

ALASKA EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM STANDARDS



Alaska Reads
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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to establish standards applicable to an early education program provided by a school district for children who are four and five years of age. The standards were prepared in response to passage of the Alaska Reads Act in May 2022 and, if adopted, have an effective date of July 1, 2023. These standards are incorporated by reference in 4 AAC 60.190.

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Summary

Early education programs must provide high-quality early education and child development services, including for children with disabilities, that promote children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth for later success in school. An early education program must embed responsive and effective teacher-child interactions. All programs must implement an evidence-based curriculum, and screening and assessment procedures that support individualization and growth in the areas of development described in the *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines* (incorporated by reference in 4 AAC 60.170) and support family engagement in children's learning and development. A program must deliver developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate approaches to learning science, physical skills, and creative arts that include language, literacy, mathematics, and social and emotional development.

I. Learning Environment

An early education program must ensure teachers and other relevant staff provide responsive care, effective teaching, and an organized learning environment that promotes healthy development and children's skill growth aligned with the *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines*, including for children with disabilities.

- a. A program must provide a well-organized learning environment. A well-organized learning environment includes

- i. developmentally appropriate schedules, lesson plans, and indoor and outdoor learning experiences that provide opportunities for choice, play, exploration, and experimentation among a variety of learning, sensory, and motor experiences; and
 - ii. teacher-directed and child-initiated activities, active and quiet learning activities, and opportunities for individual, small group, and large group learning activities.
- b. An early education program class may have a maximum of twenty (20) children led by two teachers or a teacher and a teaching assistant. A double session class may have a maximum of 17 children led by two teachers or a teacher and a teaching assistant.
- c. An early education program must regularly serve 4 and 5-year-old children for at least 2 hours per day, 5 days per week.
- d. An early education program must provide developmentally appropriate equipment, materials, supplies and physical space for indoor and outdoor learning environments, including functional space. The equipment, materials and supplies must
 - i. include any necessary accommodations and the space must be accessible to children with disabilities; and
 - ii. be periodically changed to support children's interests, development, and learning.
- e. An early education program must implement snack and mealtimes in ways that support development and learning. Snack and mealtimes must be structured and used as learning opportunities that support teaching staff-child interactions and foster communication and conversations that contribute to a child's learning, development, and socialization. Programs are encouraged to meet this requirement with family style meals when developmentally appropriate.
- f. An early education program must approach routines and transitions between activities, as opportunities for strengthening development, learning, and skill growth.
- g. A program must recognize physical activity as important to learning and integrate intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning.
- h. A program may not use physical activity as reward or punishment.

II. Social and Emotional Support

- a. A program must ensure mental health consultants assist:
 - i. The program to implement strategies to identify and support children with mental health and social and emotional concerns;
 - ii. Teachers to improve classroom management and teacher practices through strategies that include using classroom observations and consultations to address teacher and individual child needs and creating physical and cultural environments that promote positive mental health and social and emotional functioning;
 - iii. Other staff to meet children's mental health and social and emotional needs through strategies that include observation and consultation;
 - iv. Staff to address prevalent child mental health concerns, including internalizing problems such as appearing withdrawn and externalizing problems such as challenging behaviors; and,

- v. In helping both parents and education staff to understand mental health and access mental health interventions, if needed.
- b. A program may not expel or unenroll a child because of a child's behavior.
- c. A program shall prohibit or restrict use of suspension due to a child's behavior. A suspension due to a child's behavior shall be temporary, shall comply with (d) of this section, and may only be used in circumstances involving a safety threat that cannot be reduced or eliminated by the provision of reasonable modifications.
- d. Before a program suspends a child or makes a suspension determination under (c) of this section, the program shall engage with a mental health consultant, collaborate with a parent or guardian of the child, and use appropriate community resources, such as behavior coaches, psychologists, or other appropriate specialists, as needed, to evaluate reasonable modifications that may alleviate the safety threat.
- e. After conclusion of a temporary suspension, a program shall help the child return to full participation in all program activities as quickly as possible while ensuring child safety by:
 - i. continuing to engage with the child's parent or guardian, and a mental health consultant, and continuing to use appropriate community resources;
 - ii. developing a written plan to document the action and supports needed;
 - iii. providing services that include home visits; and,
 - iv. determining whether a referral to the special education team for implementing Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is appropriate.

III. Curricula

- a. An early education program must implement developmentally appropriate evidence-based early childhood curricula, including additional curricular enhancements, as appropriate, that:
 - i. are based on evidence and have standardized training procedures and curriculum materials to support implementation;
 - ii. are aligned with the *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines* and are sufficiently content-rich to promote measurable progress toward development and learning;
 - iii. include Preschool Science of Reading supplemental curricula from the following DEED approved list:
 - 1. Heggerty
 - 2. UFLI
 - 3. Zoo Phonics
 - iv. include the following Preschool Science of Reading components in daily activities
 - 1. Oral Language
 - 2. Phonological awareness
 - 3. Print Knowledge; and
 - v. have an organized developmental scope and sequence that include plans and materials for learning experiences based on developmental progressions and how children learn.
- b. A program must support education staff to effectively implement curricula must monitor curriculum implementation and fidelity, and must provide support, feedback, and

supervision for continuous improvement of curricula implementation through training and professional development.

- c. A program that makes significant adaptations to a curriculum or a curriculum enhancement to meet the needs of a specific population of students must use an external early childhood education curriculum or content area expert to develop the significant adaptations. Adaptations must be culturally sensitive. Before implementing an adaptation, a program must assess whether the adaptation adequately facilitates progress toward meeting school readiness goals.
 - i. Programs are encouraged to partner with outside evaluators in assessing such adaptations.

IV. Screening and Developmental Evaluation

- a. Screenings and assessments must be valid and reliable for the population and purpose for which they will be used, including by being conducted by qualified and trained personnel, and being age, developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate, and appropriate for children with disabilities, as available.
- b. In collaboration with each child's parent or guardian and with consent, a program must complete or obtain a current developmental screening to identify concerns regarding a child's developmental, motor, language, personal-social, cognitive, and social and emotional skills.
- c. Screening must occur within the child's first 45 calendar days of attending the program.
- d. A program must use the DEED identified statewide developmental screening tool(s).
 - i. If the DEED identified statewide developmental screening tool was administered within 45 days of attendance by a different program (e.g. pediatrician's office, PAT, Head Start, Child Find Fair, etc.), that screening meets this requirement.
 - 1. A copy of the screen must be on file with the early education program.
 - 2. Program must follow IV.e through IV.f.iv.
- e. As part of the screening process, a program must include information from family members, teachers, and relevant people familiar with the child's typical behavior.
- f. If warranted through screening and additional relevant information, and with direct guidance from a mental health or child development professional, a program must, with the parent or guardian's consent, promptly and appropriately address any identified needs through:
 - i. Referral to the district's Special Education Program for a formal evaluation to assess the child's eligibility for Special Education services as soon as possible; AND/OR
 - ii. Referral to a local agency/provider responsible for formal evaluation to assess the child's eligibility for behavioral health and other medical services related to the child's development.
 - iii. Partnership with the child's parents and the relevant local agency to support families through the formal evaluation process.
 - 1. If a child is determined to be eligible for Special Education services, the program must partner with parents and the Special Education team and assist in coordinating delivery of special education services.

2. If, after completion of the formal evaluation, the Special Education Team determines the child is not eligible for special education and related services, the program must
 - a. Seek guidance from a mental health or child development professional to determine if the formal evaluation shows the child has a significant delay in one or more areas of development that is likely to interfere with the child's development and school readiness; and,
 - b. If the child has a significant delay, partner with parents or guardians to help the family access services and supports to help address the child's identified needs.
 - i. Such additional services and supports may be available through a child's health insurance or it may be appropriate for the program to provide needed services and supports under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act if the child satisfies the definition of disability in 29 U.S.C. 705(9)(b) of the Rehabilitation Act.
- g. If a child satisfies the definition of disability in 29 U.S.C. 705(9)(b) of the Rehabilitation Act, they may not be excluded from the program on-the-basis of disability.

V. Assessment

- a. A program must use the DEED required early childhood assessment tool for each child. This tool will provide ongoing information to evaluate the child's developmental level and progress in outcomes aligned to the goals described in the Alaska Early Learning Guidelines. Such assessments must be conducted with sufficient frequency to allow for individualization within the program year and demonstrate child progress throughout the year. At a minimum, formal assessment must be conducted in the Fall and Spring annually.
- b. A program must regularly use child assessment information along with informal teacher observations and additional information from family and staff, in a culturally responsive manner, to determine a child's strengths and needs, and inform and adjust strategies to better support individualized learning and improve teaching practices.
- c. The use of screening and assessment items and data on any screening or assessment authorized under DEED is prohibited for the purposes of ranking, comparing, or otherwise evaluating individual children for purposes other than research, training, or technical assistance, and is prohibited for the purposes of providing rewards or sanctions for individual children or staff.
 - i. A program must not use screening or assessments to exclude children from enrollment or participation.
 - ii. Screening does not diagnose developmental delay. It is solely an indicator that formal evaluation is needed.

VI. Family Engagement

- a. An early education program must structure education and child development services to recognize a parent or guardian's role as their child's first, most important, and lifelong educators. A program must include and engage a parents or guardian in a child's education. Family culture and values must be reflected in a child's classroom environment and curriculum.
- b. A program must:
 - i. build responsive, respectful relationships with families;
 - ii. learn about a child and family's cultural background, traditional values, and heritage language, and integrate this background into the curriculum;
 - iii. use cultural values and traditional knowledge to plan the classroom environment; and
 - iv. provide curriculum that integrates traditional knowledge and that is organized around relevant place-based themes.
- c. A program must offer opportunities for a child's parent, guardian, or other family member to be involved in the program's education services.
- d. A program must implement policies to ensure:
 - i. the program's settings are open to a parent or guardian during program hours and family members have opportunities to volunteer and share their knowledge with the class or during group activities.
 - ii. teachers and parents regularly communicate to ensure the child's family is well-informed about the child's routines, activities, and behavior in the program.
 - iii. teachers and parents discuss the purposes of and the results from screenings and assessments and discuss the child's progress. A program shall offer opportunities for parent or guardian involvement and communications during
 1. a Meet and Greet event held before the first day of class for a school year to ease transition into the school year;
 2. a family conference held as needed, but no less than two times per school year, to enhance the knowledge and understanding of teachers, staff, and a parent or guardian regarding the child's education and developmental progress;
 3. at minimum of two home visits by a child's teacher or other staff per school year for each family, including one visit before the first day of class for a school year. A home visit may take place at a program site or another community location; and
 4. Families have the opportunity to learn about and to provide feedback on selected curricula and instructional materials used in the program.

VII. Dual Language Learners

- a. For dual language learners, a program must recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths and implement evidence-based teaching practices that support the learner's development. Dual language learner teaching practices must:

- i. focus on both English language acquisition and the continued development of the home language; or
 - ii. if teachers or staff do not speak the home language of a child, include steps to support development of the home language for a dual language learner; developmental support may include having culturally and linguistically appropriate materials available to the student and other evidence-based strategies.
- b. A program that serves American Indian or Alaska Native children must integrate efforts to preserve, revitalize, restore, or maintain the tribal language for these children into program services. Such language preservation and revitalization efforts may include full immersion in the tribal language for the majority of the hours of planned class operations.
- c. If a program serves a child who speaks a language other than English, a program must use qualified bilingual staff, a contractor, or a consultant to:
 - i. assess language skills in English and in the child's home language, to assess the child's progress in the home language and in English language acquisition;
 - ii. conduct screenings and assessments for domains other than language skills in the language or languages that best capture the child's development and skills in the specific domain; and,
 - iii. ensure those conducting the screening or assessment know and understand the child's language and culture and have sufficient skill level in the child's home language to accurately administer the screening or assessment and to record and understand the child's responses, interactions, and communications.
- d. If a program serves a child who speaks a language other than English and qualified bilingual staff, contractors, or consultants are not able to conduct screenings and assessments, a program must use an interpreter in conjunction with a staff person qualified to conduct screenings and assessments.
- e. If a program serves a child who speaks a language other than English, the program must seek volunteers who speak the child's home language to be trained to work in the classroom and support the child's continued development of the home language.

VIII. Coaching

- a. A program must implement an evidence-based, coordinated coaching strategy for teachers and education staff that
 - i. is facilitated by a trained and experienced early childhood coach. At a minimum, the coach must have:
 - 1. a baccalaureate in early childhood education or related field as defined by the Alaska SEED Registry, and
 - 2. training or mentorship in relationship-based professional development;
 - ii. assesses education staff to identify strengths, areas of needed support, and whether any educational staff would benefit from intensive coaching;
 - iii. provides opportunities for intensive coaching to education staff when needed, including opportunities to be observed and receive feedback and modeling of effective teacher practices directly related to program performance goals;

- iv. provides opportunities for education staff to receive evidence-based professional development aligned with program performance goals; and
- v. ensures intensive coaching opportunities for education staff, as needed, that
 - 1. align with the program’s school readiness goals, curricula, and other approaches to professional development;
 - 2. utilize a coach with adequate training and experience in adult learning and in using assessment data to drive coaching strategies aligned with program performance goals;
 - 3. provide ongoing communication between the coach, program director, education director, teachers, and staff;
 - 4. establishes policies that ensure assessment results are not used to punish staff that need coaching support without providing additional coaching and time for staff to improve.

IX. Continuous Quality Improvement

- a. A program must implement a continuous quality improvement process that uses data to (1) identify program strengths and needs, (2) develop and implement plans that address program needs, (3) continually evaluate compliance with program performance standards, and (4) annually evaluate progress towards achieving program goals. These plans will be focused on the early education program only.
- b. A program's continuous quality improvement process must:
 - i. ensure data is aggregated, analyzed, and compared in such a way to assist agencies in identifying risks and informing strategies for continuous improvement in all program service areas;
 - ii. ensure child-level assessment data is aggregated and analyzed at least three times a year, including for sub-groups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities, as appropriate, and used with other program data to direct continuous improvement related to curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design and other program decisions, including changing or targeting scope of services;
 - iii. use information from ongoing monitoring, including the program's annual self-assessment, child-level assessments, and program data on teaching practice, staffing and professional development, to identify program needs and develop and implement plans for program improvement; and
 - iv. use program improvement plans as needed to strengthen or adjust content and strategies for professional development, change program scope and services, refine school readiness and other program goals, or adapt strategies to better address the needs of sub-groups.

Definitions

Culturally Responsive: showing respect for and recognition of the traditions, beliefs, languages, values, and practices of the local culture(s) that has historically been present in the geographic area being served.

Education Staff: Includes certified teacher(s), paraprofessionals and any other paid staff working in the child's learning environment.

Double Session: when there are two different sessions within the school day. For example, when there is a morning class and an afternoon class.

Evidence-based: Practices for teaching that are grounded in research and professional wisdom.

Family Style Meals: When staff and children sit-down together for a meal or a snack. It helps children make healthy food choices by seeing positive attitudes from teachers and peers. With this type of meal service, teachers can model and develop key concepts for children, including:

- using proper table manners. Opportunities to try new foods and politely decline food they have tasted and don't enjoy yet
- Understanding appropriate use of utensils
- Assistance with setting and cleaning the table after the meal

Other benefits include improved motor skills and self-confidence, expanded social skills, and practice

Family: the child's primary caregiver(s). The person/people whom the child lives with and participates in family engagement activities.

Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC): Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a prevention-based, indirect service that builds the capacity of caregivers to help support and sustain healthy social and emotional development of infants and young children in the natural settings where they learn and grow, such as early care and education (ECE), home visiting, and primary care.

IECMH consultants are master's-prepared, license-eligible mental health professionals. Effective consultants understand strategies for supporting children's social-emotional development and focus on relationship-building activities with consultees that facilitate the adoption of new practices.

Parent: the person or persons legally responsible for the student.

Teacher: Holds a valid Alaska teaching certificate and is responsible for the classroom program.