

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

The Nebraska Early Childhood Education Grant Program began as a pilot in 1992 and expanded in 2001. The program provides preschool education for children ages three to five. Direct financial support is available on a competitive basis for public schools and education service units that partner with child-care centers, as well as Head Start agencies and/or human services agencies to initiate or expand their early childhood programs. Grantees are obligated to match 100% of the funding using local and/or federal sources.

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. Governor Pete Ricketts (R) took office in January 2015 and is currently running for re-election. One of the state’s urgent needs he identified in his campaign include “providing opportunities” for young people. The state budget is altered annually during the legislative session. Changes in the total budget mean increases or decreases in available funds for serving 4-year-olds. In the 2016-2017 school year, Nebraska reduced state pre-K spending by \$4.3 million (almost 15%) from the previous year, resulting in Nebraska ranking lowest for per-child spending (\$1,948 per child) out of 43 states, D.C. and Guam. When including all funding (IDEA, Title 1, required local match) Nebraska spends \$5,178 per child. Nebraska had a big jump in enrollment in 2009-2010; and in 2016-2017 served 32% of the state’s 4-year-olds and 15% of 3-year-olds.

Nebraska has strong voices from philanthropy and advocacy including the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Voices for Children, and Nebraska AEYC.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The State Board of Education is highly supportive of pre-K and the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) has had a strong and stable staff and support from other organizations in the state. The Office of Early Childhood has 22 full-time staff, 2.8 FTE are assigned to the pre-K program.

The Buffett Institute at the University of Nebraska is taking a leadership role; working with 11 Omaha-area school districts to develop and implement a Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan (mandated by the Legislature) to serve young children birth through third grade.

Education and compensation. All teachers in the Nebraska Early Childhood Education Grant Program are required to have at least a bachelor's degree and training in early childhood education. Those teachers housed in public schools have the same starting salary and salary schedule as K-3 teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Nebraska requires a maximum class size of 20 children for both 3- and 4-year-olds; with a staff to child ratio of 1:10.

Learning time. Most programs operate 3.5 to 4 hours per day for a minimum of 12 hours per week. Programs are encouraged to partner with Head Start and community providers to extend the pre-K day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines (Guidelines) for ages 3 to 5 are currently under revision. The previous version was aligned with K-3 and infant/toddler standards; and the Head Start Outcomes Framework. The state provides professional development opportunities and state sponsored training to support the use of the Guidelines.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Nebraska does not offer guidance on selecting curricula or have an approved list; but does require the locally selected curriculum to be aligned with the Guidelines. The state does not have a system to ensure that curricula are implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 28.9% of children enrolled in the pre-K were identified as having special needs. To support these children, a teacher with special education certification must be available and active in the classroom. Inclusion specialists are also available to support preschool teachers and/or children. The proportion of children with an IEP in each preschool classroom is limited.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). The number of DLLs enrolled in preschool is unknown, however a home language survey is conducted with families.

High quality teaching. In 2016-2017, ECERS-3 observations were completed in 82 classrooms; with an average on 4.19 across all subscales. CLASS observations were conducted in 84 classrooms; the average on Instructional Support was 3.08; Classroom Organization was 5.42; and Emotional Support was 5.96. It is important to note that all new classrooms have ECERS observations completed in the first two years of observations, and then other classrooms that have been in operation longer are selected for observations. Thus, the ECERS averages likely underestimate the quality of the program.

Professional development. Pre-K rules are currently being revised to increase the number of annual training hours. Currently, teachers are required to complete at least 12 clock hours annually of staff development related to early childhood education or child development. The Early Learning Connection (the state's ECE PD system) is facilitated through the NDE Early Childhood Training Center (ECTC) in coordination with the regional system of state and local partners. Classroom-embedded support is not

required; but coaching is available for school district classrooms that participate in the state's QRIS. Teachers in schools that are implementing the Pyramid Model program-wide must receive coaching.

Child Assessments. State policy requires preschool programs to assess children's learning and development during the preschool years with Teaching Strategies GOLD which has been aligned to the state's Guidelines. Observations of child progress are made continually throughout the year; however, data is finalized at standard checkpoints. Data are used to adjust curricula and monitor children's progress. The state provides TA for using Teaching Strategies GOLD and district administrators are responsible for assuring that all staff and contracted providers are adequately trained and mentored in ongoing data collection and entering and scoring child observations. Inter-rater reliability certification is required by the state to be completed every three years, however, districts may require more frequent certification.

Data-driven decision-making. New prekindergarten programs have two years of ECERS-3 observations done by staff who are reliable with the state anchor. After the second year of operation, schools can choose to be observed and rated using either the ECERS-3 or CLASS. Once all of the new classrooms are observed; a percentage of the remaining classrooms are selected for an assessment based on the history of past observations, length of time between observations, etc. The state receives the results of the assessments, however, NDE no longer requires districts to complete an Action Plan for Program Improvement based on the results of the ERS or CLASS observation.

All districts and Education Service Units (ESUs) are required to annually disseminate information about program quality and child outcomes beginning in the first year of operation. In addition, *Results Matter in Nebraska*, the child, program, and family outcomes measurement system, collects, analyzes, and publishes an annual report disseminated to the State Board of Education, Nebraska Legislature, Early Childhood Education Endowment Board of Trustees, and NDE.

There has not been a formal evaluation measuring program quality and/or effectiveness.

Integrated System. There are some components that are integrated in Nebraska's early learning system, most notably the Results Matter in Nebraska which incorporates structured classroom observations and child assessments. The Guidelines have been aligned with the child assessments, self-selected curricula, and used for teacher PD. However, the system does not support a more thorough integration of curriculum, professional development, and ECERS-3/CLASS observations.