

Legislative Report Early Childhood Assessments



February 1, 2022

State of Iowa
Department of Education
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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 2021 files

PRESCHOOL—ASSESSMENT TOOL USED

Iowa Code section 279.60 requires preschool programs under the authority of the 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 progressing 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 Code 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. Number and Percent of Iowa School Districts and Kindergarten Assessment Tools Administered in Fall 2021

| Kindergarten Assessment | Number of Districts Used as Default Assessment in Fall 2021 | Percent of Districts Used as Default Assessment in Fall 2021 |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| DIBELS 8 Letter Naming | 2 | 0.61% |
| DIBELS 8 Nonsense Words | 1 | 0.31% |
| FAST Kindergarten Composite | 321 | 98.17% |
| i-Ready Diagnostics | 1 | 0.31% |
| NWEA MAP Growth | 1 | 0.31% |
| STAR Early Literacy | 1 | 0.31% |
| TOTAL | 327 | 100.0% |

Data Source: CASA Default Assessment Survey Collection, Fall 2021

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 spring 2021. This includes data from all preschool programs in GOLD under the Department Statewide License with Teaching Strategies (although some programs are not under Department authority).

Table 2. Spring 2021 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 | 22,437 | 88.8% |
| Physical | 22,450 | 94.2% |
| Language | 22,533 | 85.8% |
| Cognitive | 22,373 | 88.2% |
| Literacy | 22,461 | 85.5% |
| Mathematics | 22,422 | 78.2% |

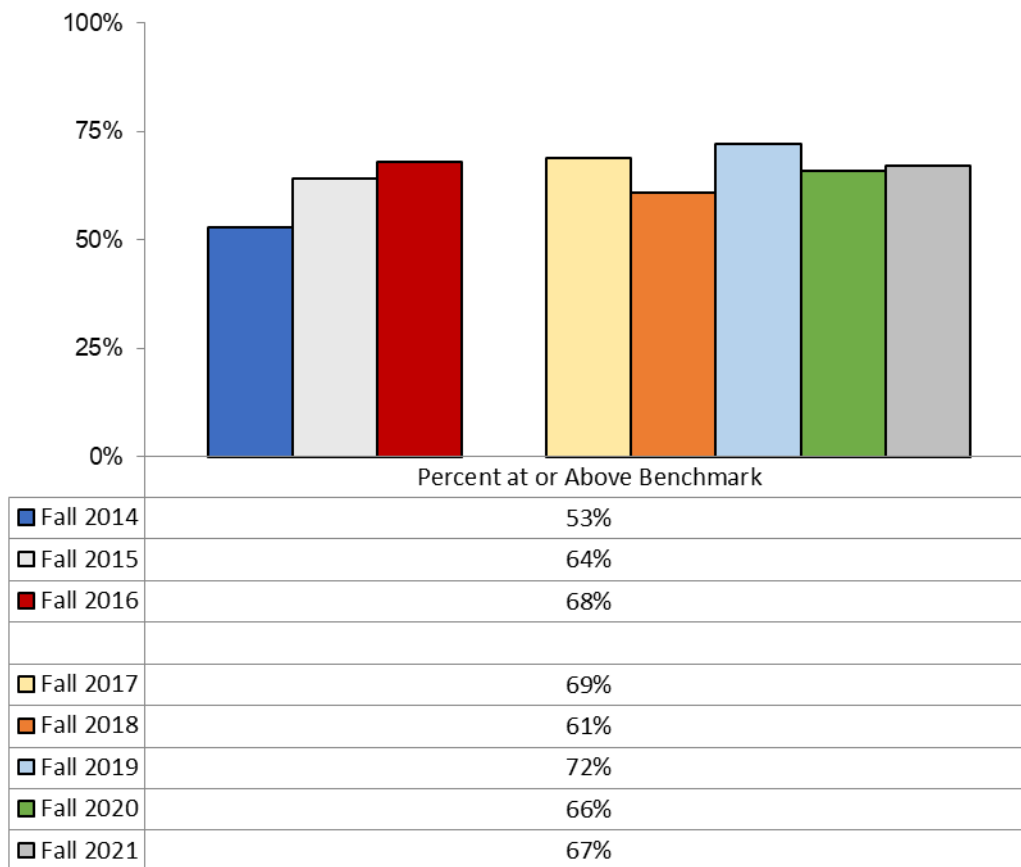
Data Source: Teaching Strategies GOLD Online Assessment System, Spring 2021

Note. Values may fluctuate as some programs may have elected to not report spring checkpoint data.

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 regarding early reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten. In fall 2021, 39,786 kindergarten students were assessed using the FAST; data indicate 26,803 students (67 percent) of those assessed were at or above the benchmark for kindergarten (Figure 1).

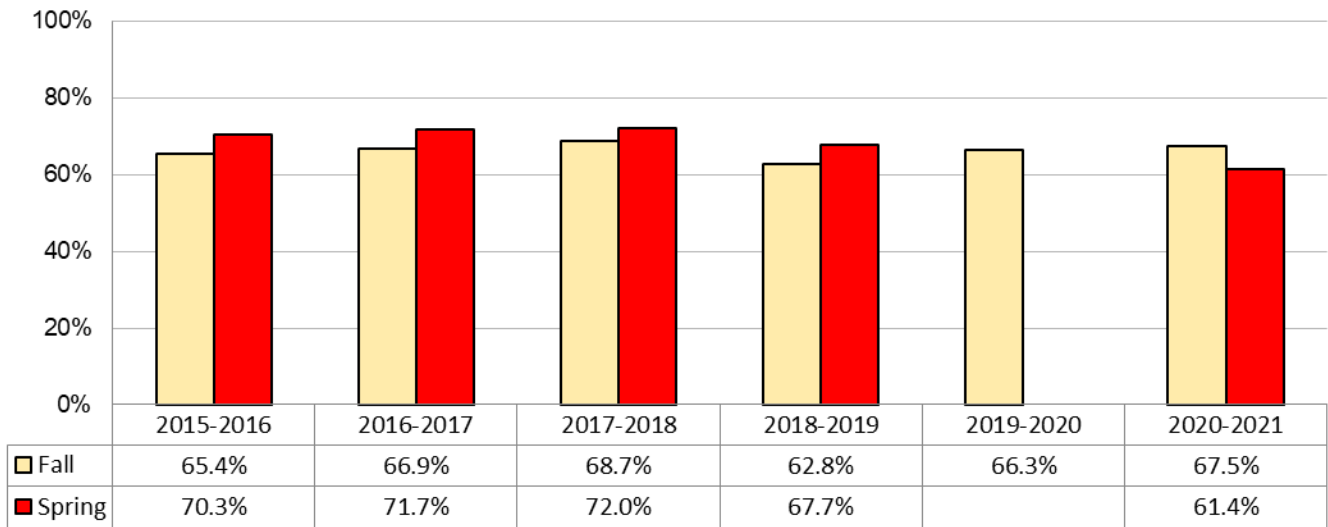
Figure 1. Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills Using an Approved Early Literacy Screening Assessment Measure, 2014-2021



Data Source: Iowa TIER Data System, 2014-2016 data; FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success MTSS Data System, 2020-2021 data; 2014-2016 data include all approved screeners; 2017-2021 data only include FAST screeners.

The year-by-year trend results (Figure 2) since 2015 illustrate an overall increasing trend statewide in the number of children at or above benchmark. By the end of kindergarten, children have grown in their development of early literacy skills. Due to the suspension of state assessments in Iowa during the health pandemic in spring 2020, data for the spring administration period is not available.

Figure 2. State Screening Data Trends for the Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills, 2015-2021



Data Source: Iowa TIER Data System, 2014-2016 data; FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success MTSS Data System, 2020-2021 data; 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 data include all approved literacy assessments, 2017-2019 data only include FAST screeners; school self-selected default assessment data represented using 2015-2016 benchmark cuts; represents district and participating non-public schools.

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 (IELS) 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 IELS with the kindergarten standards of the Iowa academic and recommended standards.
- Provide quality professional development addressing early mathematical and numeracy topics to support early math, including number sense, instruction in preschool programs.
- Provide technical assistance through area education agency early childhood consultants.