



Alabama Department of **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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Supporting Quality, Accountability, and Student Outcomes in the Alabama First Class Pre-K Program

Background

The mission of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) is to provide state leadership that identifies, promotes, and coordinates services for children, their families, and communities.

Housed within DECE, the Office of School Readiness (OSR) administers Alabama's *diverse delivery, voluntary, high-quality Pre-K program*. Classrooms are funded through a grant process in which sites must meet specific quality assurances and abide by rigorous operating guidelines.

Alabama's First Class Pre-K program has been awarded the highest quality rating by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for more than 12 consecutive years, which includes two years of highest ratings based on more stringent measures of practice.

Introduction

Using a multi-pronged approach, the DECE Office of School Readiness has implemented evidence-based strategies and methods grounded in research literature to assure that all Alabama 4-year-olds have access to excellent early learning classrooms in their communities.

According to the experts, an investment in early preschool education can have positive long-term impacts, including improvements in math and reading scores and reductions in retention in grade and special education placements.¹⁻³

The Alabama First Class Pre-K program has expanded substantially from serving just over 5,000 Alabama 4-year-olds in 2013 to nearly 17,000 in 2017, yet incremental growth and strong infrastructure have allowed for quality to be maintained and monitored.

The purpose of this white paper is to describe how the Alabama First Class Pre-K program supports quality, accountability, and student outcomes that extend well beyond Kindergarten entry.

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Six Strategies for Success

1 Key Leadership, Reasonable Growth, and Political Support

The Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education has assured that DECE employs a well-qualified, experienced leadership team and provides a fully functioning infrastructure to expand and sustain a high-quality, voluntary, statewide Pre-K system. Key leadership positions are staffed by individuals with extensive real-world experience in program administration, policy, and classroom settings as well as advanced degrees in education, including doctoral-level early childhood education.

To promote continuous improvement in early childhood education instructional practices and administration, DECE provides high-quality professional development training for Pre-K teachers, directors, and OSR staff. State leadership supports regional and local First Class Pre-K staff through professional development and leadership training, assuring that they in turn provide high-quality coaching, monitoring, and support to First Class Pre-K teachers in local classrooms.

To ensure quality and consistency, Alabama has set a reasonable growth strategy to support program expansion and scale-up. DECE awards First Class Pre-K classrooms based on a voluntary application process; this competitive grant process ensures funding is directed to programs dedicated to quality and continuous improvement. As compared to state-mandated Pre-K programs, Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms are located in sites that are committed to and prepared for the rigor of providing high-quality Pre-K.⁴ Furthermore, Alabama has implemented a deliberate and systematic expansion of First Class Pre-K to assure that the program grows at a pace that supports quality from year to year. As the program expands to more classrooms, DECE leadership continues to provide consistent and appropriate supports for teachers, including ongoing professional development, classroom-based coaching, and monitoring.⁵

The success of First Class Pre-K is due in large part to the

strong working relationship between DECE and the Alabama governor and the state Legislature, as well as public and private partnerships with business leaders and nonprofit groups. These relationships are built on trust and DECE's history of transparency and accountability, as well as data that show high quality and positive educational outcomes of children who participate in the program. Legislative relationships support funding to maintain

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and enhance the infrastructure needed to expand the program while assuring high-quality standards.

Public support for voluntary, high-quality preschool programs is at an all-time high in Alabama, with advocacy efforts led by the Alabama School Readiness Alliance.⁶ With strong leadership from Alabama's governor, consistent funding from the state Legislature, and the receipt of a federal Preschool Development Grant, the provision and expansion of First Class Pre-K is a top education priority in the state.⁷

These characteristics, combined with DECE's engagement in meaningful collaborations with other agencies and organizations, investments in data for program evaluation and accountability, workforce and infrastructure-building activities, and commitment to building a comprehensive early childhood system, create the foundation for school achievement and lifelong success for Alabama's children.

2 Development and Implementation of Foundational Guidance

Since 2000, early childhood professionals and preschool educators from across Alabama have worked collaboratively to develop and refine what is now the Alabama First Class Pre-K Framework (Framework). The Framework incorporates program guidelines, classroom guidelines, early learning standards, professional development, parent engagement,

coaching methods, and monitoring practices to create a replicable model for high-quality Pre-K programs.

Components of this Framework include resources and support to enhance performance and learning and alignment with the NIEER Quality Standards.⁸ Components are measured through on-going observation and authentic, research-based assessment.

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The Framework guides program development and program operations to ensure that Alabama’s children are prepared for school achievement and lifelong success. When new First Class Pre-K programs are proposed, sub-grantees

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must agree to abide by and incorporate the standards and practices of the Framework through an Alabama Pre-K Quality Assurances Contract to be considered for an award. Programs are monitored and evaluated using Framework guidelines and standards to maintain quality and promote student achievement consistently in all programs.

The Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children. The Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (Standards) are statewide, comprehensive

early learning standards that support school readiness for all children. Developed by OSR and an expert advisory committee of early childhood professionals,⁹ the Standards are age and developmentally appropriate and based on current recommendations and research on teaching and learning.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

The Standards reflect the philosophy of including children with disabilities in early childhood programs and the importance of teachers making accommodations to the curriculum and the learning environment to meet the needs of all children. The Standards include a strategic plan for the inclusion of children with disabilities in all early childhood systems and programs, emphasizing shared responsibility and commitment to inclusion through policy changes and resource allocation. The Standards serve as a natural progression to the Kindergarten standards contained in the Alabama Courses of Study¹⁵ and describe outcomes desired for the whole child at the end of his or her preschool experience. All Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms are monitored and evaluated using the Framework guidelines and the Standards to promote student achievement in consistent, safe, and high-quality learning environments throughout the state.

Coaching, Monitoring, and Professional Development

One distinctive example of infrastructure investment that ensures high quality is DECE’s rigorous coaching and monitoring program. Based on current research and evidence-based practices in coaching, the Alabama Reflective Coaching (ARC) Model was developed by DECE and faculty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education to give First Class Pre-K teachers the required support and skills necessary to provide a high-quality environment that supports experiences that promote school readiness.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

ARC provides customized support to First Class Pre-K teachers using a tiered model of coaching designed to meet the individualized professional development needs of each teacher. First Class Coaches and First Class Monitors have distinct roles that assure quality in all classrooms and compliance with First Class Pre-K policies and guidelines. These roles are separate from one another to ensure that coaching does not compromise the evaluative and quality assurance role of monitoring.

The underlying framework of ARC includes the use of shared planning between the learner and coach, observations by and of the learner, participatory action by the learner,

learner reflection on actions, and coach feedback on the learner’s reflections. Reflection is the most important step in the process and is what differentiates coaching from problem-solving,

consultation, monitoring, and information-sharing. The goal is to promote continuous improvement by assisting learners in analyzing

their practices and behavior through the use of a reflective discussion with the coach. The person being coached recognizes existing strengths and discovers ways to build upon those strengths in order to address identified questions, goals, plans, priorities, and interests.

The ARC approach is consistent with best practices established for effective coaching by connecting site-based professional development and classroom practice, providing ongoing observation and hands-on classroom participation,

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and offering individualized reflective discussion and feedback.¹⁹

Professional development. DECE provides numerous professional development opportunities for teachers, auxiliary teachers, and directors/administrators from sub-grantees and potential sub-grantees; these training sessions are planned and responsive to current needs and trends. OSR hosts an annual conference each year with national experts, and conference sessions are based on identified needs from surveys and site visits; conference attendance exceeds 3,000 early childhood practitioners each year. A full-time Professional Development

Coordinator plans high-quality professional development for continuous improvement of the highest quality early childhood education instructional practices and administration for Pre-K teachers, directors, and First Class Coaches and Monitors. Lead teachers must have 30 hours of professional development each year; auxiliary teachers must have 20 hours. Additionally, both lead and auxiliary teachers have individual professional development plans that are supported through onsite professional development with a Pre-K Coach. DECE leadership is focused on continued growth of a sustainable, integrated, and professional field of practice.²⁰⁻²²

4 Ongoing Assessment of Short- and Long-term Outcomes

First Class Pre-K assures quality at both the individual child and classroom levels using research-based observational assessments, including the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD). Collected data are used to develop individual professional

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development goals to improve how teachers interact with children every day to cultivate supportive, structured, and engaging classrooms.

To support high-quality learning environments and alignment of effective instruction to

student success, all children in First Class Pre-K classrooms are assessed using TS GOLD, an ongoing, observation-based, research-validated assessment system. Grounded in current research related to child development and learning, the TS GOLD assessment includes 38 objectives across six domains of development (social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and math) that are associated with school readiness standards.²³ Alabama First Class Pre-K students consistently show significant growth across all domains, with more than 90 percent meeting or exceeding widely-held expectations for

their age by the end of the Pre-K year. Furthermore, math is consistently the greatest area of weakness noted for children at Pre-K entry, yet also the area of greatest observed gains.

To promote teacher effectiveness and support high-quality teacher-child interactions, all First Class Pre-K classrooms are assessed using the CLASS, a valid and reliable research-based instrument that measures teacher-child interactions across three domains (emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support). Alabama First Class Pre-K averages consistently exceed national averages for all three domains.

Longitudinal research evaluation. DECE continues to build its capacity for outcome evaluation and longitudinal research by assembling a diverse, external academic team, the Pre-K Research Evaluation Team. This team meets monthly with First Class Pre-K leadership to evaluate the program; examine student performance in elementary school; and assess potential cost savings related to retention, chronic absenteeism, and special education placement. Alabama children who received First Class Pre-K consistently outperform their similar peers in standardized assessments of math and reading at 3rd through 6th grades and have lower rates of retention, chronic absenteeism, and special education placements. With Pre-K policies and programs in place, the Pre-K Research Evaluation Team is poised to look at longer term outcomes of the First Class Pre-K program as students matriculate to middle and high school and beyond.

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5 Meeting National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) High-Quality Standards

For more than a decade, Alabama has had the highest quality, state-funded Pre-K in the nation, as ranked by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) quality indicator benchmarks.

Since 2006, Alabama has consistently been awarded the highest quality rating by NIEER, meeting all 10 structural elements/quality standards for high-quality preschool programs.^{8,24} Currently, Alabama is one of only five states to have achieved this level of quality for its statewide program.⁸

Alabama First Class Pre-K meets the 10 NIEER quality standards in the following ways:

Early Learning Standards The Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (Standards) serve as required Early Learning Standards.

Teacher Degree Lead teachers must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development, at minimum.

Teacher Specialized Training Lead teachers must have specialized training in the early childhood field.

Auxiliary Teacher Degree Auxiliary teachers must have a Child Development Associate credential (CDA) or equivalent (nine hours of approved coursework in child development), at minimum.

Teacher In-Service Lead teachers must have at least 30 hours of in-service professional development and training yearly. Auxiliary teachers must have 20 hours each year.

Maximum Class Size The maximum number of children per classroom must be 20 or fewer; recommended number is 18.

Staff-Child Ratio The lowest acceptable ratio of staff to children in the classroom must be 1:10 or better.

Screening/Referral and Support Services Physical, vision, hearing, and dental screenings and referrals and support services are provided for families through all classrooms and supported through a centralized referral-based hub. All parents complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire-3 (ASQ-3) developmental screener. Help Me Grow follows up on referrals to connect families to health and developmental resources so that children ages birth to 8 can start school healthy and ready to succeed.

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Comprehensive Curriculum No specific commercial learning curriculum is endorsed, but all First Class Pre-K classrooms implement the Alabama First Class Framework (Framework), the Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool Children (Standards), First Class Program Guidelines, First Class Classroom Guidelines, the ASQ-3 Developmental Screener, and the Teaching Strategies GOLD Assessment. First Class Coaches provide classroom guidance and support, and curriculum content is comprehensively presented and reinforced with intentional teaching strategies for Pre-K teachers. Curriculum is embedded into the Alabama Reflective Coaching Model, which includes effective teaching practices, content based on early learning standards, and professional development. DECE reviews early learning childhood curricula to provide guidance on which are most closely aligned to the Framework and the Standards. All curricula must promote developmentally appropriate instructional practice and supplement the overall OSR First Class Pre-K program framework.

Monitoring Site visits and monitoring are provided by First Class Monitors to ensure quality and compliance. Research-based observational assessments, including the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), are administered to ensure classroom quality and that the program is meeting children's needs.

Additionally, the Alabama First Class Pre-K program provides full-day (6.5 hours), five days per week of high-quality, developmentally appropriate instruction and support for 4-year-old children. OSR recommends 180 days per year for eligible 4-year-old children, with each classroom funded for 187 days to include seven days of professional development for staff. All teachers in the Alabama First Class Pre-K diverse delivery system earn salaries that are comparable to those of K-12 public school instructional staff, an essential component for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and supporting a well-prepared, professional workforce.

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Commitment to Quality in the Classroom

The Alabama First Class Pre-K program framework was developed *by* educators *for* educators and continues to set the national standard for success in early learning because of its commitment to quality and continuous improvement, both in concept and in the practical application in classrooms.

Alabama First Class Pre-K teachers demonstrate high-impact practices that are consistent with teacher actions that can make the difference between mediocre and excellent preschool classrooms.²⁵ The following practices are critical elements of this high-quality Pre-K program:

Promote cooperative interactions between children. First Class Pre-K teachers promote both associative interactions (children sharing materials and interacting) and cooperative interactions (children working together toward

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shared goals) by implementing developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and a research-based instrument to measure teacher effectiveness, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

Teachers facilitate opportunities where children work together to accomplish tasks and meet common goals, engage in small/large group instruction, interact through circle time, and participate in different types of instructional centers, such as dramatic play, building blocks, and sensory stations with sand and water.

Foster high levels of child involvement. First Class Pre-K teachers use a comprehensive classroom management approach and a social-emotional curriculum, both of which are based on the latest brain research, child development science, and developmentally appropriate practices. In an early learning environment, bringing these components together creates a strong community of cooperation and collaboration and provides for a solid foundation for future relationships, self-control, and work ethic. These practices as well as the CLASS tool deepen student learning and self-regulation and support high-quality teacher/child interactions for both social-emotional development and academic engagement.²⁶⁻²⁷

Plan sequential activities. From their first year of teaching in a First Class Pre-K classroom, teachers are trained in scheduling and effective planning for instruction and interaction, high-quality early childhood curricula, and selection of accessible and developmentally appropriate materials. Planning for instruction includes creating a daily schedule, daily lesson plans, short-term lesson plans (weekly/monthly themes and lessons), and long-term lesson plans (themes or studies for the year).

The interests, curiosity, and needs of children are taken into consideration when developing classroom plans. Developing lessons and free choice activities around themes or studies maximizes learning in a meaningful context based on the NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practices. Teachers receive coaching on best practices in classroom management and instruction, including whole group instruction which may last up to 20 minutes and occurs throughout the day.

Lead and auxiliary teachers share instructional responsibilities, child supervision, and other classroom duties. Lead and auxiliary teachers interact with children during Learning/Free Choice time and Gross Motor time to facilitate children's play. They sit with children during meals and snacks to facilitate appropriate conversation, respect social skills, and model manners and healthy nutritional habits.

Increase time teachers listen to children. First Class Pre-K teachers prioritize small-group instruction over large/whole-group instruction to promote rich conversations and feedback. Teachers document language development in Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD), engage students in conversations to encourage higher-order thinking and inquiry skills, and use social-emotional supports to create a safe, connected environment in which children use problem-solving skills to self-regulate.

Create a positive climate. First Class Pre-K uses the emotional support domain of teacher-child interactions as defined through CLASS as a framework for creating and fostering a positive climate in the classroom. This domain ensures that teachers are aware of and responsive to student needs and allows for flexibility in planning so that student interests and motivation guide student learning. Additionally, supports are in place to build resiliency factors among students, strengthen the school-family connection through regular communication, and build upon the parent-child-teacher triad.

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An Additional Support System for Instructional Strategies for Teachers (ASSIST) team facilitates whole class instruction and management to support children with challenging behaviors. Together, the ASSIST team and teachers create individualized strategies that build on student strengths and interests to address behavioral challenges in the classroom.

Improve level of instruction. The emphasis of First Class Pre-K is school readiness, not simply preparation for kindergarten; therefore, intentionally planned instruction focuses on understanding rather than rote learning. Teachers encourage children to be creative in thought and to build high-order thinking skills – such as analysis, reasoning, planning, and producing – by drawing from children’s background knowledge/schema and connections to their own lives. All First Class Pre-K classrooms use TS GOLD to guide individualized instruction.

Reduce time spent in transition. First Class Pre-K teachers are intentional about transition time and encouraged to minimize wait time. Transitions – such as hand washing, water breaks, and bathroom breaks – are done in small groups or individually when possible. Teachers use songs, games, finger plays, and other activities to extend learning during transitions. Yearly, coaches complete a pre- and post-environmental checklist; data and site visit reports indicate that transition time is minimal in First Class Pre-K classrooms.

Provide math opportunities. The First Class Pre-K Program in Alabama recognizes the importance of math concepts in preparing children for kindergarten and early math success, an early predictor of late elementary school achievement. Special trainings as well as individual coaching provide guidance in STEM instructional practices and activities. A pilot program implemented in summer 2018 will

create STEM model sites throughout the state for teachers to visit and experience best practices in math collaborative learning settings.

Teachers are required to use a portion of grant funds to purchase supplies that support counting/numbers, patterns, measuring, geometry, and data and graphing. This requirement is based on a widely used environmental scale that measures environmental provisions that affect the broad developmental needs of young children, including cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and health and safety.²⁸

The Alabama First Class Pre-K program provides substantial teacher resources and support systems, such as the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), CLASS, Daily Schedule Guide, Lesson Plan Guide, Learning Environment Guide, Classroom Guidelines, Developmentally Appropriate Practice National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) book, ASQ-3, TS GOLD, My Teachstone, Dual Language Learners Resource Book, Conscious Discipline, Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), Alabama Developmental Standards for Preschool (Standards), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), and the ARC Model.

Encourage family engagement. DECE offers parent trainings to highlight brain development as well as the importance of relationships with families. Additionally, Strengthening Families has been implemented statewide to ensure that all individuals who serve children are using the same language when discussing child protective factors. The knowledge that strong family relationships build strong child outcomes drives DECE to continue to look for innovative ways to reach families statewide.

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Conclusions

The Alabama First Class Pre-K Program is grounded in current evidence-based practice and research in early childhood education. Through key leadership, vision, and expertise, the program assures high-quality early learning environments for Alabama preschool children in consistent, safe classrooms designed to support school readiness. Using the ARC Model, well-trained First Class Coaches and Monitors support preschool teachers and administrators to advance professional development for the highest quality early childhood education instructional practices. Carefully designed structures and processes create a system to ensure effective and efficient functions for program quality. The program is rigorously evaluated and a diverse research team supports assessment of long-term outcomes. The Alabama First Class Pre-K program maintains a thoughtful, reasonable growth strategy with strong political and public support to promote expansion while still assuring quality and accountability.

Next Steps: Building an Early Childhood Education System

Transforming Early Learning in Alabama

Alabama is implementing the carefully developed First Class Pre-K model as a bridge to develop and expand a continuum to create a vertical alignment spanning Pre-K to 3rd grade (ages 4 to 8) and birth to age 3. Using an incremental approach, the basic structure and processes that have been so successful in developing a high-quality 4-year-old Pre-K program will be applied to the development of a birth to 8 continuum of high-quality early learning experiences for children. This includes establishing high-quality programs (accountability processes and structures); building young brains (approaches to teaching and learning); teacher training, coaching, and workforce development; creating a learning laboratory; and engaging philanthropy and government in private-public partnerships – all of which are essential to constructing a comprehensive, unified early childhood education system.

Birth to age 8 continuum.

Birth to age 3. The quality of care, experiences, and education children have before the age of 4 impacts their lifelong learning and success. In 2017, DECE initiated a collaboration with the Department of Human Resources (DHR) to reach the youngest learners in the state. By providing high-quality coaching to childcare sites in the Early Head Start Child Care Partnership on curriculum fidelity and teacher-child interactions, DECE coaches will impact the quality of care being delivered to infants and toddlers. In addition, quality coaching will be offered to childcare sites in the areas of social-emotional development and increasing quality family engagement. The goal is to build quality in Alabama's licensed childcare settings.

Pre-K to 3rd grade continuum. For children to sustain the gains made in high-quality Pre-K programs, they also need access to high-quality instruction and supports in grades K-3. In 2017-2018, Alabama took an intentional step towards improving its Pre-K to 3rd continuum by providing supports to schools that are committed to replicating the successes enjoyed in the state's Pre-K program. This new effort is a Pre-K through 3rd grade initiative that includes three major components: assessment, instruction, and leadership. As part of this initiative, teachers receive access to coaching and professional development and collaborate across grades. Additionally, principals participate in a statewide Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy – a job-embedded, sustained, and ongoing professional learning experience focused on mastering effective instructional leadership practices that are developmentally appropriate.²⁹

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