

# Legislative Report

## Early Childhood Assessments

**IOWA** | Department of Education



State of Iowa  
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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 assessment and preschool information to the Department no later than Jan. 1 of that school year.
- 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 attended preschool at any time 12 months prior to registering for kindergarten. The information was gathered through parent reports or district records. The definition of preschool participation is 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 fall 2024, districts reported that 80 percent of students entering kindergarten for the first time attended a preschool program in the prior year.

Data Source: Student Reporting in Iowa, Fall 2024 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), an online, 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 of GOLD are social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science and technology and the arts. Documentation is collected on an ongoing basis across areas of development and examined regularly to assist teachers in completing progress checkpoints. Based on analysis of the collected evidence, teachers complete a progress checkpoint for each child across the required developmental domains up to three times a year. GOLD bases the levels used to indicate how a child is progressing at a checkpoint on widely held expectations for child development. Teachers may use data for both formative and summative purposes depending on the frequency and amount collected.

## 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 to assess all students enrolled in kindergarten at the beginning of the school year for their reading readiness level 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' 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 assessment tool 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 by Kindergarten Assessment Tools Administered in Fall 2024**

Kindergarten Assessment	Number of Public Districts by Screening Assessment	Percent of Public Districts by Screening Assessment
FAST earlyReading	317	97%
i-Ready Diagnostics	3	< 1%
STAR Early Literacy	3	< 1%
MAP Growth Reading	1	< 1%
DIBELS 8 <sup>th</sup> Edition	1	< 1%

Data Source: CASA Default Assessment Survey Collection, Fall 2024

## Preschool — Assessment Results

The GOLD Comparative Report compares children’s scores to a readiness benchmark reflecting objectives and performance typical of students at kindergarten entry. The Teaching Strategies research team established the specific domains’ objectives and readiness benchmarks. Data shown in Table 2 represents preschool children who met the GOLD kindergarten readiness benchmark in various developmental domains in spring 2024. This data represents all preschool programs included in the Department’s statewide agreement and license with Teaching Strategies.

**Table 2: Spring 2024 Assessment of Kindergarten Readiness for Preschool**

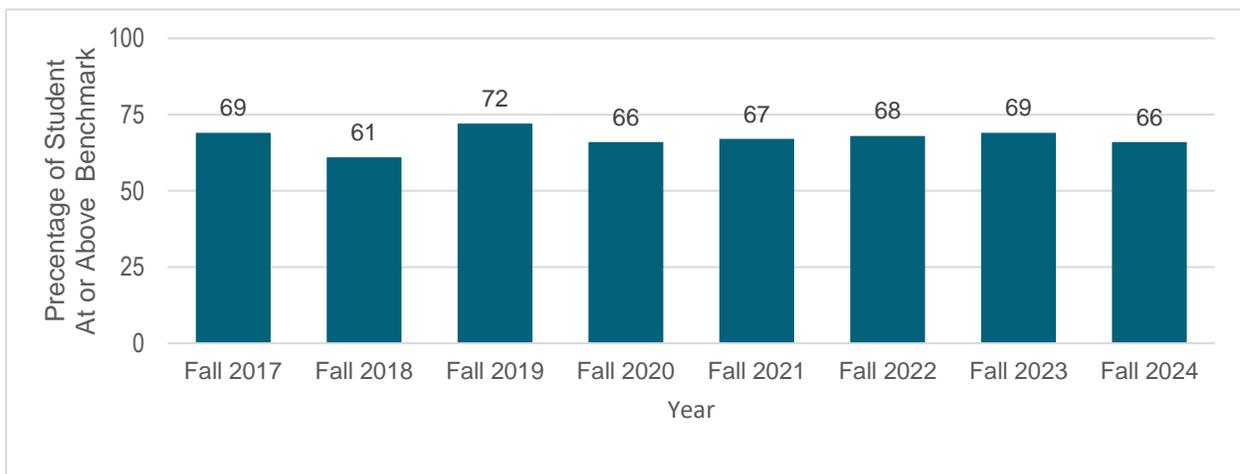
Teaching Strategies GOLD Area of Development	Number of 4-Year-Old Children Assessed	Percent at or above Benchmark
Social-Emotional	25,881	87.5%
Physical	25,790	93.6%
Language	25,805	84.3%
Cognitive	25,782	87.4%
Literacy	25,831	83.2%
Mathematics	25,770	78.9%

Data Source: Teaching Strategies GOLD Online Assessment System, Spring 2024

## 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 (or meeting expectations) regarding early reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten. In fall 2024, 37,847 kindergarten students were assessed using an approved early literacy screening assessment. Data indicates 24,984 students (66 percent) of those assessed were at or above the benchmark for kindergarten (Figure 1).

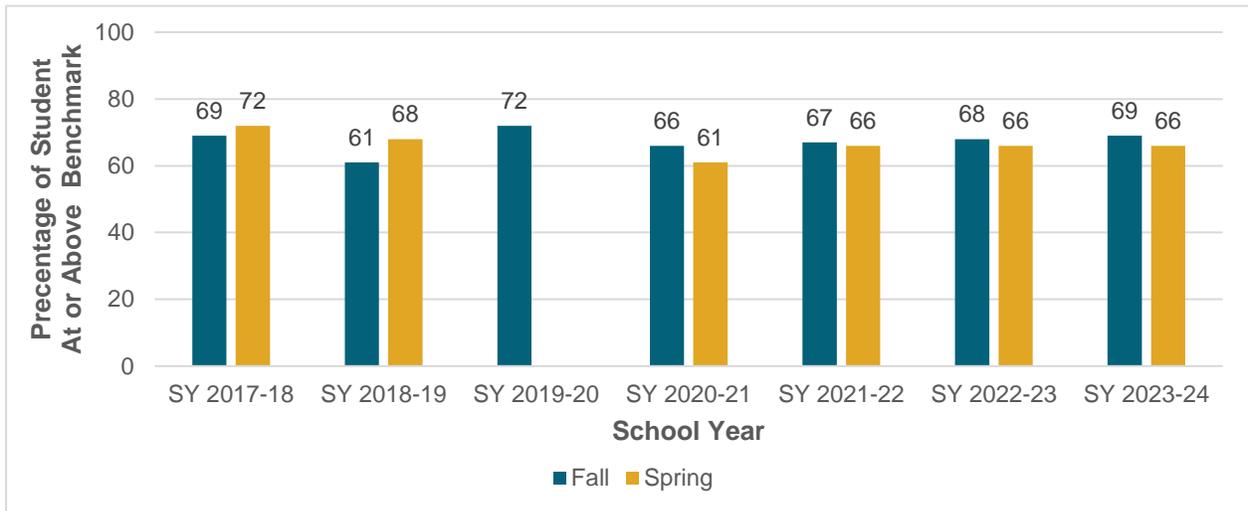
**Figure 1: Percent of Kindergarten Students at or above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills Using an Approved Early Literacy Screening Assessment Measure, 2017-24**



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-19 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-24 data; 2017-21 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-24 data includes all approved screeners.

The year-by-year trend results are shown in Figure 2. Due to the temporary suspension of state assessments in Iowa during the health pandemic 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, 2017-24**



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-19 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-24 data; 2017-21 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-24 data includes all approved screeners.

## Summary

Statewide efforts have continued in the implementation of preschool program standards to ensure high-quality programming. Data results suggest a continued need to address early literacy instruction and experiences within preschool programs. Intentional efforts in aligning 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:
  - High fidelity in implementation of preschool program standards in preschool environments, i.e., Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items and/or Head Start Program Performance Standards
  - 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 to support appropriate oral language, early reading and early writing learning aligned to the Science of Reading.
  - Statewide professional learning with Lexia LETRS for Early Childhood Educators
- A defined early childhood continuous improvement and accountability system aligned to the essential elements of high-quality preschool programming and child care services, including the following:
  - Consistent statewide administration, collection and reporting of preschool assessment data, including screening, formative and summative measures
  - Completion of the GOLD Assessment checkpoints three times a year to intentionally monitor children’s progress and inform instruction at program and state levels
  - Completion of Interrater Reliability Certification to address data validity and reliability in assessment practices of preschool teaching staff