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

Nevada’s state-funded Pre-K program, initially called the Early Childhood Education Comprehensive Plan when it began in 2001, is now referred to as the Nevada State Pre-Kindergarten Program (State PreK). Although State PreK programs operate in both community-based organizations and school districts, nearly 98% of State PreK children were served in classrooms operated by their local school districts. During the 2016-2017 school year, 65% of school districts (11 out of 17) provided State PreK. Funding is competitive, and awards are determined based on community needs as stated in individual grant applications with preference given to children eligible to attend kindergarten the following year.

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.

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

Political will. Gov. Brian Sandoval (R,) in his second and final term, is viewed as being very supportive of pre-K. During his term, DLL legislation passed (2013), known as “Zoom Schools.” The state allocated $4.6 million to support additional pre-K programs for ELL Students in six school districts that began implementation in the middle of the 2013-2014 school year. Not all of these programs are aligned with state pre-K requirements due to some of the agreements being made without input from the Office of Early Learning and Development (ELD). The rationale for Zoom Schools and other recent legislation, including SB 486 (2013) that allocated $1.5 million to pilot Nevada’s KEA, Silver State KIDS, SB 405 (2015) Zoom expansion, and SB 508 (2015), expansion of full-day kindergarten, is linked to ensuring that students can be reading on grade level by 3rd grade. The Read by 3rd Grade (SB 391, 2015) bill mandates retention of all students who do not meet 3rd grade reading proficiency, starting in 2019.

Recent pre-K budget increases are sufficient to support only a few hundred children; in 2016-2017, enrollment increased to 1,870 children, less than 5% of the state’s 4-year-old population. State PreK funding increased by almost 44%; however, the state ranks 39th in per-child spending among 43 states,
D.C. and Guam operating pre-K programs. The funding increase was due to the required state match for the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG). In 2014, Nevada was awarded a PDG which created 550 new State PreK slots and expanded pre-K to a full-day for 200 of the 1,870 children enrolled in State PreK in 2016-2017. An additional 1,665 children were served with PDG funds, but not enrolled in State PreK.

**Compelling vision and strong leadership.** In 2013, Gov. Sandoval created the Office of Early Learning and Development (ELD) within the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) through an Executive Order. The Office of ELD’s funding was approved by the interim finance committee in June 2014 and is responsible for administering multiple early childhood state and federal funding sources including State PreK and PDG. This reorganization is responsive to input from Nevada’s early childhood system stakeholders, providers, educators, intermediaries, private sector partners, and families of Nevada’s young children, who collectively called for a more coordinated and aligned system of early learning and development.

ELD is led by the Education Programs Director and encompasses all of the agencies responsible for overseeing program quality, interagency coordination, early childhood workforce development, and early learning and development standards for publicly funded early learning programs. The office expanded to twelve people with one FTE responsible for State PreK.

**Education and compensation.** Nevada requires each classroom to have a lead teacher with a BA plus ECE specialization or endorsement. Lead teachers in public schools have the same starting salary, same salary schedule for all years of service as K-3. Salary schedules are also prorated for differences in length of work day or year. Nonpublic school State PreK teachers do not have salary parity; however, most children (98%) are served in public schools.

**Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom.** State PreK has a maximum class size of 20 for 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:10. Maximum class size for 3-year-olds is 16 and staff-child ratio of 1:8.

**Learning time.** The majority of state-funded pre-K programs are half-day (minimum of 10 hours/week) unless braided with PDG funds which results in a full-day program (minimum of 25 hours/week).

**Age-appropriate learning standards.** The Nevada Pre-Kindergarten Standards (2010) are comprehensive and currently being aligned with infant/toddler standards and K-3 standards in an inclusive and comprehensive set of birth-3rd grade standards. The state provides professional development opportunities and provides additional resources to support use of the ELDS.

**System that ensures effective curriculum.** The state does not have an approved or recommended curriculum list; but does require alignment of the locally selected curricula with the ELDS. The state provides TA on curricula implementation and it is reviewed during the competitive application process and site visits.
Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 19.5% of State PreK students were identified as having special needs. The state does not have policies to support children with special needs in inclusion classrooms in State PreK.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Nevada’s policies that support families of DLLs include having recruitment, enrollment, outreach materials, and communication with the family about the program or child in the home language. The state collects and uses information on languages inputs in the home. In 2016-2017, 30% of State PreK students were identified as being DLLs, similarly to the percentage of DLLs in the state (31%). Extra funding is allocated for serving DLLs through Zoom Funding. In addition, the state monitors the quality of bilingual instruction, children are screened and assessed in their home language, and teachers are required to have training/qualifications related to working with DLLs.

High quality teaching. The last set of ECERS and ELLCO observations reported by districts as a part of the legislatively required report occurred in Spring 2015. The spring 2015 results show the 13 project sites had an average ECERS score of 4.22. Average ELLCO scores were 3.41 (out of a 7.0 scale) for the 13 State PreK sites.

Professional development. The State PreK teachers are required to have six PD credit hours every five years, but that is the only uniform policy. Each of the 11 districts that operate State Pre-K classrooms develops an individual PD approach for the PreK teachers. This includes deciding the content and format of the PD and coaching supports, if any.

Child Assessments. In 2016-2017, programs were required to use the Brigance screener that measures all child development domains, which is aligned with the ELDS. Many programs also use Teaching Strategies GOLD, but assessment data are not collected at the state level.

Data-driven decision-making. Funding for program evaluation and ECERS observations was originally available annually, and then reduced to every other year. This funding has since been cut and is no longer available. Programs receiving PDG funds are required to participate in the state’s QRIS. Currently, there are not enough funds to support QRIS participation for State PreK programs that do not receive PDG dollars.

Integrated System. The state requires the ELDS to be aligned with curriculum and child assessments. However, other critical elements of an integrated system are missing, including professional development. With the cuts in funding, data that would support an integrated system are no longer being collected.