching, is not required by state policy but is encouraged at the local level.

**Child Assessments.** Arkansas uses Work Sampling System (WSS) in pre-K with data collection required three times a year. There is robust training around WSS conducted by a contracted university. PD starts with introducing the tool, focusing on some areas of the tools, implementing all domains, and then helping programs examine what the data are telling them. Initial Work Sampling training is required for all new classroom staff (one-time); Work Sampling Refresher is required annually (accessible via webinar, etc.) and the Work Sampling Curriculum Connections is highly recommended for existing classroom staff but not required. There are coaches available to work individually with programs.

**Data-driven decision-making.** ECERS/ECERS-3 are conducted in some classrooms, more than once a year by an independent contractor with trained personnel to do the assessment and to provide technical assistance and professional development. Classrooms are selected for an observation randomly and if they are new, low-performing, or have areas of noncompliance. The state also receives the ERS results. ABC programs are required to participate in QRIS, but only need to be at the first level.

In a 2013 report on outcomes in the Arkansas program starting from the 2005-2006 school year, NIEER researchers found: "the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Program had modest but meaningful long-term



effects for children who participated, including significant positive effects on children’s receptive vocabulary and math through grade 2 and on literacy through grade 3.. The authors also found that children who attended ABC pre-K were less likely to have been retained by the end of third grade than those who did not attend any pre-K, which can be seen as an early indicator of program’s effect on school success.”

**Integrated System.** Some of the ABC elements are aligned with one another as well as the K-3 and child care system. The ELDS align with the State K-3 Standards and also link to the kindergarten entry assessment; the required pre-K child assessment; and the selected curriculum. However, the PD system does not fully support the implementation of the essential elements components.