

February 1, 2024

Legislative Report

Early Childhood Assessments



Department of Education

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Introduction

Under Iowa Code section 279.60, school districts are required to do the following:

- Administer the 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 the assessment and preschool information to the Department no later than January 1 of that school year; and

The Department is to review the information and submit findings and recommendations annually in a report to the Governor and General Assembly.

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 preschool design due to differing program requirements and/or local expectations.

In 2023-2024, districts reported 80 percent of students entering kindergarten for the first time attended a preschool program in the prior year.

Preschool- Assessment Tool Used

Iowa Code section 279.60 requires administration of the Teaching Strategies GOLD™ (GOLD) assessment. 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 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. Depending on the frequency of collection and amount collected, data may be used by teachers for both formative and summative purposes.

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 or above 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 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. 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 Public School Districts and Kindergarten Assessment Tools Administered in Fall 2023

Kindergarten Assessment	Number of Public Districts Using as Default Assessment in Fall 2023	Percent of Public Districts Using as Default Assessment in Fall 2023
FAST earlyReading	317	97%
i-Ready Diagnostics	6	2%
MAP Growth Reading	1	< 1%
STAR Early Literacy	3	1%

Data Source: CASA Default Assessment Survey Collection, Fall 2023

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 2023. This includes data from all preschool programs in GOLD under the Department Statewide License with Teaching Strategies.

Table 2. Spring 2023 Assessment of Kindergarten Readiness for Preschool

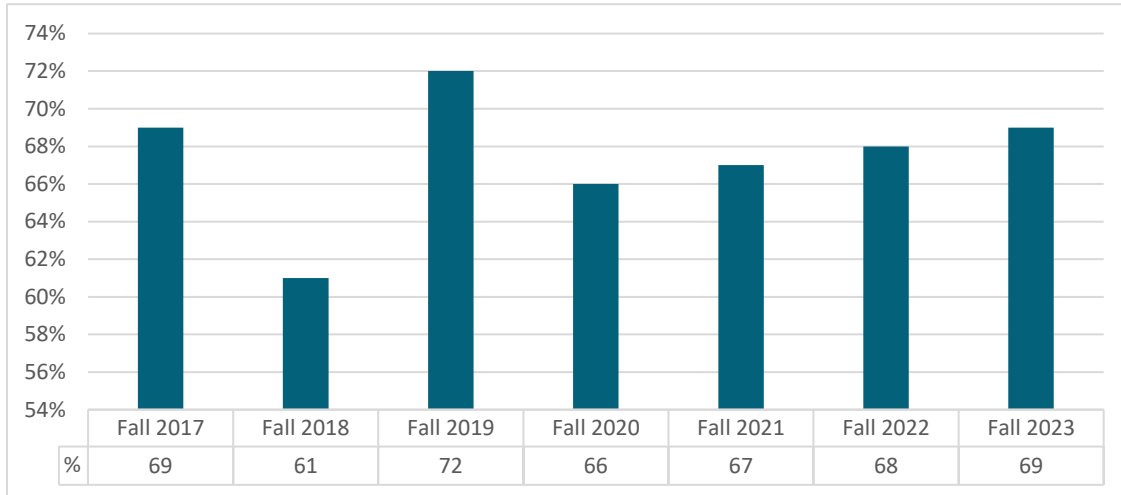
Teaching Strategies GOLD Area of Development	Number of 4-Year-Old Children Assessed	Percent At or Above Benchmark
Social-Emotional	26,116	87.4%
Physical	26,030	93.3%
Language	26,060	84.1%
Cognitive	25,980	87.3%
Literacy	26,023	83.7%
Mathematics	26,014	78%

Data Source: Teaching Strategies GOLD Online Assessment System, Spring 2023

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 2023, 38,221 kindergarten students were assessed using an approved early literacy screening assessment; data indicate 26,273 students (69 percent) of those assessed were at or above the benchmark for kindergarten (Figure 1).

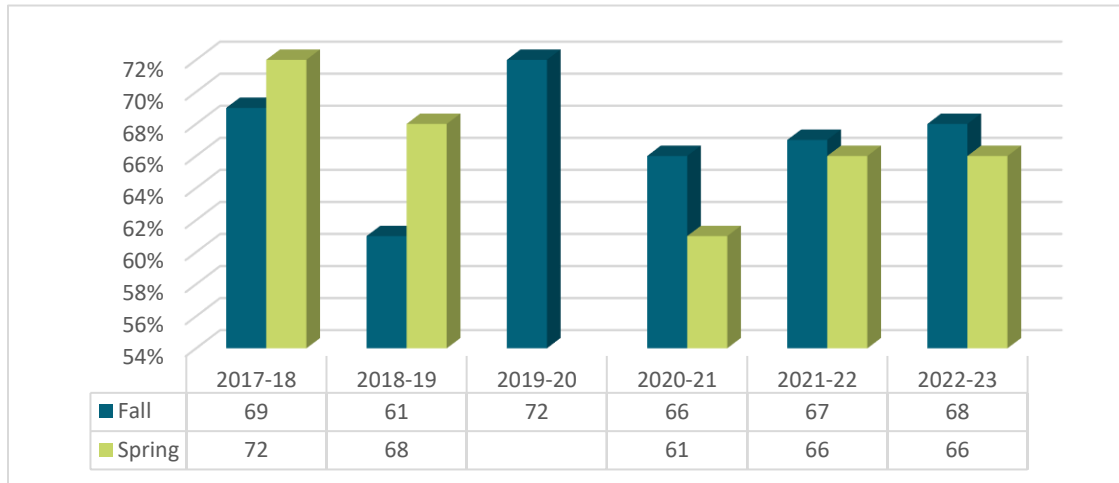
Figure 1. Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills Using an Approved Early Literacy Screening Assessment Measure, 2017-2023



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-2022 data; 2017-2021 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-2023 data includes all approved screeners.

The year-by-year trend results are shown in Figure 2. Due to the suspension of state assessments in Iowa in spring 2020, data for spring administration is not available.

Figure 2. State Screening Data Trends for the Percent of Students in Kindergarten At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills, 2017-2023



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-2022 data; 2017-2021 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-2023 data includes all approved screeners.

Summary

Results suggest statewide efforts to increase proficiency of literacy skills are positively impacting student learning in kindergarten. In preschool, statewide efforts have continued in the implementation of the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items, and the Head Start Program Performance Standards. However, intentional 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:

- Continued statewide efforts in the maintenance of high-quality preschool programs through professional learning and coaching in the following areas:
 - Implementation of the Division for Early Childhood's Recommended Practices to support inclusive practices and universal design for learning
 - Implementation of the Iowa Early Learning Standards (IELS)
 - Early mathematical and numeracy content, including number sense, and age appropriate instructional practices
 - Alignment of IELS with the kindergarten standards of the Iowa Academic Standards
- Provide quality professional development and coaching in early literacy content to teachers in preschool classrooms in support of appropriate oral language, early reading, and early writing learning aligned to the Science of Reading.
- Consistent statewide administration, data collection, and reporting of preschool assessment data including screening, formative, and summative measures; and short- and long-term development and skill monitoring. This includes:
 - Completion of the GOLD Assessment checkpoints three times a year to intentionally monitor children's progress and inform instruction
 - Completion of Interrater Reliability Certification to address data validity and reliability in assessment practices of preschool teaching staff