

IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Rhode Island

The Rhode Island State Pre-Kindergarten Program began in the fall of 2009 and is offered through public schools, Head Start programs, and private child care. These agencies can apply for competitive grants to provide the pre-K program. All children who turn four years old on or before September 1st and are living in participating communities are eligible for the program, but enrollment is determined through a lottery.

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. Historically, leadership and support for the Rhode Island program has primarily come from Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). The push to invest in preschool was originally driven by the Chair of the Board of Regents, who had read economic studies on pre-K. The Commissioner of RIDE established a demonstration project, followed by redesigning the state funding formula with a built-in mechanism to increase state investment. Using a phased-in approach, \$10 million will be invested over 10 years to expand access to high-quality pre-K, beginning with communities with a high proportion of children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. The goal is that pre-K expansion will create high-quality learning programs, improve access for the students who need it the most, and assure a smooth transition between early childhood and K–12.

Newly-elected Gov. Raimondo (D) has publicly, and within the budget, expressed support for preschool including following through on the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) commitment of adding state dollars to the federal grant. In 2014, Rhode Island was awarded a PDG for a total of \$19 million which has been used to expand access in high-need communities and to improve program monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance. As a result of PDG, enrollment in Rhode Island’s pre-K program nearly doubled between the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, the largest expansion in the program’s history.



RIDE added 17 classrooms (306 children) in 2014-2015 and 60 classrooms (1,080 children) in 2017-2018. The program is set to remain at 1,080 children moving forward. The Rhode Island General Assembly increased the investment in the Rhode Island State Pre-Kindergarten Program by \$1 million for the 2016-2017 school year and the legislature committed another \$1.1 million increase for 2017-2018.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. There is an early childhood section within the RIDE Office of Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum Division staffed with two FTEs responsible for the implementation of the state pre-K program. RIDE uses vendors, including Rhode Island's AEYC affiliate, to deliver professional development and conduct assessments.

Education and compensation. Teachers in the program must have a bachelor's degree with a pre-K-2 state teaching certification. Pre-K teachers have the same starting salary and fringe benefits as K-3 teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. The pre-K classrooms have a maximum class size of 18 and a staff-child ratio of 1:9.

Learning time. All of the State Pre-K classrooms operate for 6 hours a day, 5 days per week.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDS) are comprehensive and aligned to the state's K-3 standards and the Family visiting models (Watch Me Grow and PAT), Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards for kindergarten, and Head Start Standards. State pre-K teachers are required to participate in comprehensive PD focused on understanding and using the RIELDS.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Rhode Island does not approve curricula, but does provide a list of reviewed curricula where an alignment has been done based on a variety of indicators. The state has sponsored training, provides ongoing teaching assistance, and additional funding to support curriculum implementation. The state does not monitor fidelity of implementation of a specific curriculum, but does monitor implementation of curricula through written frameworks as well as observations and interviews.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 11.9% of children enrolled in pre-K were identified as having special needs. To support these children, teacher professional development and teaching assistance are offered. Written policies to support children with disabilities are required in program documentation, and data are collected on the role of state pre-K during the referral/IEP process.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). In 2016-2017, 24% of the state preschool enrollment are DLLs, much greater than the estimated 17% of DLLs in the state. To support DLLs the state allocates extra funding and the following program options are permissible: monolingual non-English classes, transitional bilingual programs, DLL immersion classes, and DLLs pulled out for ESL. Materials are provided in English and Spanish, and communities can hire translators in a multitude of languages to meet local needs. Programs are encouraged to find ways to communicate with families in their home



language; however, this is not required. Two percent of preschool lead teachers and 20% of assistants are fluent in a language other than English.

High-quality teaching. In 2009, when the pre-K program was piloted, NIEER was contracted to conduct a randomized control research study to evaluate the effects of Rhode Island's Pre-K pilot program on participating children's early learning outcomes. Children who participated showed significant gains in print knowledge and early math skills compared to a control group. No recent data on instructional quality is available.

Professional development. Beyond the required 20 hours of PD per year, teachers may choose from numerous optional PD offerings based on their needs. RIDE provides training and technical assistance to each program through a vendor who provides in-program/classroom support as well as large group support. At a minimum, monthly onsite coaching visits are required, as is attendance at a portion of the group communities of practice.

Child Assessments. All programs are required to use Teaching Strategies GOLD, which is aligned with the RIELDS. The state sponsors opportunities for programs to implement the tool through TA and PD opportunities, including coaching.

Data-driven decision-making. All classrooms are observed using a structured classroom observation tool (CLASS or ECERS), one time per year. If a lead teacher leaves mid-year, then another assessment occurs. Rhode Island uses a vendor, the state's AEYC and QRIS assessment team to conduct the observations. The assessors are reliable and are required to attend drift and inter-rater reliability training. After the observations, the assessors compile the final scores and reports and share with RIDE. Reports are reviewed by the state and then sent to the program and the program's coach. Programs are required to write an improvement plan for any scores below a 5 on ECERS or CLASS.

In 2011, NIEER conducted a randomized control research study to evaluate the effects of Rhode Island's Pre-K pilot program on participating children's early learning outcomes. Children who participated showed significant gains in print knowledge and early math skills compared to a control group. Rhode Island is contracting with Child Trends for another evaluation, beginning in 2017 continuing through when the children are in kindergarten. Classroom quality data obtained through QRIS assessors, as well as child level measures taken at three points in time (the start of pre-K, end of pre-K, and 1st grade), will be used for the evaluation to gauge child outcomes, overarching classroom quality and an analysis of long-term costs.

Integrated System. RIELDS has developed an integrated system that ensures alignment of curriculum and assessment with implementation improvement informed by classroom observation and other data.