

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

Vermont has a 30-year history of providing state-funded preschool. In 1987, the Vermont Early Education Initiative (EEI) was created as an annual competitive grant program to finance early education opportunities for at-risk 3- to 5-year-olds. Act 62 was signed into law in 2007, which significantly expanded publicly funded prekindergarten education for 4-year-old children in public schools and private programs. With Act 62, pre-K programs were supported through the state’s Education Fund similarly to K–12, pro-rated based on the 10 hours per week model. In the 2014 Legislative Session, legislators passed Act 166, which built on Act 62 by requiring all Vermont school districts to provide prekindergarten funding for each and every 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old child not enrolled in kindergarten, for a minimum of 10 hours per week for 35 weeks annually. The 2016-2017 school year was the first year of full implementation of Act 166.

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. Gov. Philip Scott (R), who follows Gov. Peter Shumlin (D) who had been seen as a strong supporter of pre-K and other early childhood issues, has publicly supported expansion of the pre-K program. Act 166 (2014) establishes universal access to publicly funded pre-K for all 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds who are not enrolled in Kindergarten. All Vermont school districts must provide universal publicly funded prekindergarten education for a minimum of ten hours per week for 35 weeks annually. Act 166 was to come into effect on July 1, 2015. However, as a consequence of the Transition Relief Bulletin, school districts were able to delay fully implementing the requirement until July 1, 2016. Act 166 was a result of some school districts opting out of pre-K in Act 62. With Act 166, if a pre-K program is on a list of qualified providers, then the school must reimburse that pre-K provider for pre-K services when they occur. Funding for Act 166 is provided by a mix of federal, state, and local dollars. Federal funding in 2016-2017 came from various sources, including a \$33 million, four-year federal Preschool Expansion

Grant. In 2016-2017, 75% of the state's 4-year-olds and 60% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded pre-K.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. Act 166, is co-administered by the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and the Agency of Education (AOE), administrative rules were promulgated by AOE in conjunction with AHS. Prior approval from AOE and AHS must be received before a school district may establish or expand a school operated pre-K program. If a program has three STARS or fewer in the state's QRIS, then an improvement plan must be approved by both secretaries. School districts can establish a pre-K region that has implications for payment to community-based organizations that are serving Act 166 children. After the hearings and public comment period, both secretaries need to approve or deny the regions.

There have been several leadership changes of the Integrated Support and Learning, PreK–Middle School Division, AOE (ISL/AOE) which administers pre-K. ISL/AOE currently has a staff of six assigned to pre-K. AHS is the umbrella agency for six health and human services related departments including Department of Children and Families (DCF) that administers the QRIS system, SStep Ahead Recognition System (STARS).

Education and compensation. Pre-K teachers located in public schools must have a BA and teacher specialization. These teachers have the same starting salary and schedule as K-3 teachers, prorated for differences in length of workday or year.

For teachers located in nonpublic schools, there must only be one certified teacher in the center with a BA, regardless of the number of classrooms. Salary schedule is prorated for differences in length of workday or year, there are no other salary parity policies.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Vermont has a maximum class size of 20 for 3- and 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:10.

Learning time. Vermont funds pre-K programs to operate 10 hours per week, 350 hours per year. The number of days per week programs operate are locally determined.

Age-appropriate learning standards. Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) for birth through grade 3 were approved by the State Board of Education in August 2015. The VELS are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, Common Core State Standards in English language arts and Mathematics, as well as Next Generation Science Standards. The VELS are comprehensive and much more extensive, covering children birth to 3rd grade, than the previous standards that only covered pre-K. The state provides professional development opportunities and additional resources to support the use of VELS, along with regional trainings. VELS family engagement training materials have also been developed and are being implemented.

System that ensures effective curriculum. There is not an approved list of curriculum models, but the curricula must be aligned with the VELS. Act 166 also specifies that the curriculum must be secular. During the application process programs need to identify how they are going to meet VELS domains. Currently curricula programs chose or describe are tracked by ISL/AOE, but not monitored or evaluated.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 12.5% of pre-K students were identified as having special needs. Co-teaching models are required in preschool inclusion classrooms. In addition, pre-K teachers are required to possess specific qualifications and attend PD for working with children with special needs. Inclusion specialists are available to support preschool teachers and/or children. Pre-K programs are required to follow the Division for Early Childhood's (DEC) best practices.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). The exact number of DLLs enrolled in pre-K is unknown. The state anticipates developing a state guidance document to support serving children who are DLLs during the 2018-2019 school year. Currently, the state provides training and technical assistance for working with DLL students.

High-quality teaching. All pre-K programs are required to participate in STARS and be higher than a level 3 or be NAEYC accredited. In order to be at a level 5, a program needs to have 15-17 points. In order to get 15 points, a program needs to have a 5.0 or higher on the ECERS/CLASS. In 2017, 51% of the pre-K programs had five STARS.

Professional development. Pre-K teachers in public school classrooms are required to have 9 credit hours per 7 years; teachers in nonpublic setting are required to have 12 clock hours per year. Vermont does not currently require coaching as a PD component. There are multiple PD offerings that include coaching to support and increase implementation of evidence-based practices in the early childhood setting. Early Multi-Tiered System of Supports is a prime example of training on content that includes practice based coaching elements to ensure implementation in the state.

Child Assessments. The VELs are aligned with Teaching Strategies GOLD, the required child assessment tool that must be used in all pre-K classrooms. ISL/AOE offers several different TS GOLD trainings. Funding for Act 166 classrooms has been increased with the goal of giving teachers more time to complete the components of TS GOLD. Data are used to guide teacher training, professional development, or technical assistance and to track child and program level outcomes over time.

Data-driven decision-making. Vermont is in the process of designing a pre-K monitoring and improvement system. Currently, a CLASS observation is required once every three years. Programs can request more frequent observations. A write-up is provided to both the program and the Vermont QRIS system, but it is unclear how the state uses this data. There is one state level technical support FTE devoted to this ensuring reliability and validity. All pre-K programs are required to participate in STARS and have at least 3 stars with a plan to be at least 4 stars within three years. There has not been a formal evaluation of the pre-K program.

Integrated System. All of the state funded pre-K programs are required to participate in STARS which connects all of the pre-K system components: VELs, the use of TS GOLD, ECERS and CLASS, and teacher licensing. However, supports to implement these various components are not fully developed. Previous federal funding through the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant helped start get the integration of the professional development system, program and child assessment, and data collection. However, these efforts have slowed down as the federal funding has ended. Curricula that are chosen by pre-K classrooms are expected to be aligned with the VELs, but currently there is not a verification process to ensure this occurs.