

ALASKA EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM STANDARDS



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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 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.
 - 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
- 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.
 - 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 staff-child interactions and foster oral 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 by integrating intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning.
 - h. Through written policy and/or procedure, a program may not use physical activity as reward or punishment.

II. Social and Emotional Support

- a. A program must make available a [mental health consultant](#) as defined on this document's definitions page. The mental health consultant will assist:
 - i. [Education 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.
 - ii. [Parents](#) and education staff to understand mental health and to access mental health interventions, if needed.
 - iii. 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.
 - iv. The program to implement strategies to support children with identified mental health and social and emotional concerns.
- b. 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.
- c. 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.
- d. 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 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](#) 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.

III. Curricula

- a. An early childhood 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.
- 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 childhood 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](#).
- e. An early childhood program must provide families with the on-going opportunity to learn about and to provide feedback on curricula and instructional materials used in the program.
- f. A program may choose to make adaptations to a curriculum or a curriculum enhancement to meet the needs of a specific population of students.
 - 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 adaptation.

IV. Screening

- a. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that:
 - i. Screening results do not diagnose developmental delay. Screening results will be used solely as an indicator that formal evaluation is needed.

- ii. Screening or assessment results will not be used to exclude children from enrollment or participation.
 - iii. 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.
- b. Screenings 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.
- 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, PAT, Head Start, Child Find Fair, etc.), that screening meets the requirement of (b) 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 (d) 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, 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/or 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.
- g. After completion of a formal developmental evaluation, the program will ensure that:
 - i. If a child is determined to be eligible for Special Education services, the program must partner with parents and the Special Education team to assist in coordinating delivery of special education services.
 - ii. If, a child is determined to not be eligible for special education and related services, the program must seek guidance from a mental health or child development professional and partner with [parents](#) to help the family access services and supports to help address the child's identified needs. 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.

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. Through written policy and/or procedure a program will ensure that the use of screening and assessment items and data from any screening or assessment authorized under DEED is not used for the purposes of ranking, comparing, or otherwise evaluating individual children for purposes other than research, training, or technical assistance, and is not used for the purposes of providing rewards or sanctions for individual children or staff.
 - i. 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 educator. A program must make efforts to build responsive, respectful relationships with families and to include and engage 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 must 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 local 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 that the program's settings are open to parent(s) or guardian(s) during program hours and family members have opportunities to volunteer.
- c. A program must ensure that teachers and parents have regular opportunities to

communicate so that:

- i. The child's family is well-informed about the child's routines, activities, and behavior in the program.
 - ii. The child's parent, guardian, or other family member may inform the program about the child's routines, activities, and behavior at home.
- d. A program shall offer opportunities for parent or guardian involvement and communications during:
- i. A Meet and Greet event held before the first day of class each school year to ease transition into the school year.
 - ii. A family conference held as needed, but no less than two times per school year. Family conferences will provide an opportunity to:
 - 1. Enhance the knowledge and understanding of teachers, staff, and a parent or guardian regarding the child's education and developmental progress.
 - 2. Discuss the purposes of and the results of assessments.
 - iii. A 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.

VII. Dual Language Learners

- a. For dual language learners, a program must recognize bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths by implementing 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.
 - ii. Make culturally and linguistically appropriate materials available to the student.
 - iii. Implement evidence-based Dual Language Learner teaching strategies.
- b. If a program serves a child whose home language is not 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.
 - 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.
- 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 may 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.
- d. If a program serves a child whose home language is not 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 with at least 6 credits of early childhood.
 - 2. Training or mentorship in relationship-based professional development.
 - 3. Training and experience in adult learning and in using assessment data to drive coaching strategies aligned with program performance goals.
 - ii. Assesses education staff to identify strengths, areas of needed support, and whether any educational staff would benefit from intensive coaching,
 - iii. Establishes policies that ensure assessment results are not used to punish staff that need intensive coaching support prior to providing additional coaching and time for staff to improve.
 - iv. Provides opportunities for education staff to receive evidence-based professional development aligned with program performance goals.
 - 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. Provide ongoing communication between the coach, program director, education director, teachers, and staff.
 - 3. Provide opportunities for education staff to be observed and receive feedback and modeling of effective teacher practices directly related to program performance goals.

IX. Continuous Quality Improvement

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

curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design and other program decisions, including changing or targeting scope of services.

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 (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(s) that has historically been present in the geographic area being served.

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 refers 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. With 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.

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.