

Methodology

This review includes programs meeting NIEER's definition of state-funded preschool programs: Programs must be funded, controlled and directed by the state and serve at least 1% of the state's 3- and/or 4-year-old population. The focus of the program must be primarily educational and offer group learning experiences at least two days per week.¹ In 2016-2017, 59 programs operating in 43 states and D.C. met this definition. Since our 2016 Essential Elements scan, more programs were added, including California's Transitional Kindergarten, Connecticut's Smart Start, Minnesota's Voluntary Pre-kindergarten program, and Oregon's Preschool Promise.

This analysis evaluated the extent to which each state-funded preschool program satisfied 15 "essential elements" found to characterize high-quality public preschool programs. For each element, we determined whether criteria were fully met, partially met, or not met. Some elements were easily judged based on simple, clear evidence that was readily available—for example, whether at least two adults must be present in a classroom. Others required difficult inferences based on complex evidence with considerable unknowns. In a few instances, we could not determine with any confidence whether the criteria were met. In addition to rating the status of each element, we explain the basis for our findings in individual reports for each state. These detailed descriptions offer additional insights into the extent to which each element is present in a state and, by inference, what may be necessary for that to improve.

For each state (or program within a state) the report presents an overview of the preschool landscape, a table listing conclusions regarding each element, and evidence for our judgment on each element. The 15 elements listed below are organized into three sections. The first is the "enabling environment," including two elements among the most difficult to assess: political will and the capacity of preschool's administering agency to provide vision and strong leadership. The second section, "rigorous, articulated early learning policies," has eight elements, most of which were relatively straightforward to judge. The third is "strong program practices," containing five elements. These elements proved the most difficult to assess, as ratings are based on actual implementation, and this requires information that is not always available. For states with multiple programs supporting public pre-k, each program was rated separately on the essential elements in the latter two sections which may vary across programs while the enabling environment elements obtain to all programs within a state.

Enabling environment

- Political will including support from political leadership and, more rarely, judicial mandates

- A compelling vision and strong leadership from early learning leaders

Rigorous, articulated, early learning policies

- Well-educated (BA & ECE expertise) and well-compensated teachers (K-12 pay parity)
- Class size maximum of 22 children
- Two (or more) adult teaching staff in each classroom; maximum teacher to student ratio of 1:11
- At least a full school day is provided to ensure adequate dosage
- Appropriate early learning standards for preschoolers
- Effective curriculum that has systemic support
- Strong supports for education of special needs children in inclusive settings
- Strong supports for dual language learners

Strong Program Practices

- High-quality teaching
- Professional development (PD) to improve individual teacher performance
- Child assessments that are appropriate and used to inform instruction
- Data-driven decision-making and independent evaluation
- Integrated systems of standards, curriculum, assessment, PD, and evaluation

To evaluate the extent to which each state program reflected the 15 essential elements, we reviewed public documents including, but not limited to, official information posted on the websites of state and local government. In addition, we interviewed key informants in each state. In many of the states, leaders in state agencies provided extensive assistance and clarification of our interpretations. Ultimately, the authors alone are responsible for all judgments in this report.

Readers are advised to keep in mind that our assessments refer to 2018, and circumstances and policies change. We will update the report periodically, but change in the enabling environment or policies can occur quickly-- for better or worse. Practices and the quality of their implementation tend to change more slowly, but ultimately are influenced by the enabling environment and policy context.

Criteria for Rating the 15 Essential Elements

For each of the essential elements we provide a brief description of the element and how it was assessed, followed by key criteria used to categorize each element as Fully Met (FM), Partially Met (PM), or Not Met (NM). For a more complete description of each element and the rationale behind it readers are referred to the Minervino’s original study.ⁱⁱ

Political will. Political leadership and, more rarely, judicial mandates can provide the necessary political will to create, scale up, sustain, and adequately fund high-quality early education. To the extent possible, judgments are based on actions of the Governor and legislature--not just their statements. Increases in funding, quality standards and enrollment, and legislation passed are the strongest indicators. Other strong indicators of political include ballot initiatives and court orders. Also important, but carrying less weight, are actions and statements of business leaders, philanthropic institutions and advocates.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Recent history of substantial increases in funding for expanding quality programs and strong initiatives by the governor or legislature. A ballot initiative or court order that is implemented as intended also would meet the criteria.	Some of the FM elements, but not all, possibly because there is strong opposition or there are other problems. Some evidence of willingness to fund and to legislate high quality.	No progress or decline in funding or enrollment with very inadequate support for quality. Governor and/or legislature strongly opposed.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. Senior early learning leaders, particularly those in the state agency administering the program, articulate a strong vision and exert effective leadership to make that vision a reality. Components include a well-designed early learning system with high expectations and the ability to communicate and successfully advocate for this with internal and external audiences. In addition to qualitatively meeting these criteria, the size of the office of early learning staff and any regional and district level support was taken into consideration. Additional supports for leadership could come from outside the agency, for example, from higher education, or influencers such as business, foundations, and advocacy groups.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
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Highly competent and active state office of early learning (or similar agency) that has articulated a vision of quality through regulation, guidance, technical assistance, materials, and other support, including from higher education.	Either the number of staff is far too limited to provide adequate direction and support to the system, or the ability of state administrators to lead is limited, perhaps by agency policy, authority of ECE specialist (i.e. hierarchy in the system), or politics.	There is a weak early childhood office that is unable to lead or regular turn-over in leadership or positions. Limited and fragmented authority would be one reason this could occur. Some may have only one or two staff.
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Education and compensation. All lead teachers have at least a BA degree plus suitable credentials in early learning and are paid at same level as K-12 teachers.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
All or nearly all teachers have a BA with early childhood teacher license that is the same as or equivalent to that required for public school teachers and the same compensation (or at least salary) as K-12 teachers. Both must apply.	Both salary parity and qualifications (teacher early childhood license and BA) hold in some sector (e.g. public schools or one of several programs) but not others.	Teachers are not required to have a BA or are not paid on par with K-12 in any sector.

Class Size. All classrooms have a maximum of 22 children in each classroom. This is not just required by policy but is also maintained in practice. We report each specific policy and acknowledge that small upward departures might make no discernible difference. However, reducing the number of children in the classroom may improve impacts significantly.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
No more than 22 children in a classroom.	The maximum class size of 22 children is met in one sector but not another.	Maximum class size exceeds 22 children in all sectors.

Two adults in the classroom. All classrooms have a maximum of 11 children per teaching staff person. This is not just required by policy but is also maintained in practice. We report each specific policy and acknowledge that small upward departures might make no discernible difference. However, reducing the number of children per staff substantially below 11 might improve impacts significantly. All classrooms are required to have at least two teaching staff, typically a lead teacher and an assistant.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Required of all programs, but an exception is allowed if policies permit one adult when a classroom contains 11 or fewer children and this is not commonplace.	Two adults are required in the classroom in some sectors, but not others.	One adult is allowed for classes of more than 11 children.

Learning time. Most children are served or offered a full school day preschool program.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Meets the definition of a full school day in that state (or is within a half-hour). Some states count only “instructional” time and others count hours children are on the premises, so hours may not be strictly comparable across states or cities. Even if state policy does not require a full-day program, but most children attend for a full-day, this meets the learning time requirement.	One sector (e.g., public schools or a major city) fully meets the criterion, but another did not.	Minimum number of hours is less than a full school day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The state has comprehensive learning standards that are age and developmentally appropriate and the state strongly supports (e.g., materials, guidance, and professional development) their influence on practice.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Comprehensive standards that are well articulated and mandated or strongly supported with an emphasis on	Some sector fully meets the criterion of age-appropriate learning	No comprehensive standards or they are clearly inappropriate and not

appropriate practice.	standards.	evidence based.
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System that ensures effective curriculum. The state guides and supports the adoption and use of research-based curriculum aligned with the early learning standards, connected to a system of professional development, and implemented with high fidelity.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
The state mandates one or a choice of several evidence-based models. The state strongly promotes and supports the use of evidence-based curriculum through guidance, training, and professional development. Approval processes and requirements for written documentation carry weight.	The state does much of what is required for FM, but not all.	The state offers a multitude of choices including curricula that are proven ineffective or leaves the selection of curricula entirely to local discretion without strong guidance and support.

Support for students with special needs. Programs provide strong supports for children with special needs including an emphasis on inclusion. Preschool special education is integrated into the continuous improvement process and other key components of the early learning system.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Strong programs as demonstrated by regulations and guidance, support staff at the state and other levels, and an emphasis on inclusion. Preschool special education participates in a statewide continuous improvement or accountability system. One office administers both preschool special education and regular preschool; or the two offices have formal methods to work closely together.	Meets some of the criteria for FM, but not all.	Limited guidance and support for programs that support children with special needs.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Programs have a well-developed strategy for educating young DLL children that recognizes their unique needs and the importance of home language and culture. The state strongly supports the implementation of this strategy with guidance, materials, and professional development. Ideally, bilingual teachers lead classrooms where there is dominant language other than English. Bilingual paraprofessionals also may be part of strong system of supports.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Strong programs as evidenced by regulations and guidance, support staff at the state and other levels. The state has requirements for bilingual staff in local programs. state offers bilingual, dual immersion, and other approaches that support home language as well as English acquisition; and monitors the quality of these programs. State policies support DLL children, for example, by requiring that outreach and materials be provided in the home language, requiring that children are assessed in their home language, or providing programs with additional funding to help serve DLL children. Some mix of this is required.	This holds in some sector but not others, or the state has some provisions and support but no requirements.	Limited guidance and support or requirements for English only.

High-quality teaching. Teachers have high expectations in a system with high expectations and teaching practice is good to excellent. This requires teachers who focus on intentional teaching that strongly supports achievement and socio-emotional development, as well as approaches to learning including curiosity, a love of learning, persistence and strong sense of self-efficacy. The strongest evidence of high-quality teaching comes from representative samples directly observed using standardized measures (e.g., CLASS, ECERS-R).ⁱⁱⁱ Strong structural features of programs are not by themselves enough to conclude that teaching is high quality. However, weak structural features are enough to conclude that high-quality teaching is not taking place.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
ECERS-R, CLASS, or other scores show	This is fully met in some	Direct observation indicates

<p>that teaching in the vast majority of classrooms is strong: specifically ECERS >5, CLASS scores > 5 on Emotional Support and Organization and > 4 on Instructional Support. This is not rigid. A program that scored above 3 on Instructional Support but with other evidence of good teaching and effectiveness would fully meet the criteria. If state regulations, guidance, technical assistance and other activities provide systemic support that seems strong enough to produce high quality teaching, this may be scored FM in the absence of representative (e.g., statewide) observation. Evidence of strong child gains in learning and development can contribute to the scoring, but it is not conclusive, as learning is influenced by factors outside the classroom.</p>	<p>sector (e.g., public schools only). Representative data show an ECERS-R average near 5 or a CLASS Instructional Support >3 (again this is not rigid if other evidence indicates high quality). The state's efforts may be strong enough to support high quality teaching, but are not strong in every respect.</p>	<p>that most programs are not good or better. Rated NM if there are no recent statewide observation data and the state's capacity to systemically support high-quality teaching is not strong.</p>
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Note: This element is rated not determined (ND) if no recent data are available and a clear judgment of support for high quality teaching cannot be made from other information.

Child assessments. Child assessments are aligned with standards and are used to inform teaching with a focus on improving outcomes for children. Assessments inform administrators, teachers, and others who support teacher improvement. The state provides training and other supports provided to ensure teachers and program leaders can use assessments well.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
<p>Regulations and guidance specify the use of assessments to inform teaching. These are part of a continuous improvement system with coaching or other professional development of staff around use of assessment that is strong evidence.</p>	<p>The above holds in some sector (e.g., public schools only), or the state has some of these provisions and support but use of assessments is not required or state capacity to support is</p>	<p>No, or very limited, guidance and support.</p>

Training is provided in the use of assessments.	limited.	
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Data-driven decision-making and independent evaluation. Data are collected and regularly used at all levels from the teacher on up to inform decisions regarding practice and improvement. Independent evaluation has been conducted, preferably within the past 10 years. The state supports the use of data for decision-making by others and uses data to drive its decisions. Ideally, there is a state-supported continuous improvement system operating at all levels.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Regulations and guidance specify and the state supports the use of data for decisions. If these are part of a continuous improvement system that is strong evidence. Some evidence that data is used at the state level as well as the local level.	This holds in some sector (e.g., public schools only), or the state has some provisions and support for data-driven decision-making, but state assessments, data systems and capacity to support are limited.	No, or very limited, guidance and support or little quality data is available.

Professional development. Professional development is most effective when sustained as part of a continuous improvement cycle with high expectations for teachers. Professional development is both formal and informal (e.g., peer mentoring). The state and other organizations within the system have adequate capacity to provide sufficient quality and quantity of professional development.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Regulations and guidance specify personalized professional development, which typically requires coaching, and there is adequate capacity to deliver it at the local	This holds in some sector (e.g., public schools only), or the state has some provisions and support but it is too limited with respect to reach	The state requires and offers no, or very limited, guidance and support for professional development.

and/or state levels Ideally, there is policy that supports this systemically. Evidence could include requirements for an adequate number of trained staff to provide in-depth, regular coaching to teachers.	or hours to support high quality.	
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Integrated system. Law, regulation, and (or) the state’s activities align standards, curriculum, professional development, and assessment. The state has adequate capacity to support this through the office administering the program and interagency groups.

Fully Met (FM)	Partially Met (PM)	Not Met (NM)
Regulations and guidance specify well-designed comprehensive standards, approach to curriculum, assessments, and professional development or an improvement process that are all aligned with adequate supports to implement these as a system.	This holds in some sector (e.g., public schools only), or the state has provisions and the elements but support to actually make it an operational system is too limited.	Little meaningful or systemic alignment.

ⁱ Other criteria include: the state-funded preschool program must be distinct from the state’s system for child care subsidies; the program is not primarily designed to serve children with disabilities; and state supplements to Head Start programs are considered to constitute de facto state-funded preschool programs if they substantially expand the number of children served.

ⁱⁱ Minervino, J. (2014) Lessons from research and the classroom: Implementing high-quality pre-k that makes a difference for young children. Seattle, WA: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ CLASS is the [Classroom Assessment Scoring System](#), which is an observational tool that allows assessing quality in early childhood environments. ECERS is the [Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale](#), which assesses environmental supports and the quality of the process in the early childhood setting.