

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

Delaware’s Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP) started in 1994, providing early childhood services for Head-Start eligible 3- and 4-year-olds. The program was modeled after the Head Start program and requires that participating programs follow Head Start Performance Standards.

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. Although Delaware has not recently passed or proposed much new legislation with regard to early childhood services and systems, recently elected Gov. John Carney (D) is seen as supportive of early learning and proposed additional funding for the state’s QRIS program STARS in his 2018 State of the State Address, an additional \$8.8 million was added to support QRIS efforts for FY 2019. In 2017-2018, 3-year-olds became eligible for participating in ECAP.

Not much additional funding has been added since the state agreed to a \$22 million investment in 2011 to increase the budget for the Delaware Stars QRIS program. Enrollment in the state pre-K program has actually declined as a percentage of the population over the past decade; in 2016-2017, Delaware served less than 10% of 4-year-olds in the state.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Office of Early Learning (OEL) is housed within the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE). In addition to overseeing ECAP, OEL is responsible for administering the state’s QRIS, Delaware Stars; the state’s KEA (Delaware Early Learning Survey); the professional development system for all early childhood programs; early childhood special education (IDEA part B); the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership initiative; and Parents as Teachers.

At the start of the 2016-2017 program year, new Office of Early Learning staff became the ECAP Program Manager and ECAP Monitor, respectively. After a series of meetings and individual visits to

assess program needs at the beginning of the year, the Program Manager and Monitor put in place new communication protocols and reporting procedures. ECAP Directors and Coordinators were given the opportunity to participate in monthly community of practice calls and professional development days. With strong commitment from the Secretary, the DDOE is participating in a CCSSO network for state teams striving to implement the Essential Elements.

Education and compensation. ECAP teachers located in public schools are required to have a BA and specialization training in early childhood; however, those located in nonpublic schools need an AA in early childhood education or a related field in addition to coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education and experience teaching preschool-age children. ECAP teachers working in public schools have the same starting salary and salary schedule for all years of service as K-3; those teachers not working in public schools do not have parity.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. ECAP has a maximum class size of 20 and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:10.

Learning time. ECAP programs are required to provide a minimum of 3.5 hours of services per day. Programs that operate longer than 3.5 hours per day have blended funding from multiple sources to support the additional portion including state subsidy dollars to extend the program day for children.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Delaware Early Learning Foundations (2010) are comprehensive and aligned with infant/toddler standards, K-3 standards, and college and career standards. The state provides an approved list of child assessments aligned with the Foundations and offers additional resources to programs to implement them.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Delaware has a list of state approved curriculum; 18 choices are currently on the list. Curriculum selection and implementation is guided by Delaware Stars. All ECAPs are a Star 4 or 5, and thus follow curricula guidelines and receive technical assistance as a Stars Level 4 or 5 center. The state QRIS has technical assistants that work with programs to ensure curriculum is implemented with fidelity. However, having so many curriculum choices makes it difficult for the state to ensure that all are able to be implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 7% of ECAP children received special education services. To support these students, the state requires that ECAP teachers possess specific qualifications regarding working with children with special needs and participate in professional development. DDOE has created materials and through its Expanding Inclusive Opportunities committee has created publications regarding best practices in inclusion classrooms and will be completing the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center self-assessment on inclusionary practices. Inclusion specialists are also available to support preschool teachers and/or children.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). To support DLLs, Delaware has transitional bilingual programs; dual language immersion classes; and summer language programs. ECAPs follow the federal Head Start Program Performance Standards for serving DLL children, including if a majority of children in a class or home-based program speak the same language, at least one class staff member or home visitor must speak such language. The Delaware Early Learning Foundations requires planned



differentiation for English Learners. However, no system for PD or classroom support has been established, and approved written plans for supporting DLLs are not required of the programs.

High quality teaching. ECERS observations are required for ECAP programs as part of Delaware Stars. Level 4 programs must have a minimum 4.40 on the ECERS and Level 5 needs a 5.4. Actual average scores are not available for review.

Professional development. All lead teachers working in early childhood must meet the state requirement of 18 hours of in-service professional development per year. Ongoing classroom-embedded support is only provided to some teachers, such as new teachers employed by public schools and teachers working in nonpublic schools that must adhere to the 2016 Head Start Program Performance Standards revisions that require coaching in the 2017-2018 program year. The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) housed in the University of Delaware works in conjunction with DDOE and Delaware Stars to provide workshops and trainings for all early childhood teachers. Programs may also request one onsite training session per year that can be tailored to meet the needs of the teaching staff.

Child Assessments. Delaware requires all ECAP programs to use Teaching Strategies GOLD continually throughout the year. Data are used to guide teacher training, adjust curriculum, revise state policies regarding ECAP, and track child and program level outcomes over time. DIEEC offers a series of assessment trainings, including introduction to assessments and Teaching Strategies GOLD specific sessions, for both administrators and teachers.

Data-driven decision-making. All ECAP programs participate in the state QRIS and must achieve a 4 or 5-star rating. Structured observations of classroom quality are conducted in accordance with the QRIS; some classrooms are observed less than one time per year. State policy requires that programs receive on-going feedback based on data collected from these structured observations of classroom quality using the ECERS. Delaware Stars assessors are required to maintain their reliability through the QRIS contract with DDOE.

The most recent formal evaluation of ECAP occurred in 2007.

Integrated system. The Delaware Stars program provides the framework to align the early learning standards, curriculum, and child and program assessments. Delaware Stars is jointly administered by the University of Delaware and DDOE and requires participation of ECAP programs. Some of the websites are not as up-to-date and the overall capacity of the state to support this system is limited.