

## IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: Texas

In 1985, Texas began funding half-day prekindergarten for eligible 4-year-olds through the Texas Public School Prekindergarten program. Currently, districts that have 15 or more eligible 4-year-olds are required to offer prekindergarten. Districts that have 15 or more eligible 3-year-olds can also offer prekindergarten, but are not required to do so. Students are eligible to participate if they meet at least one of the following conditions: qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (185% of FPL), homelessness, foster care, parent on active military duty or who was injured or killed on active duty, unable to speak or comprehend English, and/or parent eligible for the Star of Texas Award.

### 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.** In 2015, Gov. Greg Abbott (R) championed for increased pre-K quality, and largely succeeded in having his proposals to incentivize quality enhancement partially supported by the legislature with House Bill 4. Highlights of the passed bill include new data reporting requirements for school districts about pre-K class size, student to staff ratios, and assessments used. The legislation was also attached to a \$118 appropriation over two years, partially restoring the more than \$200 million cut from pre-K as part of \$5.4 billion in education budget cuts in 2011 that touched off the latest school finance lawsuit in Texas. In 2016-2017, state funding for preschool was about \$862 million, a five percent decrease from the previous year. Texas has never had adequate spending per child, and that spending was reduced further in the aftermath of the recession.

In 2017, the Texas Legislature did not appropriate funding to continue the \$118 million High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program or the \$15 million in supplemental funding for prekindergarten. The legislature included Rider 78 in the General Appropriations Act that requires the Commissioner to ensure districts and charter schools with eligible 4-year-olds use at least 15% of their Foundation School Program funds on high-quality efforts. It also passed HB 2039, a new prekindergarten-to-third-grade

teacher certification. In 2016-2017, enrollment as a percentage of the population remained at about 49% of 4-year-olds.

There are private sector supporters of increased quality in pre-K. Raise Your Hand Texas is an education advocacy group supportive of high-quality pre-K. The Texas Education Grantmakers' Advocacy Consortium has pooled funding for prekindergarten research and advocacy. Current membership includes almost 35 Texas foundations. The state's largest two chambers of commerce (Dallas Chamber of Commerce and Greater Houston Partnership) have been strong supporters of efforts to improve pre-K quality and access. There have also been cities that have created new programs, such as San Antonio, or established higher quality standards than what is required by the state.

**Compelling vision and strong leadership.** The Texas Education Agency (TEA) Early Childhood Education Division oversees the free public prekindergarten program in school districts and open enrollment charter schools. TEA has two FTEs responsible for supporting its pre-K program. Additional support is provided by Texas Education Service Centers. House Bill 4 allowed for TEA to increase staffing as necessary to implement the bill. However, the Agency as a whole remains crippled by budget cuts and under-staffing. TEA will find it challenging to acquire the staff necessary to adequately administer and monitor pre-k quality.

**Education and compensation.** Texas 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.

**Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom.** There is no rule regarding prekindergarten class size or staff-to-child ratio, though school districts are encouraged to follow the requirements for kindergarten. If a school district contracts with a private entity to operate the district's prekindergarten program, the program must comply with child care licensing standards. A child to staff ratio of 11:1 with a limit of 22 children per classroom is recommended but not required.

**Learning time.** Children attend pre-K for a minimum of 3 hours per day, five days per week (540 hours per year).

**Age-appropriate learning standards.** The Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines (Guidelines) were revised in 2015. They are comprehensive and aligned with K-3 standards. Training on the guidelines is provided by 20 Regional Education Service Centers (ESCs), which also offer professional development and technical assistance to early childhood education providers within that area. In addition, TEA provides online professional development regarding the Guidelines through the Children's Learning Institute.

**System that ensures effective curriculum.** TEA has a list of six state-approved and recommended curricula for the pre-K classrooms. However, programs are not required to select one of these curricula, nor are they required to be aligned with the Guidelines.

**Support for students with special needs.** In 2016-2017, four percent of Texas pre-K children had identified special needs. State administrative code states that in mainstream classrooms, qualified special education personnel must be involved in the implementation of the student's IEP through the

provision of direct, indirect and/or support services to the student, and/or the student's regular classroom teacher(s) necessary to enrich the regular classroom and enable student success.

**Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL).** In 2016-2017, 88,567 (39.5%) pre-K children were identified as being Limited English Proficient. To support these students, the state requires staff to have training/qualifications related to working with DLLs and monitoring that is focused on the quality of bilingual instruction occurs. Pre-K programming options include: transitional bilingual programs, DLL immersion classes, summer language programs, and having DLLs pulled out for ESL. Each school district with an enrollment of 20 or more students of limited English proficiency in any language classification in the same grade level must offer bilingual education. If fewer than 20 students of limited English proficiency in any language classification are enrolled in the same grade level, the school district must offer a special language program (content-based ESL). To support families, translators are used during Language Proficiency Assessment Committees for parents who do not speak English and during parent/teacher meetings and recruitment, enrollment, communication with the family, and outreach information is provided in the home language.

**High-quality teaching.** There are not any statewide CLASS or ECERS observations available for review.

**Professional development.** In the fall of 2015, the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas-Health Science Center, in partnership with TEA and the Texas Workforce Commission, developed a comprehensive professional development platform for early childhood educators. The Engage platform provides targeted PD on topics in early childhood education, as well as the CIRCLE student progress monitoring tool, coaching resources including an assessment of teacher interactions, a classroom observation tool and parent resources. The Engage platform is free to all pre-K programs as well as all public school teachers, Head Start programs, and licensed child care centers participating in Texas' QRIS.

Teachers must complete 150 clock hours of PD every 5 years. In the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant program that covers approximately 85% of preschool children, the teachers are required to also have 15 hours of mentoring or instructional coaching per year.

**Child Assessments.** Child assessments are required to be aligned with the Guidelines, but pre-K programs can choose the assessment. TEA has developed a list of state approved assessments and provides information about administering the tools.

**Data-driven decision-making.** Currently, TEA does not require the use of structured observations of classroom quality. Currently, TEA monitors the pre-K grantees through the submission of periodic activity/progress reports, a final evaluation report, and other activities related to the evaluation of the program. Formal evaluations have been largely district-driven.

HB 4's intent was to require districts that receive quality funds to conduct evaluations (and to make the results available to parents). It also required the state agency to evaluate the effectiveness of HB 4 funding in improving student learning and to identify effective instructional strategies implemented by school districts with a report of results. However, this is not currently being implemented.



TEA's Early Childhood Data Systems (ECDS) is a state data reporting platform that is part of the Texas Student Data System. Starting in the 2016-2017 school year, school districts and charter schools report demographic information on prekindergarten students enrolled, number of half-day and full-day classes, source of funding, class size/ratio, type of curriculum and the type of progress monitoring tool (if administered). The information collected in ECDS is now being reported at the state, district and campus-level and is available on the Texas Public Education Information Reports (TPEIR) web page.

**Integrated System.** There are components of the system that are integrated, but with the ability for decisions to be made at the local level, it is difficult for the state to coordinate PD, curriculum implementation, and child assessments. If funding is available to implement HB4, the likelihood of the system being more integrated from the state level is greater.