

IMPLEMENTING 15 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K: North Carolina

Since 2001, North Carolina has provided state-funded pre-kindergarten education, originally via the More at Four PreKindergarten Program, now through the NC Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program. Eligible children are identified based on a number of factors: having a developmental delay or identified disability, coming from a family with an income at or below 75% of the state median income, having a chronic health condition, or limited English proficiency. Similarly, children whose parents are active duty military personnel are automatically eligible for the program.

NC Pre-K classrooms are available statewide in privately licensed Head Start programs, child care centers, and public schools. All programs must earn high-quality ratings under the state child-care licensing system to qualify for participation in NC Pre-K and the state’s subsidy system. Program standards set for NC Pre-K must be met in both public and nonpublic settings.

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. North Carolina’s Gov. Roy Cooper is in his first term and it is too early to determine his support of pre-K. Former Gov. McCrory (R) asked for, and the legislature delivered on, a \$5M expansion, which is now permanent. This was clearly a bipartisan effort, recognizing quality. However, the legislature is very clear members only want to serve those who have no opportunity anywhere else at this point. The eligibility goal is to address greatest need at the moment: those who have not had an early learning experience, who are not enrolled in any classrooms, or cannot get access another way. In 2016-2017, NC Pre-K served 27,019 4-year-olds, approximately 22% of the 4-year-old population in North Carolina.

Approximately \$18.8 M in one-time funds that were available in 2011-2012 were not available in 2012-2013. However, in 2013-2014, \$12.4M in recurring funds were added to the program, making it possible to serve more children than originally anticipated for the year. In 2014-2015, \$123.5 million in state

spending was used to support NC Pre-K, which was a reduction of more than \$16 million, the third largest decrease across all state pre-K programs. In 2016-2017, there was a slight reduction in state spending from the previous year. In 2016-2017, approximately \$209 million of federal, state, and local funds supported the program. The majority of funding for NC Pre-K comes from the state, including \$78 million generated by the North Carolina Education Lottery.

Compelling vision and strong leadership. The Office of Early Learning (OEL) housed within the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) is a new office that focuses on Pre-K–Grade 3, however it does not oversee NC Pre-K. OEL Executive Director John Pruette recently served as President of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. OEL partners with the FirstSchool initiative of the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. FirstSchool is a Pre-K–Grade 3 initiative to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population. The North Carolina State Board of Education Policy dictates teacher education and educator licensure.

The NC Pre-K Program is administered by the NC Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), Early Education Unit. When the pre-K program was transferred from DPI to HHS in 2011, it lost about \$32M in the budget, and many key staff. There is enough staff for direct services, but the agency must cover administrative issues such as contracts, management of staff, and professional development. The transition has also weakened the state's P-3 alignment efforts.

Education and compensation. All lead teachers in NC Pre-K classrooms are required to hold a BA/BS in CD/ECE or a related field as well as a NC Birth - K or PK/K add-on license. Only NC Pre-K teachers in public schools have the same starting salary and salary schedule as K-3 for all years of service.

Adult-child ratio and two adults in the classroom. NC Pre-K has a maximum class size of 18 for 4-year-olds and requires a staff-child ratio of 1:9. Classrooms that provide for inclusive settings for children with disabilities may require an adult-to-child ratio lower than 1:9 as outlined in the North Carolina Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities.

Learning time. NC Pre-K programs receiving funding are mandated to operate 6.5 hours per day for 36 weeks each year.

Age-appropriate learning standards. The North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development (NC ELDS) were adopted in 2013, and cover all essential domains. The NC ELDS are aligned with the state Standard Course of Study (Common Core State Standards and North Carolina's Essential Standards). The state Provides professional development opportunities to support use of NC ELDS and additional resources are provided to programs to implement them.

System that ensures effective curriculum. NC Pre-K teachers are assigned mentors to support the implementation of curricula and formative assessments that is informed by and aligned with the NC ELDS to support children's development and learning needs. As part of the mentor/evaluation process to support the Birth-K licensure process, teachers are trained in the implementation of curriculum and monitored for effective practices as aligned to the NC ELDS. This system is designed to ensure curricula is implemented with fidelity. North Carolina has an approved, but not required, curriculum list which

includes: Bank Street; Creative Curriculum; HighScope; Opening the World of Learning (OWL); Tools of the Mind; Passports: Experiences for Pre-K Success (2007); and Investigator Club PreK Learning System, NC Edition.

Support for students with special needs. In 2016-2017, 5% of NC Pre-K students received special education services. To support these students, pre-K teachers are required to possess specific qualifications for working with children with special needs and must follow the Division for Early Childhood's (DEC) best practices. Coaching of preschool teachers about children with special needs is also required. OEL administers the state's exceptional children program (619 program).

Support for dual (English) language learners (DLL). DCDEE has developed a plan to better serve ELLs with additional efforts made at the local level and to comply with Title VI laws. North Carolina birth through kindergarten licensed teachers receive formal, needs-based mentoring/coaching support linked to child assessment and teacher evaluation to improve instructional practices for children served, including the requirement that children are screened in their home languages. Program standards require that sites serving children and families who do not speak English or have limited English proficiency are encouraged to hire staff fluent in the child's native language and provide recruitment, enrollment, and outreach information to families in their home languages. North Carolina was unable to report the number of DLL students served in NC Pre-K.

High quality teaching. NC Pre-K classrooms must meet at least a 5.0 on an ECERS-R assessment as part of the QRIS/Star-rated licensure system every three years. In the most recent NC Pre-K evaluation, a sample of 374 NC Pre-K classrooms were observed in 2013-2014 using the ECERS-R and the average total scores was 5.7 (on a 7.0 scale). Almost all (97 percent) of the sample classrooms scored in the high-quality range (5.0 and above), with the remainder (3 percent) scoring in the medium-quality range (3.0–4.9), and none scoring in the low-quality range (1.0–2.9.) On the ECERS-R Interaction Subscale, the average score was 6.4 (on a 7.0 scale). The ECERS tools have been used in North Carolina for many years as part of the licensing system, and these findings are consistent with evaluations that have been occurring since 2002.

Professional development. As previously described, all NC Pre-K teachers participate in a coaching program. The amount of mentoring/coaching that a NC Birth - K licensed teacher receives is based on formally assessed needs; resulting in different types of professional development plans, including specific strategies designed in collaboration with the teacher, evaluator, and site administrator (private sites). Teachers typically receive approximately 50 contact hours with coaches having caseloads of 15-25 teachers. In addition, all teachers are required to complete 18 clock hours per year of professional development.

Child Assessments. Staff are required to conduct ongoing (regular) formative assessments to gather information about each child's growth and skill development, as well as to inform instruction. All formative assessments used by NC Pre-K must be approved by the NC Child Care Commission based on the assessment tool's ability to collect information on children's behaviors, development, skills, knowledge, strengths, needs and interests across all domains of development and be aligned with the NC ELDS. As previously described, coaches support the implementation of formative assessments.



Data-driven decision-making. NC Pre-K classrooms must meet at least a 5.0 on an ECERS-R assessment as part of the QRIS/Star-rated licensure system every three years. If a classroom rates less than 5.0 on the ECERS-R, staff are given one year to make improvements per the improvement plan that is developed jointly with the site administrator and the state agency's regulatory consultant.

The state regulatory consultants and local NC Pre-K contract administrative agency staff annually observe classrooms for appropriate implementation of curriculum, formative assessments, early learning standards, staff/child ratios, group size, learning environments and health and safety requirements and then provide feedback. Assigned mentors and evaluators work directly with teachers on supporting their effectiveness to ensure classroom environments are responsive to teaching and children's learning.

NC Pre-K teachers are required to be formally observed and assessed using the NC Professional Teaching Standards, as measured Rubric for Evaluating NC Teachers, based on a formal observation schedule determined by the NC DPI. Teachers develop and follow an individual professional development plan, which may address classroom quality needs. Documentation of children's learning (formative) data collected by each local NC Pre-K program and DCDEE child care consultants monitor for classroom and site compliance with collection of data. Mentors and Evaluators (for Birth - K licensed teachers) check to ensure use of formative assessment data to inform child learning (includes families), teacher planning and professional development. Results of classroom quality ECERS-R assessments are collected and reported by an independent assessor to DCDEE.

The last formal evaluation of NC Pre-K (2017) included a total sample of 512 kindergarten children (NC Pre-K=255, non-NC Pre-K=257) who attended 135 kindergarten classrooms in 2015-2016. The results suggest that the NC Pre-K had positive effects on children's math and executive functioning at the end of kindergarten.

Integrated System. Because NC Pre-K is no longer housed in the NC DPI, opportunities to align pre-K with K-12 more intentionally have slowed. There is some opportunity to continue to build on that system, with OEL. The North Carolina Star Rated License Project (QRIS), established in 1999, has allowed the system to integrate some of the system's components, most notably teacher qualifications, professional development, and licensing.

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