



What Should a High-Quality Kindergarten Program Look Like?



A high-quality kindergarten program is essential to providing children with the skills and competencies they will need to be successful learners inside and outside of school and for many years to come. A high-quality kindergarten experience can set the tone for a successful education. There are key components that are critical for the growth and healthy development of young children. At the core of a high-quality kindergarten program, is **a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of young children.** In high-quality kindergarten classrooms, teachers see families as partners and rely on them to support learning outside of school and continually learn more about the children in their class. Program and school leaders build collaborative relationships with community organizations that support positive child and family outcomes.



Visitors to a high-quality Kindergarten program should see...

A Caring Community of Learners

Teachers and any other adult working with kindergarten students should have positive relationships with each other and with the children in their class. This helps all children feel like they belong and shows that everyone is important. In a caring community of learners, children work as a class, in small groups, and one-on-one with partners to help each other, share their ideas, and build relationships. This cooperative learning helps children become aware of different ways to do things, be part of a team, take turns and share, play different roles such as leader and follower, and respect others' ideas. The culture, language, and abilities of every child in the class is part of the regular instruction, environment, activities, and celebrations.

Teaching to Support Children's Development and Learning

The classroom should be arranged for different types of learning so all children, can participate and feel successful in the kindergarten classroom. There should be space for class meetings, tables where children work together in groups, centers for make-believe and thematic play, space for safe active movement, and quiet spots for partner and independent work. Students should have many opportunities to use skills they have mastered, practice new skills in a variety of ways, and be prompted to build deep-thinking skills that help them problem-solve and expand their ideas. A variety of materials should be organized and available for children to create, express ideas, explore sensory experiences, and celebrate themselves and others.

Planned and Spontaneous Learning Experiences

Teaching and learning should be both planned and responsive to children's needs, their experiences, and the environment. A high-quality kindergarten program should allow time for exploration and time to capture "a teachable moment." Teachers create environments and schedules that allow children to actively participate in the learning environment with their teachers and with one another. Activities in the kindergarten classroom should be interesting to the students, engaging to hold their attention, challenge their skills, help develop academic and social skills, and support a love of learning.



Critical components of effective high-quality kindergarten programs should look like...

Equitable Environment: All Educators Create the Conditions for Learning and Development that Benefit All Children

Strong Vision and Leadership

- The school district/school has a strong and clear vision for early learning and enables leadership to effectively make the vision a reality.
- All leadership and staff commit to providing equal access to inclusive learning opportunities and resources that equitably provide all students with what they need to reach their potential.
- School districts/Schools ensure that staff is prepared and part of a professional learning community that focuses on advancing equity in the school environment.
- Classrooms reflect the background, culture, and diversity of all students and families.

Program Policies: Rigorous, Articulated Early Learning Policies and Practices

Highly-Qualified Teachers and Staff

- All kindergarten teachers have a PK-3 Teaching Certificate.
- All instructional assistants meet the requirements of ESSA if employed in a Title 1 school.
- Districts enable continual early childhood professional development for teachers and school leaders.

Transition Team

- The school district/school has a PK-3 Transition Team in place that ensures student learning and program consistency across grades.
- PK-3 Transition Teams are composed of families, community agency leaders, and preschool and elementary personnel (i.e., teachers, child study team and the Preschool Intervention and Referral Team (PIRT) members, bilingual education specialists, curriculum coordinators, and administrators).

Effective Curriculum

- The school district/school adopts a clear, grade-appropriate, developmentally appropriate, and rigorous curriculum.
- The school district or school-adopted curriculum has intentional goals, skills, and assessments connected to a system of professional development and support for educators.
- The curriculum should support students in working towards meeting the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Support for Children with Disabilities

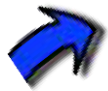
- The school district/school provides support for children with disabilities as per the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), and New Jersey State statute.
- Professional development opportunities are available for all kindergarten staff, utilizing principles of Universal Design for Learning and other development based on students' needs to support them in their natural routines and environments in the classroom.

English Language Learning Supports/Dual Language Learning Supports

- The school district/school has a well-developed program and strategies for educating multilingual learners which recognize the unique needs of each student and the importance of home language and culture.
- The school district/school supports the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), and New Jersey State statutes.

Supporting Gifted and Talented Learners

- The school district/school must establish a process to identify students as gifted and talented using multiple measures.
- The school district/school provide services to meet the needs of students who have been identified as gifted and talented.



Strong Program Practice: Integrated Continuous Improvement System

High-Quality Teaching:

- Teachers consistently plan and deliver developmentally appropriate instruction that supports high levels of student learning, social and emotional development, a love of learning, persistence, reasonable challenges, and a strong sense of efficacy.
- Play-based learning is a critical part of children's learning and development.

Useful Child Assessments

- Assessments are developmentally appropriate and aligned to New Jersey Student Learning Standards.
- The use of assessments is to inform teachers, leaders, and others who develop instruction and support child learning.
- Assessments are used to find students' strengths and to determine which areas are needed to target for early intervention.
- Varying methods of observation and assessment are used to find out what young learners know and can do so that teachers can help them progress.

Data-driven Decision-Making

- Data is collected and regularly used to inform practice and school improvement.
- Teachers of kindergarten students intentionally give and use diagnostics, formative, and summative assessments.
- The primary purpose of these assessments is to inform and plan classroom instruction and student support.

Professional Development

- Formal and informal (peer mentoring) professional development is sustained as part of a continuous improvement cycle with high expectations for teachers.
- Formal and informal (peer mentoring) professional development is provided for paraprofessionals as needed to complete position responsibilities.
- Professional learning should be intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice.
- School districts/schools can encourage educators to engage in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that identify and focus on improving teaching practices and the impact on student learning and development.

Integrated Systems

- Policy and practice align to standards, curriculum, assessment, social and emotional skills, and professional learning.
- Continual data collection/availability, monitoring, and program improvement.



Parent and Family Engagement: Involve Families in the Education of their Child and Program Improvement

Family Engagement and Involvement:

- The school district/school provides multiple opportunities, methods, and resources for parents to ask and learn about the goals, operations, and requirements to enroll their child in the kindergarten program.
- The school district/school provides a wide variety of equitable opportunities and materials to support children and families as they transition from preschool/home to kindergarten.
- Families receive an orientation to the specific classroom environment and activities accompanied by explanations for how these factors support learning and development.
- The school district/school provides examples of developmentally appropriate skills and simple strategies for families to explore with their child outside of school.
- Diverse opportunities are provided, and families are encouraged to participate in different ways in their child's education at home and school.
- Each family's language and culture are respected and incorporated into the curriculum and classroom environment.
- Translators are provided whenever needed for families in their home language.
- Educators frequently meet with parents and families to discuss progress, expectations, supports, and enrichment.
- The school district/school regularly shares information about what children are learning; why they are learning it; and, how families can expand learning beyond the classroom.



References

Some content in this resource was adapted from The New Jersey Kindergarten Program Guidelines.

Adapted from Quality Program Standards and “What Does a High-Quality Kindergarten Look Like” National Association for the Education of Young Children (Accessed October 2021)

This document was created by staff at the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Services, Office of Kindergarten to Third Grade Education. It is part of a model of home/school partnerships that complement the state's student learning standards.

The Division of Early Childhood Services acknowledges the term “parent” to indicate an adult who plays a legal and significant role in a child's life. This may include parents, stepparents, parents' partners, foster parents, grandparents, extended family caretakers, and others who regularly contribute in important ways to a child's education and development. When known, the term “parent” or the term “family” is used precisely. When referring to groups, or those who share responsibility for the well-being of a child, the use of both terms, “parent and family” is inclusive and more accurate.