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ALASKA EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM STANDARDS January Draft



Alaska Department of Education & Early Development
P.O. Box 110500
Juneau, AK 99811-0500
education.alaska.gov

ALASKA EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM STANDARDS

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 Alaska Early Education Program standards are in two sections. The first section addresses the requirements outlined in the Alaska Reads Act adopted in 2022 and amended in 2023 by AS 14.07.165(a) for school districts who wish to receive formula funding for their early education students that are four- and five- years old. The second section of the standards are not required for the application for formula funding but are critical to quality early education programs.

Both sections of the standards are designed to work in concert to provide the best possible early education programs for our students.

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Summary

Early education programs must provide quality early education and child development services, including for children with disabilities, that promote children's developmental 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.

Section 1: Standards required to qualify for formula funding

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. Teaching practices must promote positive relationship amongst all children and adults. It encourages each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of the classroom community and fosters each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member.
- b. 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.
 - ii. Teacher-directed and child-initiated activities, active and quiet learning activities, and opportunities for individual, small group, and large group learning activities.
 - iii. Preschool Science of Reading components integrated into daily activities.
 1. Oral Language
 2. Phonological awareness
 3. Print Knowledge
- c. An early education program class may have a maximum of twenty (20) children led by two teaching staff. A double session class may have a maximum of 17 children led by two teaching staff.
- d. An early education program must regularly serve four- and five-year-old

- children for at least two hours per day, five days per week.
- e. An early education program must provide developmentally appropriate equipment, materials, supplies and physical space for indoor and outdoor learning environments. The equipment, materials and supplies must
 - i. Include any necessary accommodations and the space must be accessible to children with disabilities.
 - ii. Be periodically changed to support children's interests, development, and learning.
 - f. 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.
 - g. An early education program must approach routines and transitions between activities, as opportunities for strengthening development, learning, and skill growth.
 - h. A program must recognize physical activity as important to learning by integrating intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning.
 - i. Through written policy and/or procedure, a program may not use physical activity as reward or punishment.

II. Social and Emotional Development

Ho and Funk (2018) state that:

Children's social and emotional health affects their overall development and learning. Research indicates that children who are mentally healthy tend to be happier, show greater motivation to learn, have a more positive attitude toward school, more eagerly participate in class activities, and demonstrate higher academic performance than less mentally healthy peers.

DEED recognizes the importance of supporting social and emotional development and encourages programs to provide proactive supports as opposed to reactionary measures.

- a. Through written policy and/or procedure, a program may not implement the exclusionary practice of expulsion; it may not unenroll a child because of a child's behavior.
- b. Through written policy and/or procedure, a program shall prohibit or restrict use of the exclusionary practice 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.
- c. Through written policy and/or procedure, before a program suspends a child or makes a suspension determination under (c) of this section, the program shall collaborate with a parent, engage with a mental health consultant, if available, and

use appropriate community resources, such as behavior coaches, psychologists, or other specialists, as needed, to evaluate reasonable modifications that may alleviate the safety threat.

- d. Through written policy and/or procedure, 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 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.
 - iv. Determining whether a referral to the special education team for implementing Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is appropriate.

For additional supports for social and emotional development, see Standard I Learning Environment, Standard III Curricula, Standard II Mental Health Consultation in Supplemental Section 2, and the State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines.

III. Curricula

- a. An early education program must implement one developmentally appropriate evidence-based early childhood comprehensive curriculum that is aligned with the *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines* and is sufficiently content-rich to promote measurable progress toward development and learning.
- b. An early childhood program must implement at least one early childhood pre-literacy curriculum that is based in science of reading and that is included on the DEED approved list titled, Alaska Evidence-Based Early Childhood Education/PreK Literacy Curricula. The comprehensive curriculum described in III.a may serve as the literacy curriculum if it is included on the DEED approved list in III.b.
- c. The curricula that an early childhood program implements to achieve (a) and (b) of this section must:
 - i. Be based on evidence and have standardized training procedures and curriculum materials to support implementation.
 - ii. Have an organized developmental scope and sequence that include plans and materials for learning experiences based on developmental progressions and how children learn.
- d. An early education program must implement continuous improvement of curricula through:
 - i. Training and professional development.
 - ii. Monitoring curriculum implementation and fidelity.
 - iii. Providing support, feedback, and supervision to educational staff.
 - iv. Providing families opportunities to learn about and give feedback on selected curricula and instructional materials used in the program.
- e. A program may choose to make adaptations to a curriculum or a curriculum enhancement to meet the needs of a specific *population of students*. This standard

does not refer to adaptations for *individual students* such as those required for special education.

- i. If significant adaptations are made:
 - 1. Districts must use an external early childhood education curriculum or content area expert to develop the significant adaptations.
 - 2. Adaptations must be culturally sensitive.
- ii. Before implementing an adaptation, a program must assess whether the adaptation adequately facilitates progress toward meeting school readiness goals.
- iii. After implementing an adaptation, programs are encouraged to partner with outside evaluators in assessing the effectiveness of the adaptations.

IV. Screening

- a. Using a formal developmental screening tool and process helps programs to quickly determine whether a student is meeting expected milestones for their age or is at significant risk for a developmental delay. DEED is committed to providing programs with a tool that is in alignment with best practices and is proven to be accurate and effective. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that:
 - i. Signed parent consent is obtained before screening and any subsequent referral. Parents may indicate non-consent if they choose.
 - ii. Screening does not diagnose developmental delay. Screening results will be used solely as an indicator that formal evaluation is needed.
 - iii. Screening results will not be used to exclude children from initial or ongoing enrollment and participation.
- b. Educational staff conducting the screening must have completed training offered by certified trainers.
- c. In collaboration with each child's parent or guardian and with consent, a program must complete or obtain the DEED identified statewide developmental screening within the child's first 45 calendar days of attending the program.
- d. If the DEED identified statewide developmental screening tool was administered within 45 days of attendance by a different program (e.g. pediatrician's office, Parents As Teachers, Head Start, Child Find Fair, etc.), that screening meets the requirement of (d) in this section. The program should not duplicate screening. Instead, the program must:
 - i. Ensure that a copy of the screen is on file with the early education program.
 - ii. Use the screening results to carry out (f) through (h) of this section.
- e. A program must ensure that teachers and parents discuss the purposes of screening, the results of a child's screening, and corresponding recommendation(s)

- in a timely manner.
- f. If warranted through screening and additional relevant information, a program will use input from a parent and early childhood professionals such as the district's lead teacher, a mental health consultant, or an early childhood special education professional to 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. Work with the child's parent to identify local agency(s) who provide behavioral health and other medical services related to child development.
 - g. Partnership with the child's parents and the relevant local agency(s) to support families through a formal evaluation process. After completion of a formal developmental evaluation, the program will ensure that:
 - i. When a child is determined to be eligible for Special Education services, the program will partner with parents and the Special Education team to assist in coordinating delivery of special education services.
 - h. When a child is determined to not be eligible for special education and related services, the program will use input from the district's lead teacher, a mental health consultant, and/or early childhood special education professional to help the family identify community and medical supports to help address the child's identified needs. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that 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

Early Education programs will use an early childhood assessment tool to 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. Teachers will use this on-going information to make modifications to the classroom environment, routines, and activities to best suit the children needs and interests and to share relevant information with families.

- a. A program must use the DEED required early childhood assessment tool for each child.
- b. 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.
- c. A program must regularly use child assessment information along with on-going 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.
- d. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that the use of assessment items and data from any assessment authorized under DEED is not used for the purposes of ranking, comparing, or otherwise evaluating individual children or staff for purposes other than research, training, or technical assistance, and is not used for the purposes of providing rewards or sanctions.
- e. A program must not use assessments to exclude children from enrollment or participation.

VI. Family Engagement

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 make efforts to build responsive, respectful relationships with families and to include and engage a parents or guardians in a child's education. Family culture and values must be reflected in a child's classroom environment and curriculum.

- a. A program must learn about a child and family's cultural background, traditional values, and heritage language, and integrate this background into the curriculum:
 - i. A program that serves American Indian or Alaska Native children must integrate efforts to preserve, revitalize, restore, or maintain the tribal language into program services.
 - ii. A program must use cultural values and traditional knowledge to plan the classroom environment.
 - iii. A program must provide learning experiences that integrate traditional knowledge and that are organized around relevant place-based themes.
 - iv. A program must offer opportunities for a child's parent, guardian, or other family member to share their knowledge with the class or during group activities.
- b. Through written policy and/or procedure a program must ensure the program's settings are open to parents or guardians during program hours and family members have opportunities to volunteer.
- c. A program must ensure that teachers and parents have opportunities for ongoing communication about the child's routines, activities, and behavior at school and at home.
- d. A program shall offer the following opportunities for parent or guardian involvement and communication:
 - i. Family conferences.
 - 1. Family conferences will be held as needed, but no less than two times per school year.
 - 2. Family conferences will provide an opportunity to enhance the knowledge and understanding of teachers, staff, and a parent or guardian regarding the child's education and developmental progress and to discuss the purposes of and results of assessments.
 - ii. Home visits.

1. Teachers or other staff will provide the opportunity for a minimum of two home visits per school year, including one visit before the first day of class for the school year.
2. Home visits may take place at a program site or another community location.

VII. Home Language Support

A program must recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths by implementing evidence-based teaching practices that support the learner's development of both the home language and English.

- a. When a child's family speaks a language other than English at home, the program will:
 - i. Provide evidence based dual language learner teaching practices.
 - ii. Make culturally and linguistically appropriate materials available to the student.
- b. If a program serves a child whose home is not English, a program must use qualified staff, a contractor, or a consultant that speaks the child's home language and English 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.
 - iii. Ensure those conducting 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.
- c. If a program serves a child whose home language is not English and qualified bilingual staff, contractors, or consultants are not able to conduct screenings and assessments, a program must use an interpreter or volunteer in conjunction with a staff person qualified to conduct screenings and assessments as described in (b.i) through (b.iii) of this section. If necessary, a district may use an on-demand phone or virtual interpreting service.
- d. If a program serves a child whose home language is not English, the program must seek classroom volunteers who speak the child's home language.

VIII. Continuous Quality Improvement

- a. A program must implement a continuous quality improvement process that is focused on the early education program only.

- b. The continuous quality improvement process will evaluate and inform one or more of the following: curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design, changing or targeting scope of services, and/or other program needs.
- c. A program must implement a continuous quality improvement process that uses data to:
 - i. Identify program strengths and needs.
 - ii. Develop and implement plans that address program needs.
 - iii. Continually evaluate compliance with the Alaska Early Education Program Standards.
 - iv. Annually evaluate progress towards achieving program goals.
- d. A program's continuous quality improvement process must ensure child-level assessment data is
 - i. Aggregated and analyzed at least two times a year, including for sub-groups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities, as appropriate.
- ii. Used with other program data to direct continuous improvement
- iii.

Section II: Supplemental Standards

Implementation of this supplemental standard is not required to meet eligibility for formula funding. Section I and Section II together provide a framework for high quality early education programs.

I. Early Childhood Coaching

An early childhood coaching system uses a relationship based professional development approach to increase the professional capacity of teaching staff. This approach implements a cycle of action planning, focused observation, and reflection and feedback. Goals may address any area that would lead to improved student educational experience.

- a. A program must implement an evidence-based, coordinated coaching strategy for teachers and education staff.
- b. A program's coordinated coaching strategy will:
 - i. Be facilitated by a trained and experienced early childhood coach. At a minimum, the coach must have:
 - 2. A baccalaureate in early childhood education or related field as defined by the Alaska SEED Registry with at least six credits in early childhood.
 - 3. Training or mentorship in relationship-based professional development.
 - 4. Training or experience in adult learning and in using assessment data to drive coaching strategies aligned with program performance goals.
 - ii. Assess education staff to identify strengths, areas of needed support, and

appropriate level for tiered coaching.

- iv. Establish policies and procedures that ensure assessment results are not used to punish staff prior to providing additional coaching and time for staff to improve.
- v. Provide opportunities for education staff to receive evidence-based professional development aligned with program performance goals.
- vi. Ensures tiered 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. Provide ongoing communication between the coach, program director, education director, teachers, and staff.

Provide opportunities for education staff to be observed and receive feedback and modeling of effective teacher practices directly related to program performance goals.

II. Mental Health Consultation

A program will implement mental health consultation as defined on this document's definitions page. The mental health consultant will assist:

- (a) Educational staff to improve classroom management and teacher practices through strategies that include using classroom observations and consultations to address teacher and individual child needs and to create physical and cultural environments that promote positive mental health and social and emotional functioning.
- (b) Parents and education staff to understand mental health and to access mental health interventions, if needed.
- (c) The program to implement strategies to identify children with mental health and social and emotional concerns, including internalizing problems such as appearing withdrawn and externalizing problems such as challenging behaviors.
- (d) The program to implement strategies to support children with identified mental health and social and emotional concerns.

Definitions

Coach: Early Childhood Program coaching is an interactive process of observation, discussion, and reflection in which the coach, trained in relationship based professional development (RBPDP), guides staff as they grow towards achieving self-identified goals.

Culturally Responsive: Showing respect for and recognition of the traditions, beliefs, languages, values, and practices of the local culture that has historically been present in the geographic area being served. [AS 14.60.010](#)

DEED: Department of Education and Early Development

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

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

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

Exclusionary Practices: The term exclusionary practices refer to:

- a. In-school suspension: Practices that involve removing or excluding the child from the classroom.
- b. Out-of-school suspension: Practices that involve temporarily removing the child from the program.
- c. Expulsion: Permanent removal or dismissal from the program.
- d. Soft expulsion: Practices that make it so that the program is not a viable or welcoming care arrangement for the family and leaves the family with little choice but to withdraw their child.

Family Style Meals: When staff and children sit-down together for a meal or a snack it provides an opportunity for children to build relationships with teachers and peers. Providing this type of meal service, teachers can model and develop key concepts for children, for example:

- Communication: Conversational turn taking, asking and answering questions, and labeling items.
- Social skills: Using proper table manners, taking turns, and politely declining foods after trying them.
- Motor skills: Appropriately holding and using utensils, pouring drinks, and opening packages.
- Problem solving: Assisting with setting the table and clearing it after the meal.

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

Mental Health Consultation: 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.

Multilingual: A student learning two or more languages, their home language not being English.

Parent: The person or persons legally responsible for the student. The term parent is not limited to a biological parent.

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

Tiered Coaching: A model of coaching that matches education staff with coaching opportunities that best meet their needs and preferences. The coaching model will be fluid and may include formats such as peer-to-peer, group, or one-on-one support.

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