

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

In 1990, the Kentucky state legislature passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) to address unconstitutional inequities in schools, as identified by the Kentucky Supreme Court. As part of KERA, the Kentucky legislature created the Kentucky Preschool Program (KPP) – a preschool program targeted to 4-year-olds from families with incomes at or below 160% of the federal poverty level (FPL), as well as 3- and 4-year-olds with developmental delays and disabilities, regardless of income.

Each of Kentucky’s 173 school districts offered KPP services in 2016-2017. School districts may subcontract with private child care centers, Head Start programs, and special education providers to offer preschool services.

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. Gov. Beshear’s term expired in January 2016 and he was replaced by Matt Bevin (R). During his campaign for governor, Gov. Bevin questioned the state’s participation in federal preschool programs, citing a federal study showing the benefits were inconsequential once a child got beyond third grade, yet he is also quoted as saying “early childhood education is critical.”

Pre-K support from the legislature has been solid over time. In 2016, an additional \$19M was allocated to the pre-K program and the income eligibility for KPP was raised from 150% to 160% of poverty with one estimate that 5,000 more children will be served. Others in the legislature have called for raising the limit to 175% FPL. HB303 (2016) created a grant program to incentivize cooperative public/private partnerships between public school districts and child care providers to develop full-day, high-quality programs for at-risk children. In 2016-2017, 23 planning grants were awarded for a total of \$531,962 and 46 implementation grants for a total of \$5,980,861.



In 2016-2017, Kentucky enrolled 19,435 children, almost 26% of the state's 4-year-olds and 9.5% of 3-year-olds. State spending decreased by 2% in 2016-2017, reducing state per-child spending to \$4,715. However, when combined with all reported pre-K spending, that amount increases to \$8,083 per child, ranking the state 9th out of 43 states including DC and Guam.

There are many supporters throughout the state, notably the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. Prichard's Strong Start KY advocates for high-quality pre-K available for every Kentucky child. The Kentucky Education Action Team (KEAT), a coalition of seven of Kentucky's education advocacy organizations also provides an active pre-K presence.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), Office of Teaching and Learning, Division of Program Standards, School Readiness Branch provides leadership for early education. The School Readiness Branch Manager leads KDE's early learning strategy work, including designing a strategy to increase the number of children entering public school kindergarten ready and progress to proficiency in math and reading by end of third grade. There have been some recent leadership changes within the School Readiness Branch. Six FTEs are assigned to the administration of KPP. In addition to KDE, there is a Governor's Office of Early Childhood. The office oversees The KIDS NOW initiative which is funded with 25% of Kentucky's Tobacco Settlement Funds. The University of Kentucky provides leadership to P-20 educators, especially in its Educational Leadership Studies program.

Education and compensation. Kentucky requires each classroom to have a lead teacher with a BA plus an interdisciplinary early childhood education certification. There is an exception for lead teachers hired prior to 2004-2005, who can hold a CDA or an AA in child development. These teachers are allowed to remain in their current positions but may not transfer to other districts. Lead teachers in public schools are paid on par with district salary schedules, but there is no such requirement for lead teachers in nonpublic schools.

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

Learning time. KPP is required to serve children for at least 2.5 hours per day. In 2016-2017, there were 74 full-day programs, 79 half-day programs, 18 programs offering a full-day and half-day schedule, and two programs delegating services to Head Start. Statewide, through these programs, there were 973 half-day sessions and 624 full-day sessions offered.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Kentucky Early Childhood Standards (KYECS) were first developed in 2003. The comprehensive KYECS for Birth-3 and 3-4 were revised in 2009 and 2013 by a team of interdisciplinary early childhood educators. The KYECS are aligned with the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, the K-3 state standards, and the state's college and career ready standards for the early grades. State policy provides an approved list of child assessments aligned with the KYECS. In 2011, efforts began to reinforce district capacity to understand and implement KYECS and support school readiness. Funding for these efforts were supported by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant. In addition to resources, the Early Learning Leadership Networks (ELLNs) provide leadership, service and support to school districts with implementation of assessments and standards, focusing on math, English Language Arts, and science standards.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Decisions about curricula are made locally by school districts. Curricula must be developmentally appropriate, relevant to and reflective of students' needs, and integrate a variety of skills into activities that are targeted toward the interests of children; but are not required to be aligned with the KYECS. Support for making decisions about curriculum is provided to districts by KDE and Regional Training Centers (RTCs). KDE and the RTCs provide leadership, service and support to school districts to ensure curricula and assessments are implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2107, KPP enrolled 10,566 children with disabilities, 54% of all children enrolled in KPP. To support these children, KPP teachers are required to participate in professional development opportunities and coaching, and possess specific qualifications for working with children with special needs. In addition, inclusion specialists are available to support preschool teachers and/or children, and professional development is required for preschool teachers who serve children with special needs.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). The preschool program does not have direct access to Title III funds and English Language services begin in kindergarten. However, schools may have access to the Title III coordinator or staff in the district for support and resources. According to preschool regulations, there must be staff and program resources reflecting the racial and ethnic population of the children in the program and child assessments used are expected to consider the cultural background of the children.

High quality teaching. ECERS-R observations conducted as part of the Preschool Program Review (P2R) process were not available for review. In addition, all KPP programs are required to participate in Kentucky All STARS, the state's QRIS, and maintain a level 3 or higher rating. However, only levels 4 and 5 requires a structured observation score of 4.0 and 5.0 respectively.

A formal, third-party longitudinal evaluation was completed by the University of Kentucky and University of Louisville in 2014 as part of a state-wide evaluation of the star rating system. The sample of KPP classrooms was quite small: 20 classrooms. Nevertheless, CLASS scores were in the low to mid-range for Instructional Support (M=2.55) and in the mid-range for Emotional Support (M=5.5) and Classroom Organization (M=4.94). A NIEER study of 47 classrooms several years ago found similar CLASS scores: for Instructional Support (M=3.1), Emotional Support (M=5.4), and Classroom Organization (M=4.7). Average ECERS-R in the NIEER study was 4.26. This essential element was not able to be determined due to the small sample size of both studies.

Professional development. Beyond the 24 clock hours of professional development teachers are required to receive annually, educators are offered training, on-site consultation, and other services through RTCs and ELLNs. Only teachers located in public schools are required to participate in coaching and have individualized professional development plans utilizing the Danielson Framework.

Child Assessments. Based on a list of recommendations in the Kentucky Continuous Assessment Guide for classroom/instructional assessments, KDE has approved five assessments for preschool programs: (1) Assessment, Evaluation and Programming System (AEPS); (2) Carolina Curriculum for Infants/Toddlers/Preschoolers with Special Needs; (3) Teaching Strategies GOLD; (4) COR Advantage; and, (5) Work Sampling System. Most programs have selected and implemented Teaching Strategies

GOLD. Assessments are required to be completed, at minimum, twice a year, once in the fall (August 1 to October 1) and once in the spring (March 1 to May 1). Data from the observations are used to adjust curriculum and track child and program levels over time. As previously noted, KDE and RTCs provide leadership, service and support to school districts to ensure child assessments are implemented with fidelity.

Data-driven decision-making. The state evaluates local program quality through the Preschool Program Review (P2R) process. Every district receives a visit from a KDE site visit team once every five years, or a visit from the Regional Training Center (contractor with KDE) to conduct an ECERS-R observation. Additionally, seven to ten school districts are randomly selected to participate in a Consolidated Monitoring (CM) site visit. During this CM process each district receives a site visit from a KDE team that includes one or more preschool team members. After the CM visit, the district receives individual program reports (preschool, Title I, etc.), a consolidated monitoring report, and follow up technical assistance. The CM report includes collective strengths and concerns noted by individual program reviewers across the entire school district. In addition, all KPP programs are required to participate in Kentucky All STARS, the state's QRIS, and maintain a level 3 or higher rating. KPP teachers located in public schools participate in Kentucky's Teacher Professional Growth and Effectiveness System.

In November 2016, the Education Assessment and Accountability Review Subcommittee approved OEA to study the state's preschool and kindergarten programs. The study was intended to analyze funding, enrollment, characteristics and outcomes of preschool and kindergarten programs at the state and district levels, including the number of districts that are implementing full day kindergarten. The study offered 15 recommendations for improvement, including further study to better meet the needs of Limited English Proficiency students and steps to comprehensively evaluate the preschool program once every five years beginning in 2020. Also, the study stated that free and reduced priced lunch (FRPL) students and students with an individualized education program (IEP) who enroll in preschool are more likely to test ready for kindergarten than their FRPL and IEP peers who do not enroll in preschool.

Integrated System. The state's ELDS are aligned with the required child assessments, however the curriculum that is implemented is not required to be aligned. ECERS observations are integrated into the P2P monitoring process, but this is only an option, not required by Kentucky All STARS. There are also differences in what is expected of teachers and programs that operate in public schools versus nonpublic settings.

On a positive note, the Kentucky Early Childhood Data System assists early childhood programs in reporting children's progress towards meeting the Kentucky Early Childhood Standards and the Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) Child Outcomes, while using recommended practices for the authentic assessment of young children. Given the high percentage of children with special needs in KPP, the integrated system is designed as a "universal design" model with application for all students across different programs.