

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

Georgia’s Preschool Program started in 1992 as a small pilot program and expanded in 1995 to become the nation’s first state-funded universal preschool program for 4-year-olds. State lottery revenues generate funding for the program in a variety of settings such as public schools, private child-care centers, faith-based organizations, Head Start agencies, state colleges and universities, and military facilities.

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
●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	—	—	●	●	●	●

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

Political will. GPK’s established history and presence in every county has created a culture where GPK is considered a “fact of Georgia life,” and as a result has significant political support even though new, visible champions do not necessarily stand out within the legislature. Over its 25-year history, GPK has been supported by each governor beginning with Zell Miller (D) providing the political impetus behind GPK. Governor Deal (R) recently pledged an additional \$50 million to support the quality of the program, which is still recovering from the adverse effects of the Great Recession and decreased lottery revenues.

Budgetary constraints in the preschool program during the 2011-2012 school year resulted in several changes. The program was cut by 20 days, though this reduction was eliminated by the 2013-2014 year, returning the program to its 180-day schedule. Other changes, still in place, included an increased teacher-student ratio of 1:11, and the maximum class size grew from 20 to 22 students. Total state spending for the 2016-2017 school year was almost \$349 million, an increase of approximately \$34 million over the 2015-2016 school year. This increase in funding supported retention of lead and assistant teachers, including salary increases. The program also received funding to serve 2,320 high-need children in Summer Transition programs during the 2016-2017 school year.

Support for GPK extends to business, philanthropy, and advocates, which have a history of effectively working together to advance high-quality early education. [Voices for Georgia’s Children](#) is an effective



advocacy group and particularly strong proponent of GPK and children's issues in general. [Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students](#) (GEEARS) is another strong organization that has played an important role publicly and privately. GEEARS is part of a [leadership team](#) that includes Georgia Public Broadcasting, United Way of Metro Atlanta, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, and others. GEEARS has been instrumental in coalescing the philanthropic community to support early education.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. Georgia has a separate state agency governing services for children birth to five and their families. Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) which oversees programs serving children from birth through five years, including GPK, child care subsidy (CAPS), the Quality Rated tiered quality rating and improvement system, professional development, the Head Start State Collaboration Office and child care licensing. Despite early shifts in DECAL leadership, with new governors typically appointing the Commissioner, there has been remarkable stability within the agency for some time. The Georgia Department of Education (GDE) largely retains authority on K–3 early education programs along with early childhood special education (Title B Section 619), Title I, and literacy initiatives.

Education and compensation. Georgia requires each classroom to have a lead teacher with a BA plus an early learning credential. Funding to programs is based on a formula calculating lead teachers being paid on par with a statewide entry-level kindergarten teacher, regardless of the number of years of experience or advanced credentials teachers may possess. The 2016-2017 budget includes a funding allocation for a two percent increase in salary for both lead and assistant teachers. A new salary scale was also developed for preschool lead teachers based on years of experience to continue supporting salary parity between preschool teachers and K-12 teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Budgetary constraints in the preschool program during the 2011-2012 school year resulted in several changes, including a teacher-student ratio of 1:11 being allowed, and the maximum class size became 22 students. Georgia does not meet NIEER's maximum class size and ratio benchmark, however it does meet Essential Elements.

Learning time. Children attend Georgia's pre-K program five days per week during the school year and services are provided a minimum of 6.5 hours per day. Wrap-around services extending the length of the school day are common in most nonpublic settings, typically funded with child care subsidy or parent fees.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) were last reviewed for the 2013-2014 school year. The GELDS have been aligned with the state's K-3 standards and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework and the Work Sampling System indicators for four-year-olds. DECAL provides a website which includes resources for families, teachers, and providers on the GELDS. All Pre-K teachers are provided with a GELDS manual and toolbox. PEACH is a newly developed interactive website that provides GELDS aligned activities for teachers to use in instructional planning including the ability for teachers to develop, save online, and print lesson plans.

System that ensures effective curriculum. DECAL completes a full curriculum review approximately every 5 years to identify curriculum models that best support Georgia's Pre-K Program (e.g. aligned with the GELDS and WSS). DECAL's approved curriculum list is posted on the DECAL website with guidance regarding selection of a curriculum. Pre-K programs must select a curriculum on the approved list,

however, there is not a system to ensure that it is being implemented with fidelity. Individual programs can request an approval to implement a subject-specific curriculum. Last year, programs were eligible to apply for funding to implement the social emotional curricula, Second Step.

Support for students with special needs. Having made inclusion a priority for more than a decade, DECAL believes it has made significant progress for including children with special needs in state pre-K. Programs must indicate in their annual application if they will be full-inclusion classrooms where a full- or part-time certified special educator (co-teacher) is present, all specialized services are “pushed-in” rather than “pulled-out,” and children attend the program full-time with typically developing peer models. The maximum number of children with an IEP in each preschool classroom is limited to six children. Preschool teachers are required to possess specific qualifications regarding working with children with special needs and participate in PD targeting this population. During the 2016-2017 school year, there were 158 fully inclusive pre-K classrooms with an approved model and full day special education teacher. In addition, there were a total of 2,863 children (3.5% of the total pre-K enrollment) who had an IEP.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Georgia reported that 7,245 pre-K students, or 9% of those enrolled in pre-K, were English Language Learners in 2016-2017. Pre-K programs are required to provide recruitment, enrollment, and outreach information to families in their home languages.

Recognizing the increasing population of young DLLs in communities throughout the state and the challenges this presents for families and schools when children enter kindergarten, DECAL has taken special steps to address the needs of these students. In 2013, DECAL began piloting the Rising Pre-K (RPK) Summer Transition Program to support children registered to enter Georgia’s Pre-K or Head Start in the fall whose home language is Spanish. RPK is targeted to low-income families whose children must be age eligible for Georgia’s Pre-K Program in the upcoming school year. The RPK’s enrollment priority is children whose home language is Spanish. The instruction in these classrooms is taught in both English and Spanish with bilingual staff. During the 2016-2017 summer, DECAL served 770 children in 55 classrooms with a staff to child ratio of 1:7.

High quality teaching. In 2011-2012, CLASS observations were conducted in 199 randomly selected pre-K classrooms. The average CLASS score (on a 7.0 scale) was in the middle to high quality range on Emotional Support (5.5), in the upper end of the middle range on Classroom Organization (5.2), and in the low to middle range on Instructional Support (2.8). Another study reviewed 199 randomly selected GPK classrooms in 2013-2014 and found similar results: ECERS-R average score (3.7) and CLASS average on Emotional Support (5.7), Classroom Organization (5.5), and Instructional Support (2.5).

Professional development. All Pre-K programs have an assigned Education Specialist, with an ECE credential and appropriate experience, who provides classroom-embedded technical assistance and coaching in all classrooms and onsite monitoring for programs. In addition, individual teachers are selected to participate in an intensive professional development project (MMCI PD) focused on improving teacher/child interactions. These teachers are provided on-going in-class coaching, regular observations and attend monthly professional learning community sessions incorporating CLASS. The amount of supports and visits is differentiated based on teacher and program needs. New teachers



receive additional visits while veteran teachers may only be visited 2 or 3 times a year. Teachers participating in the MMCI PD receive monthly coaching sessions.

Teachers in programs who are in the Quality Support Program (Funding Probation) receive, at a minimum, quarterly classroom observations and goal setting and targeted technical assistance. In addition, teachers who are identified as struggling with classroom management or dealing with challenging behaviors receive Intensive Professional Development from a regional Inclusion Specialist.

DECAL provides a minimum of 12 clock hours of training each year to all Georgia's Pre-K lead and assistant teachers. Training is customized for the participants based on their lead or assistant teacher role. Programs are required to document the additional 3 hours of appropriate training; all teachers are required to complete 15 clock hours of PD per school year.

Child Assessments. All Georgia's pre-K classrooms are required to use Work Sampling System Online (WSO). A correlation between the GELDS and WSO has been developed. All teachers receive professional development and onsite technical assistance on curriculum, lesson planning and child assessment.

Data-driven decision-making. Georgia conducts yearly CLASS observations to gather a state baseline. These observations are provided to programs for program improvement and to support the development of Professional Development Plans. All classroom observers are DECAL staff who must demonstrate annual reliability for all of the instruments for which they conduct observations. All observation data is collected and reviewed by internal research staff to ensure observations are conducted in a manner supporting the reliability and validity measures established for each tool. Annual professional development is provided for observers, and an internal protocol has established for each observation tool to ensure consistency. For programs participating in the state's QRIS, Quality Rated, classrooms receive ECERS observations.

In 2011, the Georgia General Assembly funded a multi-year evaluation of the program which is being conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, UNC-Chapel Hill. Data on the first two phases of the study have been released and demonstrate significant gains for children participating in the program across all domains of learning. In addition, DECAL has commissioned studies related to professional development for Georgia's Preschool Program teachers and summer transition program.

Integrated System. Standards, curriculum, assessment, instruction, and evaluation are woven together in Georgia's integrated system, emphasizing data-driven decisions on the state, local, and program level. The system encompasses not only pre-K, but also other programs such as child care and Head Start, in part woven together by Quality Rated, Georgia's QRIS.