

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

Building upon the 1998 Early Childhood Education Pilot Project, Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) was launched in 2005 following enactment of the Voluntary Pre-K for Tennessee Act (2005). Since 2012, almost every district has offered at least one full-day VPK classroom where low-income, homeless, or children in foster care receive priority enrollment. Only public schools are eligible to apply for state-funded VPK grants through a competitive process. Districts may, however, contract with private child care agencies, Head Start agencies, institutions of higher education, public housing authorities, and any three-star QRIS rated program in a community-based or private child-serving agency.

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. Political will has been historically evident from the Governor’s Office through the legislature. Strong bipartisan support was evident with the passage of the Voluntary Pre-K for Tennessee Act of 2005 and support continues although state funding for the program has not increased in recent years. Gov. Haslam is intent on maintaining support for VPK, though publicly most attention has been placed on early literacy in third grade. The Pre-K Quality Act (2016) enhanced quality requirements, including the use of child formative assessments.

Since its inception, VPK has relied on numerous funding sources, including general education revenue and, in the past, lottery revenue and federal TANF funds. State funds for the VPK program have been mostly level since the 2014 school year. Federal Head Start, IDEA, Title I, and other funds are used to provide the required 25% local match. Districts have used the same funding, \$117,490 per classroom, to operate VPK for the past three years. VPK enrollment leveled off between 2008 and 2015 but in 2016 increased by almost 2,000 students, where it remained level in 2016-2017, when 18,640 at-risk children were served. Some of this increase in enrollment can be attributed to Tennessee being awarded a competitive federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) for \$17.5 million to expand pre-K enrollment in

Nashville and Shelby County. PDG funds supported 1,320 children in new slots and 3,380 in improved slots in VPK classrooms in 2016-2017.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Tennessee State Department of Education (TDOE), Division of Early Learning and Literacy has administrative author of VPK. In the past few years there have been several leadership changes. Funds are distributed to LEAs with limited support from the state due to the size of the state staff. The current state education Commissioner has been supportive of protecting VPK and making public statements about pre-K's importance for student outcomes. Early learning leadership in TDOE was weakened under the previous Commissioner.

Education and compensation. Tennessee requires each classroom to have a lead teacher with a BA plus an early learning credential. Lead teachers in both public and nonpublic schools are paid on par with district salary schedules. In 2016-2017, all lead teachers had at least a BA and 53% of assistant teachers had at least a CDA.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Tennessee has a maximum class size of 20 for 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:10. Maximum class size for 3-year-olds is 16 and staff-child ratio of 1:8. In mixed-age groups, a maximum of eight 3-year-olds can be in the class with twelve 4-year-olds. If there are nine or more 3-year-olds, the classroom capacity is 16. Two adults are required in each VPK classroom.

Learning time. Children attend VPK five days per week during the school year and services are provided for a minimum of 5.5 instructional hours per day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Tennessee Early Learning Development Standards for 4-Year-Olds (TN ELDS) are currently being revised. The current version is aligned to the state's K-3 standards and includes content that support dual language learners. State policy does not require child assessments to be aligned with TN ELDS. Guidance documents and professional development opportunities to support the use of the TN ELDS have been provided by the state and will continue once they are revised.

System that ensures effective curriculum. Tennessee maintains a list of approved curricula for the state-funded pre-K Programs to choose from. In 2016-2017, there were 37 curricula (22 were identified as comprehensive curricula) on their approved list. This year, the state engaged in a thorough curriculum review process with a rubric to guide decision-making and settled on three curriculum choices that met the identified criteria including alignment with the TN ELDS. The state is currently in the process of developing curriculum-sponsored trainings and providing ongoing technical assistance to the districts.

Support for students with special needs. Children with IEPs are considered as Tier 2 priority for enrollment in the VPK program after ensuring all income-eligible students are enrolled. In 2016-2017, 3.9% of VPK children received special education services. VPK teachers are required to possess specific qualifications regarding working with children with special needs. In addition, if the ratio of students with IEP exceeds 50%, teachers are required to have a specialized license.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Tennessee is not able to report the number of DLLs enrolled in VPK. Bilingual instruction is permitted in VPK. To support VPK families, recruitment, enrollment and outreach information and other communication with the family about the program or child is in the family's home language. TN ELDS include standards on cultural awareness.

High-quality teaching. During the 2014-2015 school year, the Peabody Research Institute (PRI) at Vanderbilt University was involved in the fifth year of an ongoing external evaluation on the effectiveness of the VPK program. PRI reports that the quality of pre-K programs across the state is inconsistent, and in some cases below expectations, based on ECERS classroom observations. ECERS data collected by PRI on a statewide sample find that the average ECERS score is about 4 with the Activities subscale at 3 (on a 7.0 scale). Only a very small fraction of classrooms scored 5 or higher overall.

Professional development. All lead teachers working in public schools must meet the state requirement of 30 hours of in-service PD per year. The 18 hours required in early childhood for preschool teachers may count toward this total. In 2017-2018, the requirements will increase to 24 clock hours per year for Directors, Teachers, and Assistants; and 30 hours in 2018-2019. The PDG grant has provided more intensive and ongoing training and coaching supports in Metro and Nashville districts. VPK teachers are required to participate in teacher evaluations which guide teacher support, but the extent of the coaching and mentoring is unknown and not coordinated by the state.

Child Assessments. The 2016 Pre-K Quality Act required all VPK and kindergarten classrooms to utilize a state board-approved pre-K and kindergarten student growth portfolio system for evaluating pre-K and kindergarten teachers. In 2017-2018, the student growth portfolio was implemented. Teachers and districts are required to choose an assessment from a state-approved list to demonstrate student achievement. Student achievement scores count as 15% of a teacher's evaluation. Fifty percent of the evaluation is based on classroom observation and the remaining 35% is based on student growth, which comes from a student growth portfolio model. It does not appear that the portfolio is aligned with the TN ELDS.

Data-driven decision-making. State law requires two site visits per year to monitor for compliance with rules and regulations. In addition, new teachers are evaluated four times per year. ECERS and ELLCO are used by district leaders when new classes are opened, when new teachers are hired, and at least once every 5 years thereafter. Program evaluators attend regular trainings and reliability testing, submitting all documentation. Data collected during monitoring are used to create program improvement plans at both the state and local level.

As previously described, an external longitudinal evaluation is currently being conducted by PRI.

Integrated System. In 2017-2018, Tennessee implemented a child assessment system that is aligned with pre-K and K. However, the TN ELDS do not appear to have been incorporated into the development of these assessments. CLASS and ECERS data are collected and used at the program level, but not at the state level.