

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

The Missouri Preschool Program (MPP) began serving 3- and 4-year-olds in early childhood settings in 1998 with the goal of providing access to all families throughout the state, regardless of income. MPP is operated in public schools, private child care centers, and nonprofit agencies. A competitive grant process determines where MPP funds are awarded, with programs serving children with special needs and those from low-income families are given priority. Programs use sliding payment scales, based on criteria including eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch or Department of Social Services income guidelines.

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. Funding for MPP declined in the aftermath of the recession, hitting an all-time per-child low in 2013-2014 in real dollars. Enrollment as a percentage of the population, never more than 5%, is lower than in 2002. In 2014-2015 pre-K spending was \$13.6 million, an increase of more than 73% (inflation-adjusted) from the previous year. However, funding declined the following two years, \$1.9 million in 2015-2016, and another \$2.1 million in 2016-2017. MPP is funded through the state’s Tobacco Settlement Fund. In the 2016-2017 school year, there were 2,646 children attending MPP, a 6% increase from the previous year.

Former Gov. Eric Greitens (R) recently resigned from office. It is too early to determine the degree of support MPP will have with Gov. Mike Parson (R).

In 2018, MPP’s budget was cut by \$5.8 million, half of the current funding due to a provision in the K-12 school funding formula for incorporates Pre-K funding for children age 3 and 4 at an amount up to 4% of the school district’s total number of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Early Learning Section, within the Office of Quality Schools, is responsible for overseeing state efforts to expand and improve early learning opportunities through MPP and two other state programs: Parents as Teachers (PAT), and a small CCDF program. The Office of Quality Schools is one of six offices within the Division of Learning Services within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The Early Learning Section has seven FTEs; however, all early childhood personnel within the section have multiple roles and therefore the state cannot quantify the number of full time equivalencies who oversee MPP.

Education and compensation. For a program to receive state funding, regardless of setting, teachers are required to have a BA with specialization in early childhood. MPP teachers in a public school setting must receive a teaching contract that places them on the same salary schedule as the districts' K-12 teachers. MPP teachers' salaries in nonpublic school settings must be "commensurate with other professionals in similar positions." DESE interprets this as requiring that teachers in private as well as public programs must receive salaries comparable to those of K-12 teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Missouri has a maximum class size of 20, with a teacher to student ratio of 1:10.

Learning time. The program must provide 6.5 hours of educational activities appropriate to the developmental level of the child per day between the hours of 7:30 am and 5:00 pm. Only governmental entities or public school districts (awarded funding prior to FY16) can provide a part-day program (minimum of 3 hours) to better serve those children participating in other district programs, such as Title 1 and/or early childhood special education (in 2016-2017, 8% of MPP programs were part-day). Preschool programs are required to operate five days per week. However, public schools that implement a four-day school week for their K-12 grade levels can also implement a four-day schedule for the preschool program. The length of the preschool day is expected to mirror the length of the K-12 day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Missouri Early Learning Goals, the state's ELDS, are inclusive of children from infants to kindergarten entry. Last revised in 2013, they are comprehensive and are currently being aligned with the newly revised K-12 standards. The state provides resources and PD to support the use of the ELDS.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Currently, four early childhood curricula are approved for use in MPP. In order to be selected, DESE reviews the curriculum using a rubric that evaluates the areas of: valid research, evaluation results, professional development, and developmental appropriateness. Teachers receive training that must be approved and delivered by the curriculum source. Additional support for implementation of curriculum is provided by onsite consultation. There is not a system to measure whether curricula are being implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 11% of MPP students were identified as having special needs. MPP programs must collaborate with the local school district(s) to offer PAT services to MPP families. These services should include, at a minimum, family home visits, group connections, developmental screenings, and access to the Resource Network.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). In 2016-2017, 6% of MPP students were DLLs. State policy does not regulate services for DLLs. The ELS parent guides have been translated into Spanish and Bosnian.

High quality teaching. The only direct observation data on teaching quality available for review are from the 2003 study in which 138 MPP classrooms were observed using the ECERS. Average scores for the classrooms during the 2nd observation cycle were 5.39, clearly above “good” on the 7.0 rating scale. It is unfortunate this data is more than a decade old, as they indicate relatively high quality.

Professional development. All MPP teachers participate in the Learning Communities Project that includes on-site consultation/coaching and regional professional development opportunities. Teachers are also required to participate in continuous professional development (22 clock hours per year) on such topics as the selected curriculum model and the DRDP. Site-based consultations are provided to all classrooms to support program improvement, the number of coaching contact hours vary depending upon the teacher’s needs and experience.

Child Assessments. Following a year of piloting, Missouri adopted the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) as a uniform child assessment instrument for formative and summative purposes. For screening children, there is a list of approved instruments. Lead teachers and assistants in MPP classrooms are required to be trained in DESE-sponsored DRDP trainings. Following this training, teachers and assistants are expected to implement the DRDP as a formative assessment to look at each child’s growth and development to guide learning activities in the classroom.

Data-driven decision-making. All MPP classrooms are observed annually by reliable assessors using the ECERS. Trends in the ECERS information are used to target professional development delivered regionally and by the program consultants/coaches to work with programs on setting goals for improvement. The state also receives the results of the structured observations of classroom quality to target funding for quality improvement efforts; make changes to state policy; provide program staff with technical assistance, mentoring, PD; identify programs for corrective action or sanctions; and make funding decisions about grantees.

Integrated System. The Early Learning Goals provide the foundation that aligns the required child assessment (DRDP) and four curricula choices. Professional development opportunities include a required coaching component that supports the implementation of these elements. Data are collected regularly and used at the program level to enhance quality using the PD system.