

DEC 2018



# NEW KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

## Defining and Measuring Quality in Early Childhood Education

## THE BIG PICTURE

The demand for quality early childhood education (ECE) programming is high — [86 percent of Americans report they want it to be a national priority](#) — and the estimated economic benefits are striking: according to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, [investments in early education generate approximately \\$7 for every dollar invested](#). Still, just [55 percent of American 3- and 4-year-olds attend a formal preschool program](#).

States including [Alabama](#) and [Oklahoma](#) have been on the forefront of enacting policies designed to improve access to high-quality ECE programs, and other states have followed suit. Over the past 15 years, state-funded pre-K programs have more than [doubled in size](#) and, since the beginning of 2018 alone, 15 state legislatures have introduced — and in [some cases, enacted](#) — bills to improve the accessibility and quality of early childhood education and childcare.

Lawmakers at the federal level have also introduced bills aimed at improving ECE such as the [Child Care for Working Families Act of 2017](#), which calls for “a tiered and transparent system for measuring the quality of child care providers that includes a set of standards for determining the quality of a child care provider” that meet “rigorous and evidence-based standards that are tied to child outcomes.”

At the same time, city governments have worked to expand access to high quality ECE programs. After creating [universal pre-K for all 4-year-olds in New York City](#), Mayor Bill De Blasio announced that he intended to [extend full-day pre-K to 3-year-olds](#) in late 2017. Chicago’s outgoing mayor, Rahm Emanuel, also [set a goal to have a full-day universal pre-K program in place for 24,000 4-year-olds](#) within the next three years, and other cities, including [Boston](#), [Washington D.C.](#), and [Detroit](#) are working to implement universal pre-K programming.

Prioritizing ECE has clearly become an area of focus for policymakers. Yet as they work to expand access to ECE programs, the question remains: how do we define and measure high quality programming? The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has [tracked the funding, access, and policies of state-funded preschool programs](#) since 2001 and published an annual [State of Preschool Yearbook](#) since 2003. NIEER developed and [recently updated](#) a rating system for 10 preschool policy standards related to quality. According to NIEER, “[the benchmarks provide a coherent set of minimum policies to support meaningful, persistent gains in learning and development that can enhance later educational and adult life achievement](#),”<sup>1</sup> yet cannot guarantee success and significant variability in the quality of and outcomes associated with ECE programs across the country remains.

[In a recent effort to measure the effects of eight state-funded pre-K programs](#), researchers from NIEER, The University of Delaware, The University of California, Los Angeles, and the Michigan Public Health Initiative found a diverse range of outcomes associated with large-scale, public pre-K programs and encouraged states to devote “increased attention to frequent, more rigorous, and broader evaluations of their pre-K programs.”<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, while the idea of expanding access to ECE opportunities has taken root nationwide, there is a [growing consensus](#) around the need to pair that growth in access with more rigorous expectations of quality in order to best serve the next generation.

## NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

In an effort to measure key organizational constructs that can help broaden the ECE field’s understanding of high-quality programming, [The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) (UChicago Consortium) and The Ounce of Prevention Fund (The Ounce) partnered to develop and test surveys designed to assess the underlying organizational conditions of ECE programs. To date, the ECE field has focused most improvement efforts on classroom materials and interactions. There has been little to no consensus around how to define and measure the underlying organizational conditions that contribute to improvement in early childhood education programs.

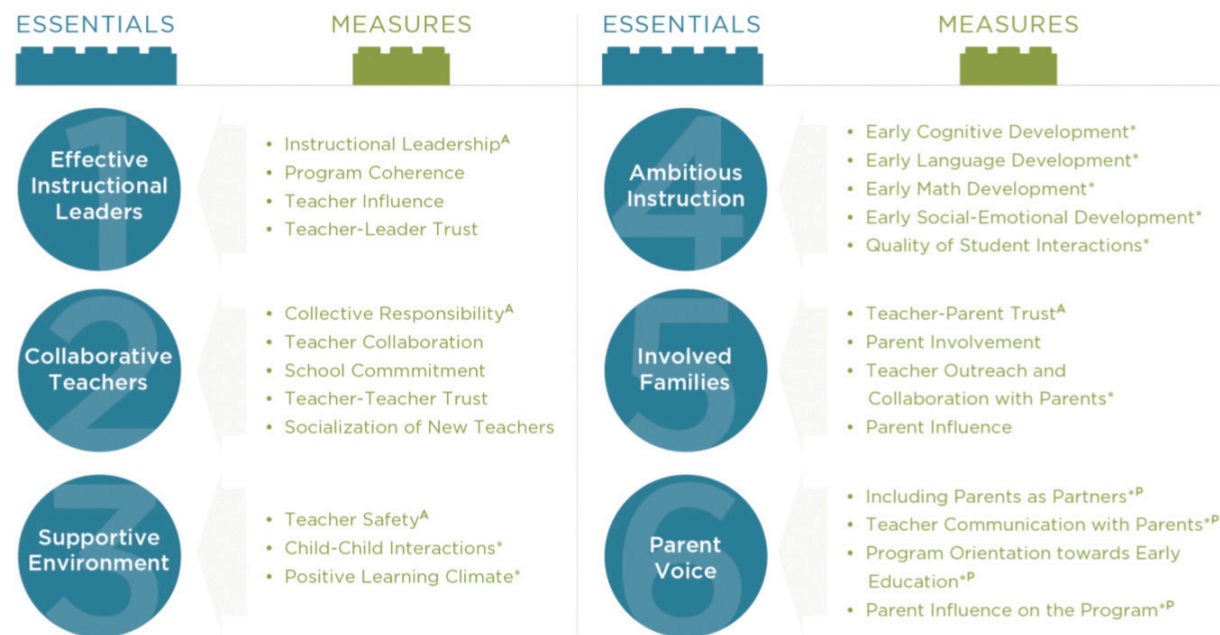
The relationship between organizational conditions — often referred to as “school culture and climate” conditions — and improvement in K-12 schools has been well established. Nearly twenty years ago, the UChicago Consortium identified five essential factors that drive K-12 school improvement. Strength in the five essentials, detailed in the seminal publication, [Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago](#), is strongly correlated with improved student outcomes. The UChicago Consortium’s research found that schools strong on at least three of



the five essentials were 10 times likelier to show substantial gains in students' reading and math achievement than schools weak on three or more of the five essentials; and strength in the five essentials correlated with gains in test scores, attendance, Freshman OnTrack, high school graduation, and teacher retention rates.

The UChicago Consortium and The Ounce set out to determine whether a similar kind of relationship exists between organizational conditions and indicators of program quality in the early education space. They studied 81 ECE program sites throughout Chicago — 41 school-based and 40 community-based. Nearly 750 surveys were collected from teachers and 2,464 were collected from parents. The surveys were found to be reliable (measuring what they're intended to measure) and valid (positively related to established measures of ECE program quality). With these survey results, researchers from the UChicago Consortium and The Ounce identified six “Early Education Essentials” for early childhood programs.

#### Measures Included in Final Versions of the *Early Ed Essentials*



Note: \* New Early Ed measure (not on K-12). <sup>A</sup> Slightly adapted from K-12 measure. <sup>P</sup> Parent survey measure.

- 1. Effective Instructional Leaders:** The school or program leadership is strategically focused on children's development and early achievement. They nurture trust, collective understanding and responsibility for excellence, and improvement among staff and families.
- 2. Collaborative Teachers:** Teachers are committed to the school or program, build strong relationships with their colleagues, and work together continuously to improve teaching and learning.
- 3. Supportive Environment:** Schools or programs are physically and emotionally safe and engaging environments, wherein staff hold high expectations for children's socio-emotional and academic learning, coupled with nurturing, individualized support for children and families.
- 4. Ambitious Instruction:** Teachers and staff provide consistently engaging, effective, rigorous, and developmentally-appropriate curriculum and instruction.
- 5. Involved Families:** Staff develop strong, collaborative relationships with families and support active family engagement in children's learning.
- 6. Parent Voice:** Parents feel included as a partner in their child's learning and development, including influence over the programming.

Early childhood program sites' scores on the Early Education Essentials were significantly related to ECE program outcomes, including CLASS pre-K scores and attendance rates. A more complete summary of the findings can be found in the UChicago Consortium and The Ounce's 2018 research snapshot, "[Early Ed Essentials: Testing New Surveys to Inform Program Improvement](#)."<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, the [Early Education Essentials tool](#) developed by the UChicago Consortium and The Ounce provides early childhood programs with valid, reliable, and actionable data that ECE leaders can use to focus attention on strengthening the organizational supports for teaching, learning, and family engagement. It also expands the definition of quality in the ECE space beyond classroom conditions and teacher characteristics, to include organizational conditions and the important role of leaders as instructional guides. Additionally, the alignment

between the Early Education Essentials and K-12 5Essentials tools provides a common lens and language for understanding and discussing improvement across the educational continuum. Leaders from both the early education and K-12 sectors can strengthen alignment of structures and practices, and thus the experiences children and families have as they transition from pre-K into the early elementary grades.



## DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

Look for the topic of ECE program quality — and the cost of implementing high-quality ECE programs — to remain at the forefront of nationwide policy and practice discussions on ECE in the years ahead.

ECE played a prominent role in recent gubernatorial elections, with newly elected governors in New Mexico, Michigan, Illinois, and Colorado all pledging to increase funding for high-quality pre-K options. Other states have already pledged funds to expand access to ECE programs. In New Jersey, three districts have received a total of nearly \$1.5 million in preschool education expansion aid from the state to create free, full-day preschool programs. An additional \$36.5 million in state funds has been allocated to expanding access to other districts' early childcare and education programs, namely through an increase in subsidy payment rates for lower-income families. These subsidy payment rates will be higher for parents placing their children in programs rated three or more stars by [Grow NJ Kids](#), the state's quality rating improvement system for early childcare and education. Additionally, nearly \$7 million will be dedicated to improving the quality of other programs' classroom learning materials.

ECE advocates in other states are urging their legislators to follow suit. In conjunction with Early Learning Indiana, Indiana University's Public Policy Institute released [a report](#) that advocates for expanding Pre-K access through tax credits for businesses that support ECE, social impact bonds funded by private investors, and dedicated revenue sources created by local tax initiatives. The report is expected to influence the Indiana state legislator's budget negotiations beginning in January 2019.

The political will for expanding access to and funding for ECE often comes from [increasingly positive bipartisan polling](#) and the idea that higher quality education ultimately leads to better economic outcomes. In the recently released documentary, "[Starting at Zero: Reimagining Education in America](#)," Greg Canfield, Secretary of Commerce for the State of Alabama, shares his view of ECE as a lever for economic development and urges other state-level leaders to make investments in early education programs, asserting that, "now is the time to have a very strong, successful launch and expansion of early childhood education."

As state leaders focus on expanding access to high quality ECE, researchers are shedding new light on what high quality ECE looks like. A [December 2018 report](#) from The Ounce and the UChicago Consortium provides contrasting descriptions of strongly- and weakly-organized ECE programs, as measured by the [Early Education Essentials tool](#), to help educators, policymakers, and families better understand how and why different supports in ECE programs can create better outcomes for children.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the interest in and political will to move ECE forward in the United States seems to be high right now, and research continues to illuminate how to identify and implement high-quality ECE programs.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/2018-new-knowledge-report>

## SOURCES

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- 4 Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D.M., Stein, A.G., Wagner, M.R., Park, S., Frank, E., Lupescu, S., & Young, C. (2018). *Early Education Essentials: Validation of surveys measuring early education organizational conditions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the Ounce of Prevention Fund.