

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

Wisconsin’s Constitution has included a promise to provide free, voluntary education for 4-year-olds since it became a state in 1848. Districts are not required to offer the Four-Year-Old Kindergarten program (4K), but if they do, it must be open to all age-eligible children. Funds for 4K are paid to public schools, which then may subcontract with private child-care centers or Head Start agencies.

The Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement program is a separate, state-funded program offering supplemental state finances to federal Head Start grantees to provide comprehensive early childhood education for 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities or from low-income families. Participating programs follow the federal Head Start Performance Standards, and children meet Head Start enrollment eligibility guidelines.

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.

Four-Year-Old Kindergarten program (4K)

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

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement

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Political will. Wisconsin 4K has been around many years, and now 96% of the districts offer programs. In the last two budget cycles, there has been nobody, including Governor Scott Walker (R), who has opposed 4K. There is strong support for the concept of quality rating as it applies to child care, but no discussion for scaling up quality beyond the QRIS. Currently, there is a growing interest in voucher and charter school efforts.

In the Head Start State Supplement program, the focus is not on increasing the total allocation, but on getting programs closer to parity with Head Start costs per child. Therefore, the amount of money stayed the same, but the number of children participating was reduced. In 2016-2017, enrollment in the Head Start State Supplement was 681 children (a reduction of 23% since 2014-2015), but enrollment in 4K was 51,292 (an increase of 7% since 2014-2015). Between the two programs, Wisconsin served 72% of the state's 4-year-olds and 1% of 3-year-olds in 2016-2017.

Wisconsin has a fairly interested and involved business sector, with probably a dozen or more people who, if called upon to do advocacy, would do it. The Partnership for Wisconsin's Economic Success was more engaged when there was intensive national effort. At the local level, there are a significant number of philanthropic and business groups, including United Way, working with local agencies around early childhood.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Office of Early Learning (OEL), housed within the Content and Learning Team on the Division for Academic Excellence in Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), is charged with coordinating the statewide early childhood system. The OEL works collaboratively across DPI divisions and other state departments to bring continuity and cohesiveness to the programs associated with early learning. The OEL provides leadership, partnership, policy development, incentives, and technical assistance to the early childhood community for children birth to age eight throughout Wisconsin. OEL has 2.5 FTEs assigned to pre-K who collaborate with counterparts in the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and with universities, to move policy forward.

Education and compensation.

4K: A BA with early childhood teacher license is required for teachers. Salary parity is decided at the local level, but not required by state policy.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: Teachers must have an AA and ECE specialization, as per Head Start requirements. There are no state parity policies, salary and benefit packages are determined locally.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom.

4K: There are no state requirements for class size or staff-child ratio.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: This program 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 17 and staff-child ratio of 2:17. In mixed-age groups, the maximum number of children is 16, with a ratio of 1:8.

Learning time.

4K: The state funds a total of 437 hours per year; districts determine how many days per week the program operates, and if hours will be used for parent outreach. Most programs are part-day, four to five days per week, but an increasing number of rural districts may offer school-day programs two or three days per week. State policies support partnerships with child care and Head Start to extend the number of hours per day or weeks per year.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: Programs follow the federal Head Start performance standards and the grant-approved program design, which is a minimum of 3.5 hours per day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The comprehensive Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (MELS) include infant toddler standards and are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. The state does not have stand-alone K-3 or college- and career-ready early grades standards. The state provides professional development opportunities to support use of the MELS through its training and technical assistance system that includes cross-sector trainers, a 15-hour training, and a variety of resources.

System that ensures effective curriculum. The state does not have a list of approved or recommended curricula. The state provides PD and TA opportunities to support curriculum implementation at conferences, through some technical assistance providers, and through web-based resources. Decisions regarding curriculum selection and implementation fidelity are made at the local level.

Support for students with special needs. Most of the policies to support preschoolers with special needs occur at the local level. Each school district in Wisconsin is responsible for providing a continuum of services to support children who need special education.

4K: In 2016-2017, 13.6% of 4K children received special education services. Programs are required to follow each child's Individual Education Plan providing supports as defined with in the programs and inclusion specialists are available to support teachers and/or children.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: The number of children with special needs is not able to be reported. Inclusion specialists are available to support preschool teachers and/or children.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). The number DLLs enrolled in pre-K programs is unknown.

4K: Federal Title III requirements are followed to support DLLs. Implementation of the policies is locally determined.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: Programs follow the HS Performance Standards regulations. Implementation of the policies is locally determined.

High quality teaching. CLASS or ECERS scores were not able to be reviewed.

Professional development.

4K: Teachers are required to complete 6 credit hours of PD every 5 years. Licensed teachers in public schools have the option of either having a credit-based license renewal or doing a performance-based system that includes writing professional development plans, working with

a mentor, and having a team review and approval. For those in nonpublic schools, coaching is locally determined.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: All lead teachers must complete 15 clock hours of PD per year. Participation in coaching is locally determined, not a state required policy.

Child Assessments.

4K: The state requires a literacy screening in 4K through 2nd grade. The state Response to Intervention and the Comprehensive Screening and Assessment Blueprint both promote ongoing assessment. Tools do not need to align with the MELS and are locally determined. Child assessment data are used at the local level.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: An assessment tool is required, but selected by the program, following Head Start Performance regulations.

Data-driven decision-making. In 2011, Wisconsin committed to developing an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (WI ECIDS) to support regular data exchanges as well as ad hoc research requests. Early childhood data linkages have been established between DPI, DHS, and Department of Children and Families (DCF). The WI ECIDS was implemented in December of 2017 and is now available for use by DPI, DCF and DHS personnel.

4K: The state does not collect structured observations of classroom quality. DPI only conducts onsite monitoring of programs if they are part of Title 1 or IDEA. 4K is monitored by the school district. When 4K is housed in a child care center, child care licensing visits occurs annually. When 4K is in a Head Start program, Head Start monitoring occurs as per the federal monitoring schedule.

4K was last evaluated for both process quality and program impact/child outcomes during the 2003-2004 year.

Wisconsin Head Start State Supplement: The state does not collect structured observations of classroom quality or monitor programs. The state is informed if a Head Start grantee is found out of compliance with federal Head Start Performance Standards following a federal HS review.

Integrated System. Because so many of the decisions are made at the local level, it is challenges to create an integrated system. The state does not establish policies for curricula and assessment choices, PD content and coaching, and structured classroom observations and use of data.