

# Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Learning Environments: Preschool

(Ages 3-5)

**MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**



**P-20 Division of System  
and Student Transitions  
Office of Great Start**

**Child  
Development  
and Care**

**Head Start  
Collaboration**

**Early  
Childhood  
Development  
and Family  
Education**

**Preschool  
and  
Out-of-  
School Time  
Learning**

In 2018, the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start (MDE OGS), Preschool and Out-of-School Time Learning, convened a group of Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) stakeholders from among its grantees at intermediate school districts (ISDs). The group, composed of Early Childhood Specialists (ECSs) and Early Childhood Contacts (ECCs), came together to serve as an advisory committee on matters related to supporting and strengthening the critical role of GSRP ECSs. Often referred to as the “catalyst for quality,” it is the ECS who serves as coach for every GSRP teaching team in every GSRP classroom across the state, and who is ideally positioned to impact continuous quality improvement of GSRP classrooms statewide.



Early in 2019, the advisory committee determined that, to support the work of the GSRP ECS, a foundational document was needed for the early childhood system of preschool to clearly distill the essential qualities required of a preschool learning environment necessary to providing the highest quality, developmentally appropriate experiences for preschool children.

The goal was to provide an accessible, concise, straightforward and useful, summative document carefully aligned to and upholding the Michigan State Board of Education’s *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten*, the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s *Early Childhood Program Standards*, and *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, as well as the National Head Start *Early Learning Outcomes Framework*.

Additionally, the advisory committee sought a document grounded in the latest research on high-quality in early childhood education, but *not specific to a particular program, setting, curriculum or instructional approach*. The need for such a document was instead seen as critical to clarifying high-quality elements necessary for all preschool children in group settings including state-funded preschool and blended classrooms with Head Start, tuition-funded child care and education settings, and for all programs awarded or seeking star ratings from Great Start to Quality, Michigan’s quality rating and improvement system. Michigan is known for its diverse mixed-delivery system of early care and education providers of preschool education and this document is intended to be a resource for all within it. A subcommittee of the advisory committee was formed to draft this document.

In pursuit of, and to meet the goal established for this document, the advisory committee began by identifying the essential qualities; these were termed the “Key Elements.” As work progressed, the advisory committee established an additional goal that the document be written to address the Key Elements for *preschool children*, while intentionally creating the foundation and space for a future companion document specific to the Key Elements for *infants and toddlers*. In 2020, support for this objective was sought and secured from the MDE OGS leadership, including the Offices of Child Development and Care, Head Start Collaboration, and Early Childhood Development & Family Education.

Finally, reviewers from the advisory committee, MDE OGS staff, and external partners provided feedback and suggested improvements. The Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Learning Environments: Preschool (Ages 3-5) is the product of this endeavor.

The following advisory committee members, subcommittee members, and equity content reviewers brought innovative ideas, practical expertise, and solid research knowledge to the crafting of this document.

## A special “thank you” to the following individuals:

### GSRP Early Childhood Specialists Professional Learning Advisory Committee 2019-2020

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**Kelly Adamek** - Macomb Intermediate School District

**Susan J. Alleman** - Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency; Shiawassee Regional Education Service District

**Karen Black** - Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency

**Kendra Curtiss-Tomaski** - Clare-Gladwin Regional Education Service District

**Katie Keith** - C.O.O.R Intermediate School District

**Carly Rowe** - Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District

**Karen Roy** - Mecosta-Osceola Intermediate School District

**Lisa Schrader** - St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency

**Keshia Shadley** - Tuscola Intermediate School District

**Gerri Smalley** - Oakland Schools

### Key Elements Writing Subcommittee Members

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**Kelly Adamek** - Macomb Intermediate School District

**Karen Black** - Clinton County Regional Educational Service Agency

**Kendra Curtiss-Tomaski** - Clare-Gladwin Regional Education Service District

**Katie Keith** - C.O.O.R Intermediate School District

**Heather Lucas** - Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start

### Equity Content Reviewers

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**Chamayne Green** - M.Ed., Oakland Schools

**Jill Griffin, Ed.D.** - Michigan Department of Education, Office of Educational Supports

**Gerri Smalley** - Oakland Schools

### Michigan Department of Education Contributors

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**Jill Griffin, Ed.D.** - Office of Educational Supports

**Dawn Kalkman** - Office of Great Start

**Heather Lucas** - Office of Great Start

**Mischele McManus** - Office of Great Start

**Laurie Nickson** - Office of Great Start

**Pat Sargent** - Office of Great Start

## Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Learning Environments: Preschool

### (Ages 3-5)

In learning settings for young children, certain elements must be present to create an environment that ensures robust development and fosters ideal learning experiences. This document identifies and articulates the characteristics of five Key Elements that are fundamental to achieving high-quality experiences and strong outcomes for preschool children: the learning environment, daily routine, adult-child relationships, teaching practices, and family engagement. The Elements are not unique to any one type of setting, specific program, or curriculum, but apply in center-based and home-based programs, with mixed-age and age-specific groupings of children ages 3-5, in part-day or full-day programs. Each Element is defined and described through bullets that detail hallmarks of the Element providing guidance for adults working with children as well as those supporting, administering, or evaluating a program.

The Elements draw from national and state standards for early childhood and are based on research in child development that exemplifies proven practices in early education. In particular, these Key Elements are aligned to Michigan’s *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten (ECSQ-PK)* and the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, and the *NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards*. A bibliography is provided at the end of this document listing additional sources supporting these Key Elements.

Throughout the document adults and their critical role are described. Adults who interact with children are referred to with the terms “adult” and “teacher” interchangeably as context dictates, however all adults interacting with children are truly “teachers.” Every interaction provides the opportunity for teaching and learning.

## Key Element #1 High Quality Learning Environments

The environment is designed to promote high quality learning and interactions in all domains throughout the day.

- In a high-quality **environment**:
  - Space is arranged in defined interest areas to facilitate children's learning by:
    - Creating smaller learning areas within the larger environment with space for several children to play at once
    - Planning for traffic patterns, considering how children travel throughout the environment: from area to area, within areas, to the bathroom, to cubbies, etc.
    - Considering placement of active and quiet areas (e.g., blocks and library area); wet and dry areas (e.g., art and water table)
    - Embedding large group area (circle time) and tables (used for small group/meals) within the defined interest areas
  - Learning materials, artifacts, and visual representations reflect every child's family, local community, abilities, first language, and cultural identity (e.g., family pictures, images of community landmarks, businesses, buildings, mascots, family/community activities, events, community events/traditions)
  - Adult-made/commercial displays are relevant to the children's interest, topic of study, and essential to the implementation of daily activities (e.g., visual daily schedule, alphabet/number/job chart, etc.)
  - Children's work is prominently displayed at their eye level
  - An outdoor learning space includes:
    - Adequate space for various types of play (e.g., playing games, exploring nature, wheeled equipment)
    - Stationary equipment (e.g., slides, swings)
    - Portable equipment (e.g., balls, bikes, blocks)
    - Materials for content learning (e.g., art, science, dramatic play)



- The environment is **comfortable, attractive, and aesthetically pleasing for children**
  - Furnishings, equipment, and utensils are child-size and support all abilities
  - Natural light, home-like touches, and a variety of textures are intentionally utilized
  - The environment is free of clutter:
    - Organized interest areas are inviting and ideal to explore
    - Space is arranged to maximize children's use and minimize "adult only areas"
    - Items displayed on walls are carefully selected to limit visual stimulation
    - Muted colors and lighting options are dominant
- **Learning materials and supplies** for children's use are readily accessible and promote independence
  - Materials are:
    - Purposefully labeled and displayed
    - Plentiful, open-ended, real items vs. plastic/toy replicas
    - Relevant, challenging but not frustrating
    - Varied, supporting all domains of development (e.g., math, literacy, art, science)
    - Rotated over time, to reduce clutter and support children's increased abilities and changing interests
    - Natural elements whenever possible

## Key Element #2 Consistent daily routine

A consistent daily routine is implemented to promote balanced participatory learning through all portions of the day.

- Daily routine is posted at children's eye level and:
  - Easy to understand and includes text along with pictures/symbols that are culturally responsive
  - Teachers and children refer to it throughout the day
  - Contains age and developmentally appropriate language for children
- Daily routine must include an appropriate amount of time each day for children to:
  - Plan their play, engage in that plan, and reflect on how their plan worked
  - Play for a sustained, continuous period allowing children to enter into deep concentration and construct knowledge through the play-learning process strategically facilitated by teachers. A *minimum* of 60 minutes is ideal.
  - Engage in a discrete small group activity planned and facilitated by teachers
  - Engage in a discrete large group activity planned and facilitated by teachers
  - Engage in family style snack(s) and/or meal time(s)
  - Transition between parts of the day
  - Play outdoors daily
  - Have an opportunity to rest if attending a school-day or full-day program
- Daily routine must be structured with the following in mind:
  - Balances time children are expected to sit and attend verses leading their learning with opportunities to move
  - Transitions are minimal and intentionally planned to keep children engaged in learning
  - Predictable, flexible, and responsive to the children
  - Supports the needs of the whole group

## Key Element #3 Adult-child relationships

Responsive adult-child interactions promote secure relationships that support learning throughout the day.

- Adult-child interactions with all children:
  - Are respectful, supportive, warm and caring, consistent, predictable, accepting, and intentional
  - Understand, reflect, and respect children's culture, both verbally and non-verbally
  - Place value upon the child's first language
  - Meet children's basic needs
  - Support peer interactions to teach social skills and conflict resolution while fostering friendships
  - Increase children's autonomy and problem-solving abilities
  - Are purposeful, whether planned or spontaneous
  - Foster sustained conversational exchanges that promote rich language and communication
  - Acknowledge children's efforts and accomplishments
  - Model positive interpersonal skills:
    - Offer empathy
    - Demonstrate patience and flexibility
    - Identify feelings
    - Use manners (e.g., thank you, excuse me, please)
    - Listen actively to both children and adults
    - Match facial expressions and tone to words
    - Demonstrate appropriate cultural, non-verbal communication: gestures, eye-contact, body language
    - Problem-solve and show decision-making strategies by role-playing, using self-talk, and storytelling
  - Considers physical proximity and engagement of the adult and child during the interaction (e.g., eye-level, matching affect, acknowledge child's presence)



## Key Element #4 Intentional Teaching

Adults use intentional teaching practices to support continued growth in all aspects of children's development and learning.

Intentional Teaching is dependent upon adult expertise in fundamental child development and the developmental continuum together with authentic assessment and appropriate observations of each child to establish learning goals and continuously inform instruction.

Intentional teachers rely on all members of the teaching team to affect the on-going assessment cycle by:

### *Observe and Assess*

- Use an ongoing authentic assessment system to collect data and work samples
- Examine (potential) personal biases and beliefs that might present during observations and assessments to ensure objectivity
- Observe and document children's development and learning through all parts of the day
- Use a variety of strategies to record observations (e.g., anecdotal notes, time sampling, matrix, frequency of behavior tally, work samples)
- Gather data to plan for individual children and the whole group within:
  - The environment (activity choices)
  - Small group activities
  - Large group activities
  - Transitions

- Analyze observational data to evaluate children's progress at least weekly

### *Reflect and Plan*

- Establish learning goals and select instructional strategies that support children's continuous growth and progression (at their pace) along the developmental continuum
- Create lesson plans and activities based on the data gathered in all domains of development
- Support children's interests and cultures as demonstrated during observation and based on information collected from families
- Balance adult-guided and child-guided experiences

### *Implement Instruction*

- Acknowledge and describe what children are doing and saying by reflecting, restating, or narrating
- Scaffold and extend children's thinking and learning by:
  - Using purposeful questioning
  - Asking open-ended questions to learn more about children's plans and thinking
  - Seeking predictions from children about what they think will happen next
  - Prompting children to make connections to themselves and their world
  - Providing new information and/or model skills and strategies
  - Imitating children's actions
  - "Wondering" aloud
  - Offering suggestions when needed
  - Providing additional materials/resources
  - Encouraging children to evaluate their work and plan new ideas
- Adults model "self-talk" by talking through their actions (e.g., "I'm going to roll this playdough into a ball with my hands.")



## Key Element #5 Engaging families

The relationship with each family is valued and strengthened by seeking multiple ways to partner in their child's development and learning.

Programs actively seek to build relationships and continuously foster connections with families using a variety of strategies. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Environment/facility tours
- Family orientation process
- Open house
- Home visits and other ways to gather information about the child's interests, parent's goals for their child, and the family's cultural values (e.g., "tell me about your child" packet)
- A system for daily and weekly two-way communications utilizing multiple formats such as:
  - Conversations during drop-off and pick-up times
  - Notes and/or newsletter
  - Telephone/virtual conversations
  - Email communications/parent communication apps/virtual platforms
- Parent-teacher conference(s) to connect and update the family on the child's progress and select/review family/child goals

Programs offer multiple opportunities for families to engage in their child's program. Some examples include but are not limited to:

- Creating a physical space that is welcoming and accessible to all families
  - Structuring drop-off and pick-up transitions to best meet children's needs
  - Providing frequent opportunities for families to participate in the learning environment and in program activities
- Creating connections between home and school activities
  - Co-creating goals for children's learning with family and teacher input
  - Providing opportunities to enhance school experiences through extensions for related home experiences (e.g., sending home books read in school, suggesting questions for parents to ask their children)
  - Inviting families to share cultures, traditions, favorite books, games, or activities in the learning environment
  - Offering opportunities for families to volunteer their time/talent to support the program and learning environment
- Encouraging families to participate in program governance or connections to the community (e.g., parent coalitions/advisory, Head Start Policy Council, community events or foundations)
- Seeking family input in program/environment evaluation efforts (e.g., parent surveys)



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