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# ALASKA EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM STANDARDS

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# 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 for school districts to receive formula funding for four- and five-year-old pre-elementary students. These requirements are outlined in the Alaska Reads Act adopted in 2022 and amended in 2023 by AS 14.07.165(a). The second section is not required for formula funding but are critical components of quality early education programs.

The two sections of the standards work in concert to provide the best possible early education programs for our students.

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## Summary

### Early education programs

- provide quality early education and child development services, including for children with disabilities, that promote children's developmental growth for later success in school.
- embeds responsive and effective teacher- child interactions.
- 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.
- delivers 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 ensures 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 emphasize nurturing and responsive practices, interactions, and environments that foster trust and emotional security.
- b. A program provides a well-organized learning environment. A well-organized learning environment includes:
  - i. Developmentally appropriate schedules, lesson plans, and indoor and outdoor learning experiences 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 are 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 regularly serves four- and five-year-old children for a minimum of 10 hours per week.
- e. An early education program provides developmentally appropriate equipment, materials, supplies and physical space for indoor and outdoor learning environments. The physical space, equipment, materials and supplies must
  - i. Include any accommodations needed to be accessible to children with disabilities.
  - ii. Be periodically changed to support children's interests, development, and learning.
- f. An early education program implements 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 approaches routines and transitions between activities as opportunities for strengthening development and learning.
- h. A program recognizes physical activity as important to learning by integrating intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines.
- i. Through written policy and/or procedure, a program may not use physical activity as reward or punishment.

## II. Suspension and Expulsion

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

A program will have written policy and/or procedure to ensure that:

- a. A program may not implement the exclusionary practice of expulsion; it may not unenroll a child because of a child's behavior.
- b. 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. 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. When a program determines that a suspension is necessary, the program shall take the following steps during the suspension to help the child return to full participation in all program activities as quickly as possible while also ensuring

child safety:

- i. Continue to engage with the child's parent and a mental health consultant and continue to use appropriate community resources.
- ii. Develop a written plan to document the action and supports needed.
- iii. Determine whether a referral to the special education team for an eligibility evaluation 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 implements 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 implements at least one early childhood pre-literacy curriculum that is based in science of reading and that is included on the DEED approved list. The comprehensive curriculum described in III.a may also 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 implements continuous improvement of curricula through:
  - i. Training and professional development.
  - ii. Monitoring implementation fidelity.
  - iii. Providing support, feedback, and supervision to educational staff.
  - iv. Providing families opportunities to learn about and give feedback on 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 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. Developmental Screening

Using the DEED identified 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.

- a. A program completes or obtains the DEED identified developmental screening within each child's first 45 calendar days of attending the program.
- b. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that:
  - i. Signed parental consent or non-consent is obtained before screening.
  - ii. Screening results will be used solely as an indicator that formal evaluation is needed. Screening does not diagnose developmental delay.
  - iii. Screening results will not be used to exclude children from initial or ongoing participation.
- c. Educational staff conducting the DEED identified developmental screening tool must have completed training offered by certified trainers.
- d. When a program serves a multilingual student, the program will ensure those conducting screening have sufficient skill level in the child's home language to accurately administer the screening. Programs will access an interpreter when necessary.
- e. If the DEED identified 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 (a) 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.
- f. 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.
- g. 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. Identification of local agency(s) who provide behavioral health and other medical services related to child development.
- h. A program will partner with the child's parents and the relevant local agency(s) to support families through any formal developmental evaluation process.
- i. 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.
  - ii. 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 address the child's identified needs.
- j. 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 the DEED required early childhood assessment tool to provide ongoing information to evaluate the child's developmental level and progress towards 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 each child's needs and interests and to share relevant information with families.

- a. A program uses the DEED required early childhood assessment tool for each child.
- b. At a minimum, the DEED required early childhood assessment tool must be conducted in Fall and Spring annually.
- c. A program aggregates and analyzes student assessment data at least two times a year, including sub-groups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities, as appropriate.
- d. A program must regularly gather child assessment information, on-going informal teacher observations, and additional information from family and staff.
- e. A program must regularly use formal and informal assessment information to support individualized learning and improve teaching practices.
- f. When a program serves a multilingual student, it will ensure assessment data reflects the child's use and understanding of the home language in addition to English. Programs will access an interpreter when necessary.
- g. 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.

- h. Through written policy and/or procedure a program must not use assessment results 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 educator. 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 each child and family's cultural background, traditional values, and heritage language, and integrate these 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 the cultural values and traditional knowledge of its students to plan the classroom environment.
  - iii. A program must provide learning experiences that integrate the traditional knowledge of its students and that are organized around relevant place-based themes.
  - iv. A program must offer opportunities for each child's parent(s), guardian(s), or other family member(s) to share their knowledge with the class or during group activities.
- b. A program must identify children whose family speaks a language other than English at home. When identified, the program will:
  - i. Provide evidence based dual language learner teaching practices.
  - ii. Make culturally and linguistically appropriate materials available to the student.
- c. 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.
- 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.
- e. 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.
- f. 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. Continuous Quality Improvement

- a. At least annually, a program must implement a continuous quality improvement cycle that is focused on the early education program.
- b. The continuous quality improvement process will evaluate and inform one or more program need, for example: curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design, scope of service, etc.
- c. A program must implement a continuous quality improvement process that uses data to:
  - i. Plan: Collect and analyze data to identify program strengths and needs and to set goals.
  - ii. Do: Implement action steps and collect data throughout the cycle.
  - iii. Study: Review and analyze data to evaluate progress towards goals.
  - iv. Act: Refine and adjust practices based on findings.

## 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 that includes goal setting, observation, action planning, reflection and feedback. Education staff will be provided with coaching opportunities that best meet their needs and preferences. Goals may address any area that would lead to improved student educational experience.

- a. A program will 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. Annually have the coach guides each staff member through a self-assessment process to identify strengths, areas needing support, and appropriate level of coaching.
  - v. Establish policies and procedures that ensure the coaching process does not inform the district's staff evaluation process.
  - vi. Align with the program's school readiness goals, curricula, and other approaches to professional development.
  - vii. Provide ongoing communication between the coach, program director, education director, teachers, and staff.

## II. Mental Health Consultation

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is a prevention-based, indirect service that builds the capacity of educational staff to help support and sustain healthy social-emotional development in early childhood classrooms. 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.

- I. The mental health consultant will:
  - (a) Utilize strategies including classroom observations and consultation with educational staff.
  - (b) Address educational staff and student needs.
  - (c) Assist educational staff to create physical and cultural environments that promote social-emotional functioning and positive mental health.
  - (d) Assist parents and education staff to understand mental health and to access mental health interventions, if needed.
  - (e) Assist the program to implement strategies to identify children with social-emotional and mental health concerns, including internalizing problems such as appearing withdrawn and externalizing problems such as challenging behaviors.

- (f) Assist the program by implementing strategies to support children with identified social-emotional and mental health concerns.
- ii) The mental health consultant will hold a master’s degree and a license as a mental health professional.

## Glossary

**Coach:** Early Childhood Program coaching is an interactive process of observation, discussion, and reflection in which the coach, trained in relationship based professional development (RBPd), 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 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:** Suspension and expulsion.

### **Expulsion:**

- a. Expulsion: Permanent removal or dismissal from the program.
- b. 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 with whom the child lives and participates in family engagement activities.

**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.

### **Suspension:**

- 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.

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

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