

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

Illinois has offered state-sponsored pre-K since 1985 under the auspices of Illinois Prekindergarten for At-Risk Children. In 2006, the Illinois legislature passed the Illinois Preschool for All (PFA) initiative, which expanded the original program and aimed to provide access to high-quality pre-k to all 3- and 4-year-olds by 2012, the first and only state to aim to offer voluntary, high-quality pre-k to both 3- and 4-year-olds. PFA is available in every county, though funding limitations do not allow every child to enroll.

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	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. There is a Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development that has continued to grow under the current Governor, Bruce Rauner (R) who is actively campaigning for a second term. His Democratic opponent is J.B. Pritzker who has included expanding early childhood education, including universal pre-K, as one of his campaign promises. The Illinois Preschool for All initiative began in 2006 with the goal of providing preschool education to all 3- and 4-year-olds in Illinois by 2012, but due to budget constraints the program serves only one in four children at age 4 and one in five at age 3. Even though Illinois did not have a full state budget for two years, the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) received annual increases, including a \$50 million increase for the 2017-2018 school year.

In 2014, Illinois was awarded a competitive federal Preschool Development Grant/Expansion Grant for \$20 million. During the 2016-2017 school year, there were 3,934 children served in the state using this funding, including 2,577 new slots and 1,357 enhanced Preschool for All slots. Enhancement slots were used to move part-day slots to full-day classrooms.

Philanthropy, both local and nation, is supportive of Illinois’ early childhood initiatives including the Irving Harris Foundation and the McCormick Foundation. Illinois Action for Children (ILAC) and the Voices for Illinois Children have been advocates for expanding pre-K.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Early Childhood Division at ISBE administers ECBG, IDEA Preschool Discretionary funds, the RTT-ELC grant, Preschool Development Grant/Expansion Grant, Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS, which is Illinois' KEA) and all of the grants and contracts associated with those funding sources. There are nine professional staff, two support staff, and the newly renamed Director of Early Learning in an agency of approximately 400 staff. In the last few years there has been some turnover in leadership positions, in part due to the roles being Governor appointed positions.

Education and compensation. A BA and teacher specialized training in pre-K is required for PFA teachers. Under the federally funded PDG program teachers are required to have salary parity with their local kindergarten/primary teachers. The teachers in school-based PFA are generally in the union and on the same pay scale as the kindergarten/primary teachers but there is no requirement.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. PFA has a maximum class size of 20 children and ratios are 1:10 for classrooms serving 3- and 4-year-olds.

Learning time. PFA programs are required to operate 2.5 hours per day. There is no formal partnership, but child care centers are one of the eligible recipients of PFA funding and provide wraparound services for the children in PFA who are also in their centers. In 2016-2017, 14% of programs operated school-day sessions.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS) last revised in 2013 are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, the state's college and career ready standards, and the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Domains. Programs must use a child assessment tool that is research-based and aligned with the IELDS. Other state supports include PD opportunities and guidance on selecting curriculum aligned with the IELDS.

System that ensures effective curriculum. PFA requires the use of a comprehensive research-based curriculum that is aligned with the IELDS. Programs are required to indicate which curriculum they are using in their application and the use of the specified curriculum is checked during on-site monitoring as part of the QRIS system. Coaching is available to support curriculum implementation, but is not required. In 2016-2017, it was reported that 96% of the PFA programs were using Creative Curriculum.

Support for students with special needs. The State of Illinois strongly encourages and promotes inclusion of all children in preschool programs; 18.5% of children enrolled in PFA received special education services. The proportion of children with an IEP in each preschool classroom is limited to no more than 30%, not including children with speech IEPs. As part of their monitoring process, the Early Childhood Block Grant Preschool for All (PFA) 3-5 Compliance Checklist has an indicator to check whether special education supports and services are provided in the PFA classroom and embedded into the activities and routines of the day. PFA teachers are required to possess specific qualifications regarding working with children with special needs and PD is required for preschool teachers who serve children with special needs. Inclusion specialists are also available to support preschool teachers and/or children.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). PFA enrolled 22,559 children who were DLLs in 2016-2017. The percentage of DLLs in PFA (31%) was greater than the 25% of DLLs in the state. Bilingual

instruction is permitted and the quality of that instruction is monitored. PFA teachers are required to have training or qualifications related to working with DLLs.

In addition, PFA programs that are administered by public school districts are required to offer a language instruction program to all children identified through a language proficiency screening process to be English Language Learners (ELLs). In attendance centers with 20 or more preschool ELLs of any single language classification other than English, a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program is provided, which includes instruction in the home language, English, and English as a second language (ESL) for each language classification represented by 20 or more students. In attendance centers with 19 or fewer preschool ELLs of any single language classification other than English, a Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI) is provided which includes ESL instruction and may include home language instruction or support.

High quality teaching. A 2009 observational evaluation of PFA by Erikson and SRI found CLASS scores were 5.6 for emotional support, 5.2 for classroom organization, and 3.2 for instructional support. The average ECERS-R scores were 4.4 with only 25 percent scoring 5 or better. Chicago was not included in the study, however. Given the omission of Chicago, the discrepancy between ECERS-R and CLASS scores, and that the data are somewhat old, the quality of the current program cannot be determined.

Professional development. Each PFA program must have staff development assessment procedures and ongoing professional development activities that demonstrate how the results of the assessment (e.g. ECERS, CLASS, and the PFA compliance checklist) were used to inform the program's staff development. Teachers are required to complete 120 clock hours per five years. Coaching is offered to teachers in PFA classrooms based on the monitoring report for that PFA program. However, coaching is not required by state policy.

Child Assessments. PFA requires the use of a research-based authentic child assessment system that aligns with the curriculum and documents child progress over time. The state provides a list of aligned assessments. In 2016-2017, 65% of PFA programs reported using Teaching Strategies GOLD; 25% Work Sampling System; and the remainder another assessment that was aligned with the IELDS. ExceleRate Illinois provides regional training opportunities, coaching support, and online resources for teachers on assessing children.

Data-driven decision-making. All PFA programs are required to participate in ExceleRate Illinois, the state's Quality Recognition and Improvement System. All programs have a rating that is renewed after each monitoring visit. In addition to the ECERS or CLASS, assessors use a PFA compliance checklist. Compliance reviews examine teacher certification, use of a research-based screening tool, research-based curriculum, kindergarten transition planning, community collaboration plan, and meeting requirements for serving homeless children and ELL students.

Based upon the reports, a program is required to develop a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) that identifies action steps, resources to be utilized, targeted professional development, and a timeline for improvements. In each subsequent year until the program is monitored again, they are required to submit an annual update of progress on their CQIP.



The last external evaluation of PFA was conducted by the Erikson Institute (2012) and is described in the high-quality teaching section of this scan.

Integrated System. All PFA programs are required to participate in ExceleRate Illinois, the state's QRIS. ExceleRate Illinois identifies programs standards in four domains: Teaching and Learning, Family and Community Engagement, Leadership and Management and Qualifications and Continuing Education. These four domains are aligned with the state's IELDS, PFA selected curricula, and child formative assessments.