

Legislative Report

2025 Early Childhood Assessments

IOWA | Department of Education



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2025 Early Childhood Assessments

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

All local school districts are required 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.
- 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. Information is gathered through parent reporting 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 2025, districts reported 80% of students entering kindergarten for the first time attended a preschool program in the prior year.¹

Preschool: Assessment Tool Used

Iowa Code requires preschool programs under the authority of the Department to administer Teaching Strategies GOLD® (GOLD). This is an online, observational assessment system for children from birth to grade 3. GOLD blends portfolio-based assessment for all areas of development and learning with performance tasks to monitor and evaluate learning progression and predict school success across areas. Specifically, the developmental domains of GOLD include 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 analyzed regularly to assist teachers in completing progress checkpoints. Based on analysis of the collected data and 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 279.60 with Iowa Code 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 279.68, the Department reviewed early literacy assessments for universal screening and progress monitoring to determine valid and reliable instruments for administration.

Table 1 depicts the various kindergarten literacy assessment instruments used in public 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).

¹ Data Source: Student Reporting in Iowa, fall 2025 files

Table 1. Number and Percent of Iowa Public School Districts by Kindergarten Assessment Tools Administered in Fall 2025

Assessment	Number of Districts	Percent of Districts
FAST earlyReading	314	96.3
i-Ready Diagnostics	10	3
mCLASS DIBELS-8	2	< 1

Data Source: CASA Default Assessment Survey Collection, fall 2025

Preschool: Assessment Results

The GOLD Comparative Report compares children’s scores to a readiness benchmark representing 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 2025. This data represents all preschool programs included in the Department’s statewide agreement and license with Teaching Strategies.

Table 2. Spring 2025 Assessment of Kindergarten Readiness in Preschool

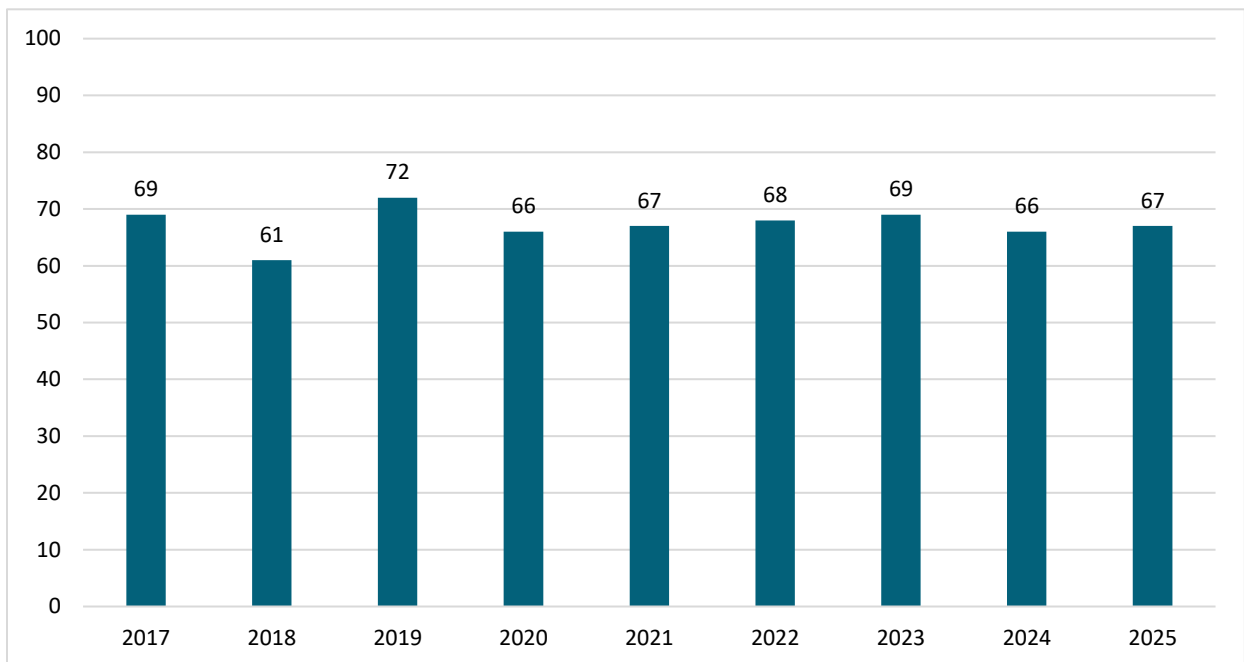
Teaching Strategies GOLD Area of Development	Number of 4-Year-Old Children Assessed	Percent At or Above Readiness Benchmark
Social-Emotional	25,743	87.4
Physical	25,707	92.9
Language	25,691	83.3
Cognitive	25,664	86.6
Literacy	25,608	82.4
Mathematics	25,552	77.8

Data Source: Teaching Strategies GOLD Online Assessment System, spring 2025

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 2025, 35,880 kindergarten students were assessed using an approved early literacy screening assessment. Data indicates 23,937 (67%) of students assessed were at or above the benchmark for kindergarten (Figure 1).

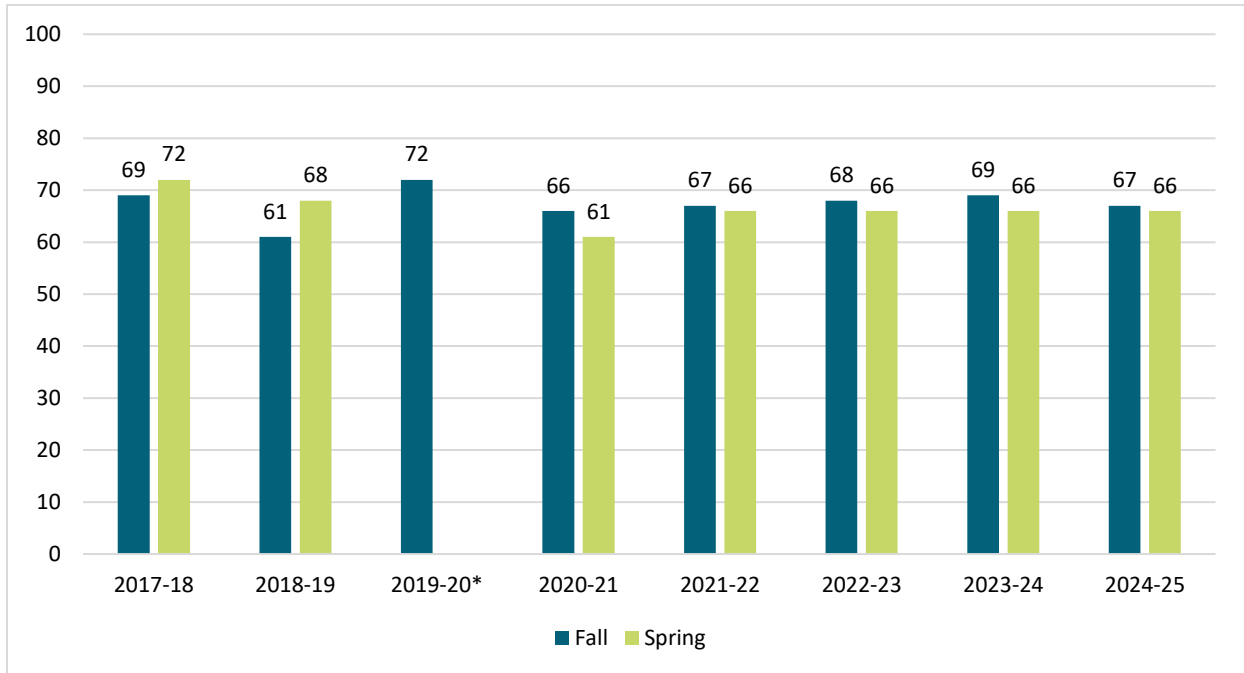
Figure 1. Percent of Kindergarten Students At or Above Benchmark in Beginning Reading Skills Using an Approved Early Literacy Screening Assessment Measure, Fall 2017-25



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-2025 data; 2017-2021 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-2025 data includes all approved screeners.

Figure 2 illustrates year-by-year trend results. Due to the spring 2020 suspension of Iowa state assessments, 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, 2017-25



Data Source: FastBridge Learning Data System, 2017-2019 data; Student Success Data System, 2020-2025 data; 2017-2021 data includes only FAST screeners; 2022-2025 data includes all approved screeners.

Summary

Statewide efforts have continued in the implementation of preschool program standards to ensure high-quality programming. Data indicate an ongoing need to strengthen early literacy instruction and experiences within preschool programs. The Department will continue to focus on efforts to align assessment, curriculum and instruction to support improved outcomes for young children.

Based on these findings, the Department will prioritize the following actions:

- **Maintain high-quality preschool programs through targeted professional learning and coaching, including:**
 - Ensuring high-fidelity implementation of preschool program standards in preschool environments (e.g., Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation Standards and Head Start Program Performance Standards).
 - Strengthening implementation of the Iowa Early Learning Standards (IELS).
 - Expanding focus on early mathematics and numeracy, including number sense and developmentally appropriate instructional practices.
 - Aligning revised IELS with kindergarten expectations within the Iowa Academic Standards.
- **Strengthen early literacy instruction in preschool classrooms by:**
 - Continuing statewide professional learning for early childhood educators through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling.
 - Providing ongoing coaching and support to sustain evidence-based practices aligned to the Science of Reading.
- **Enhance preschool continuous improvement and accountability systems by:**
 - Ensuring consistent statewide administration, collection and reporting of preschool assessment data.
 - Supporting completion of GOLD Assessment checkpoints three times a year to inform instruction.
 - Reinforcing interrater reliability certification to improve data validity and consistency.