

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

The Alaska Pre-Elementary program is available to 4-year-olds in 11 of 54 school districts and has been operating since the 2009-2010 school year. In the 2015-2016 school year, Alaska changed the way the competitive grants are offered to include two types of grantees: three-year renewal grants allow grantees that were previously receiving funding to design programs based on community needs; and districts that have never received grants are eligible to apply for a one-year pre-elementary development grant. Development grants are geared toward strategic planning to begin implementing or support existing Pre-Elementary goals until they can be switched to renewal grants.

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. Alaska’s state pre-K program had a total budget of \$2.5 million and served children in eight districts for the 2012-2013 school year. There was an \$800,000 drop in funding in 2013-2014 and the program was slated for closure in 2014-2015. Gov. Bill Walker (R) proposed a budget in 2015 calling for elimination of the pre-kindergarten program as well as additional reductions of \$820,000 in grants for other early childhood programs. Supporters of pre-K were successful in ensuring that \$2 million was put back into the FY 2017 budget. Despite these efforts, budget reductions have continued to be a challenge within the state. The switch to renewal grants and pre-elementary development grants has resulted in inconsistent funding for prekindergarten over the past few years which also affected program implementation and quality. In 2016-2017, pre-K enrollment increased by 12%, however, that amounted to a total of 358 children being served, less than 4% of the state’s 4-year-old population.

Alaska has offered a supplement to federally recognized Head Start programs since the 1980s. During the 2016-2017 program year, the state provided \$6.8 million to support Head Start programs in Alaska.



The financial support is part of an effort to develop program quality through school readiness activities and professional improvement. The funds also offer admission to additional children and families whenever possible.

The Alaska Early Childhood Advocacy Group is a coalition of early childhood organizations including: Alaska Head Start Association, Alaska Infant Learning Program Association, Best Beginnings, State Office, and threadAlaska, the state Child Care Program Office, and Department of Health and Human Services.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) is responsible for state public education, including pre-K. DEED's vision of supporting all students to succeed in their education and work does not specify pre-K children; nor does Alaska's Education Challenge, which outlines the state's priorities for addressing student achievement gaps and graduation rates. DEED's early learning lead is the sole person responsible for the state's pre-K program.

Education and compensation. All teachers are required to have a minimum of a BA as well as training in early childhood education. Teacher shortages in Alaska are significant, and districts that cannot find certificated staff can utilize staff with higher degrees in early childhood education who do not meet the certification requirements. State policies do not require pre-K teachers, in either a public school or non-public school setting, to have salary parity with K-3 teachers.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. Alaska allows a maximum class size of 20 children, with a staff-child ratio of 1:10 or lower.

Learning time. The number of hours per day and operating schedule of pre-K classrooms are locally designed to fit district needs. Programs may partner with child care or other services to provide wraparound care, but, by state definition, state-funded pre-K cannot operate more than five hours a day.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The Alaska Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs) were written in 2007 and include infant/toddler standards. The ELGs have been aligned with the Alaska Developmental Profile, the Head Start Child Outcome Framework, and TS GOLD. The state provides additional resources and professional development opportunities to support the use of the ELGs.

System that ensures effective curriculum. While Alaska does not provide a list of state approved or recommended curricula, it does provide additional funding support for Head Start and pre-elementary grantees looking for curriculum resources materials. The state also has materials and offers training to district leaders both in group and individual settings to support curriculum alignment. The state does not have a system to ensure that curricula are implemented with fidelity.

Support for students with special needs. If parents and members of the IEP team determine that pre-K is the least restrictive environment for the child, the child could receive services through pre-K even if he or she did not meet the age requirements. Separate from this, the state does not have any policies related to providing supports for programs serving preschool children who have special needs enrolled in inclusion classrooms in this state-funded preschool program. In 2016-2017, 30 children (8% of the total number enrolled) received special education services.

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). Alaska is not able to report the number of DLLs enrolled in pre-K nor does the state have any specific policies to regulate services for these children. The state's ELDS include content related to serving DLLs.

High quality teaching. Even though the state does not collect structured classroom observations, a two-year evaluation of the program occurred in 2011 and 2012. The *2012 Alaska Pilot Pre-Kindergarten Project (AP3) Year Two Report* found that the ECERS-R average scores ranged from a 3.15 to a 6.68; with an aggregate score of 5.44 in spring 2011. While the overall average score falls within those of high quality classrooms (great than 5), the range of classrooms is not reported, only 11 classrooms were observed, and these assessments were conducted more than seven years ago.

Professional development. Teachers are required to complete six credit hours every five years and have written individualized annual professional development plans. Bi-weekly coaching and mentoring services are being piloted to some lead and assistant teachers on a voluntary basis. Alaska uses the My Teaching Partner Coaching System and in 2017 had 27 teachers enrolled.

Child Assessments. The state incorporates Teaching Strategies GOLD into all preschool programs. This assessment has been aligned with the state ELGs. Data are used to track child and program level outcomes over time and to make adjustments to curricula. DEED works with districts to provide online training opportunities.

Data-driven decision-making. The state collects the following information throughout the year: pre-K enrollment, budgets (including receipts and purchases), licensing status, accreditations, student demographics, home language surveys, teacher credentials and background checks, status of children's health screening, family engagement hours, hours of professional development completed, Teaching Strategies GOLD data, IEP data, family information forms, and family engagement hours. However, the data collected are not used at the state and/or at the local level for program improvement.

The last formal evaluation of the program was completed in 2012, a two-year evaluation that assessed process quality as well as program impact and child outcomes based on pre-and post-assessments using the DIAL II, PPVT, and ECERS instruments.

Integrated System. There are some components of the early learning system that are aligned, including the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines and the Alaska System for Early Education Development (SEED), the state's early childhood professional development system for Head Start, the Tribal Childcare Association, State of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, the Department of Health and Social Services, and the Department of Labor. SEED is the state's registry and maintains the career lattice and teacher competencies. However, state officials report the state does not have adequate capacity to align more components of the Pre-Elementary program.