

Early Childhood Assessments Legislative Report



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State of Iowa
Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
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Des Moines, IA 50319-0146

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INTRODUCTION

Iowa Code section 279.60: Assessments – access to data – reports

The 2014 General Assembly passed legislation requiring local school districts to complete the following:

- Administer Teaching Strategies GOLD early childhood assessment to every resident prekindergarten or four-year-old child whose parent or guardian enrolls the child in the district;
- Administer a valid and reliable universal screening instrument as prescribed by the Iowa Department of Education (Department) to every kindergarten student enrolled in the district (Iowa Code section 270.60);
- Collect from each parent guardian or legal custodian of a kindergarten student enrolled in the district, information including, but not limited to, preschool attendance and demographic factors;
- Report the results of assessments and preschool information to the Department no later than January 1 of that school year; and
- Submit findings and recommendations annually in a report to the governor, the general assembly, the Early Childhood Iowa State Board, and the Early Childhood Iowa area boards.

REPORT OF PRESCHOOL PARTICIPATION

Districts reported the number of students who had attended preschool at any time twelve months prior to registering for kindergarten. Districts gathered the information through parent reports or district records. Preschool participation has been defined to include attending any district or non-district preschool program including Head Start, local private preschools, and preschools funded by Early Childhood Iowa scholarships. Data analysis should consider variations in program design due to differing program requirements and/or local expectations. In 2020–2021, districts reported 82 percent of students entering kindergarten for the first time attended a preschool program in the prior year.

Data Source: Student Reporting in Iowa, Fall 2020 files

PRESCHOOL—ASSESSMENT TOOL USED

Iowa Code section 279.60 requires preschool programs under the authority of the Iowa Department of Education (Department) to administer Teaching Strategies GOLD™ (GOLD). This is an online, ongoing, portfolio-based assessment system for children from birth to grade three. GOLD blends portfolio-based assessment for all areas of development and learning with performance tasks to predict school success across developmental areas. Specifically, the developmental domains on GOLD are: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science and technology, and the arts.

Documentation for each child is also collected on an ongoing basis across areas of development and examined regularly to assist teachers in completing progress checkpoints. Up to three times a year, teachers complete a progress checkpoint for each child across the required developmental domains based on analysis of portfolio evidence.

Levels used to indicate how a child is doing at a checkpoint are based on widely held expectations for child development.

KINDERGARTEN—ASSESSMENT TOOL USED

The Department aligned the kindergarten assessment requirements of Iowa Code section 279.60 with Iowa Code section 279.68, the statutory requirements for ensuring that all students are at benchmark in reading by the end of third grade. This law requires each school district assess all students enrolled in kindergarten at the beginning of the school year for their level of reading or reading readiness on a locally determined or statewide assessment. Locally determined assessments that districts select must meet minimum standards for reliability and validity established by the Department. In order to support districts in the implementation of Iowa Codes section 279.68, the Department reviewed early literacy assessments for universal screening and progress monitoring to determine valid and reliable instruments.

Table 1 depicts the various kindergarten literacy assessment instruments used in school districts. Each of these assessment tools measures early literacy concepts including print, letter names, and sounds and beginning sounds (phonemic awareness) in young children. One assessment tool commonly used by districts is the Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST).

Table 1. Percent of Iowa School Districts and Kindergarten Assessment Tool Administered in Fall 2020

Kindergarten Assessment	# Districts Used as Default Assessment in Fall 2020	% Districts Used as Default Assessment in Fall 2020
FAST Kindergarten Composite	324	99.1%
i-Ready Diagnostics	1	0.3%
NWEA MAP Growth	1	0.3%
STAR Early Literacy	1	0.3%
TOTAL	327	100.0%

Data Source: CASA Default Assessment Survey Collection, Fall 2020

PRESCHOOL—ASSESSMENT RESULTS

In the GOLD Comparative Report, children were compared to a readiness benchmark reflecting objectives and performance typical of students at entry to kindergarten. The objectives and readiness benchmarks for specific domains were established by the Teaching Strategies research team. Data shown in Table 2 represents preschool children who met the GOLD kindergarten readiness benchmark in various developmental domains in winter 2020. This includes data from all preschool programs in GOLD under the Iowa Department of Education Statewide License with Teaching Strategies (although some programs are not under Department authority).

Previous reports have included GOLD spring checkpoint data. Due to the suspension of state assessments in Iowa during the health pandemic in 2020, data for the spring checkpoint period is not available. Table 2 represents the winter 2020 checkpoint period completed in February 2020.

Table 2. Winter 2020 Assessment of Kindergarten Readiness for Preschool

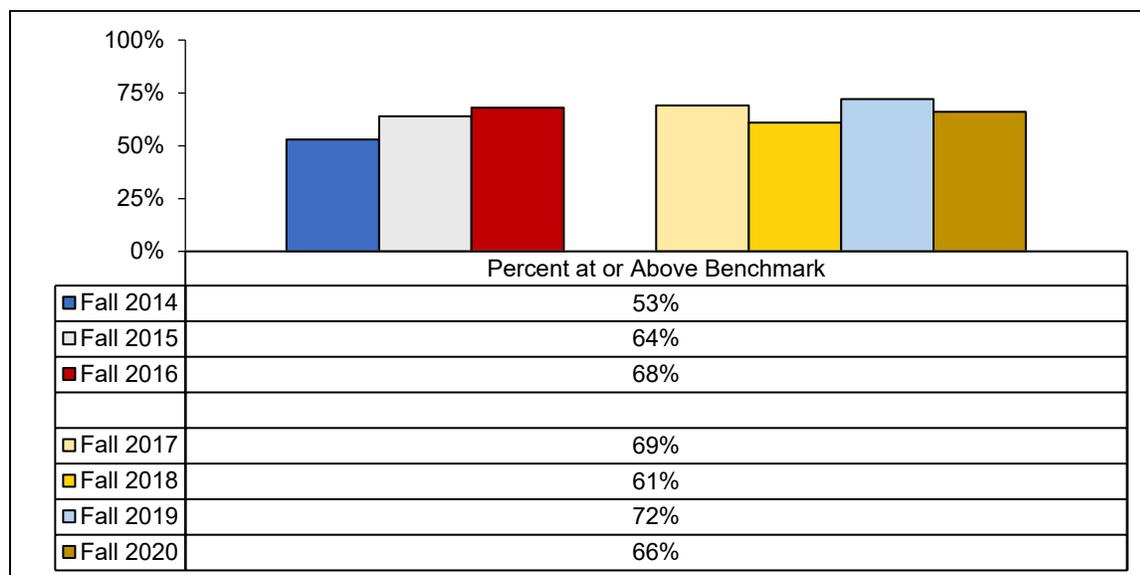
Teaching Strategies GOLD Area of Development	Number of 4 Year Old Children	Percent at or Above Benchmark
Social-Emotional	23,210	81.5%
Physical	23,093	90.1%
Language	23,110	77.3%
Cognitive	23,033	79.6%
Literacy	23,273	70.6%
Mathematics	23,229	61.3%

Data Source: Teaching Strategies GOLD Online Assessment System, Winter 2020

KINDERGARTEN—ASSESSMENT RESULTS

To determine kindergarten performance, students are compared based on a criterion or benchmark aligned with relevant outcomes. A composite or total score is calculated based on assessment subtests. The composite score is reported to determine the percent of children at benchmark meeting expectations in regard to early reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten. In fall 2020, 36,112 kindergarten students were assessed using FAST; data indicate 23,965 students (66 percent) of those assessed were at or above the benchmark for kindergarten (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills Using an Approved Early Literacy Screening Assessment Measure, 2014–2020



Data Source: Iowa TIER Data System, 2014-2016 data; FastBridge Learning State Data File, 2017–2020 data; 2014–2016 data include all approved screeners; 2017–2020 data only include FAST screeners

Figure 2. State Screening Data Trends for the Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills, 2015–2019

Due to the suspension of state assessments in Iowa during the health pandemic in spring 2020, data for spring administration period is not available. Consequently, trend data is not reported in this FY21 report.

SUMMARY

Results suggest statewide efforts to increase proficiency of literacy skills are positively impacting student learning in kindergarten. In preschool, statewide efforts have included implementation of the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and early literacy instructional strategies. Ongoing efforts in the alignment of assessment, curriculum, and instruction to assist in closing the achievement gap for young children are needed. Recommendations supportive of such efforts include the following:

- Continue state funding supporting the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of quality preschool programming.
- Support quality preschool programs through maintaining program standards and implementation of Iowa Early Learning Standards in order to prepare children for success in kindergarten.
- Support quality professional development that addresses the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, Iowa Early Learning Standards, and the alignment of Iowa Early Learning Standards with the kindergarten standards of the Iowa academic and recommended standards (Iowa Core).
- Provide technical assistance through area education agency (AEA) early childhood consultants.
- Department/AEA/local education agency partnership efforts in early literacy and school improvement have included early childhood with an intent to effectively and efficiently address instruction and student outcomes systemically in preschool through grade twelve.