



EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

# COMPANION REPORT



## 50-State Comparison: K-3 Quality

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In recent years, the pre-kindergarten (pre-K) component of the early childhood (birth to age eight) continuum has received significant policy attention. While the pre-K years are a critical time for early childhood development, there is a policy disconnect between the birth to age five and the kindergarten through third grade (K-3) components of this continuum. Children are at risk of losing the gains that they make in high-quality pre-K programs if the K-3 experience that follows does not continue at the same level of academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practice. In order to ensure that children meet key benchmarks, such as third grade reading proficiency, policymakers may want to consider focusing on improving quality not just in pre-K, but also in the K-3 years.

In an effort to provide policymakers, researchers and education leaders with a tool for generating creative solutions to K-3 issues, Education Commission of the States developed a 50 State-Comparison outlining some of the key state-level policies impacting K-3 quality. While this comparison provides information solely on the policies that exist in state statute, rules and regulations, Education Commission of the States recognizes that local level initiatives also impact K-3 quality. Pockets of innovation exist across the country where leaders have learned to navigate the complex field of state and federal policy in order to build effective K-3 systems. However, these initiatives are not captured in this comparison. Additionally, there are some issues beyond the scope of this research that deserve further attention, such as principal leadership, teacher certification and endorsements, and data system continuity.

Find your state  
in the **50-STATE  
COMPARISON:  
K-3 QUALITY**



This 50-state comparison covers six K-3 policy areas with multiple data points, including:

- **Basic Requirements** (e.g. length-of-day and student-to-teacher ratios).
- **School Readiness and Transitions.**
- **Assessment, Intervention and Retention.**
- **Instructional Quality.**
- **Family Engagement.**
- **Social-Emotional Learning.**

## KEY POLICY AREAS IN K-3

### Basic Requirements

Requirements around full-day kindergarten, length-of-day and teacher-to-student ratios provide a strong foundation for a K-3 system. Children attending full-day kindergarten show stronger academic gains in reading and math when compared to their peers who are enrolled in half-day kindergarten.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many students are at risk of suffering learning losses after transitioning from high-quality pre-K programs to half-day kindergarten programs and programs with high teacher-to-student ratios. It would be beneficial if policymakers worked together to address these foundational requirements to ensure that learning gains made in pre-K do not “fade-out” during the K-3 years.

### Highlights

- Fourteen states plus Washington, D.C., require full-day kindergarten and only 11 specifically require that kindergarten programs have the same length of day as first through third grade.
- Kindergarten length-of-day requirements vary from two to seven hours per day. In grades one through three, length-of-day requirements vary from four to seven hours per day.
- Thirty-one states provide teacher-to-student ratio requirements, ranging from 1:15 to 1:33 for kindergarten and 1:17 to 1:32 in first through third grade.
- Grant funding specifically aimed at reducing teacher-to-student ratios in the K-3 grades is available in at least five states.

### School Readiness and Transitions

The transition to kindergarten is a crucial point in a child’s educational experience. Without the proper supports, students may begin their formal education ill-prepared, exacerbating educational gaps that may already exist. Many states require the administration of kindergarten entrance assessments to inform instruction, identify students that may require additional supports and determine whether children’s pre-K experiences have adequately prepared them for kindergarten. In addition, some states provide guidance and set requirements for the pre-K to kindergarten transition process and others outline exactly what the term “school readiness” means.

### Highlights

- Thirty-two states plus D.C. require the administration of a kindergarten entrance assessment. Eighteen states provide guidance around what these assessment results should inform. In **Colorado**, **Kentucky** and **Ohio**, students may not be prohibited from entering kindergarten based on their assessment results.
- Nineteen states plus D.C. provide guidance for the pre-K to kindergarten transition process. In **West Virginia**, county collaborative early childhood teams are required to develop written plans for



transitioning children into pre-K and out of pre-K and into kindergarten. These plans must include family engagement, teacher/provider meetings and assessment data linkages. Written transition plans are also required in **Nebraska, Colorado, Connecticut** and **New Jersey**.

- An official statutory definition of “school readiness” exists in six states plus D.C. Many states outline their definition in the state’s Early Learning Guidelines, instead of in state statute.

## Assessment, Intervention and Retention

A student’s ability to read by the end of third grade is a key indicator of future success.<sup>2</sup> Many states have implemented third grade reading laws to ensure that students meet this important marker. The three main components of these laws include: early identification through assessment, high-quality intervention and, in some states, grade retention. Most often, states are required to utilize assessments to inform interventions in K-3. Many states require or permit retention if students are unable to achieve grade-level proficiency.

### Highlights

- Thirty-nine states plus D.C. require assessments in any or all K-3 grades and 36 states provide guidance around what those assessment results should be used to inform.
- Forty states plus D.C. provide guidance around a system of interventions for struggling students.
- Eighteen states plus D.C. require third grade retention and 14 of those offer conditional promotion options. All states that require retention also require a system of intervention.

**Oklahoma** requires reading assessments at the beginning and end of each school year, which are used to inform interventions and progress monitoring procedures. Various interventions are made available for struggling students, including summer school, tutoring and transition classes. Upon recommendation by the Student Reading Proficiency Team, a group that evaluates a student’s eligibility for probationary promotion, students may be offered probationary promotion, allowing them to progress to fourth grade, subject to continual review of their reading performance.

## Instructional Quality

Effective teaching is an essential component of a quality K-3 system. As such, teachers must be well-prepared and provided with ample opportunities for professional development in areas crucial to K-3 student success. Because third grade literacy is an important marker for future student achievement, teacher preparation and professional development related to reading instruction are particularly important. In addition, teacher training on instruction for English language learners (ELLs) is critical.

### Highlights

- Some form of teacher preparation and/or professional development in reading is required for educators in K-3 in at least 37 states. Many of these requirements include training on reading instruction, using reading assessment results and providing interventions.

In **Iowa**, each teacher candidate is required to demonstrate knowledge of literacy acquisition and each district is required to provide professional development services to elementary school teachers in how to use evidence-based strategies to respond to students' reading issues.

**Louisiana** requires that teacher preparation programs that prepare candidates for certification in K-3 grades must provide instruction in the administration, interpretation and use of reading assessments.

- Twenty-three states require classroom teachers to have some form of training or professional development related to instruction for ELLs. These are most often general requirements around language acquisition and cultural competency.

**Alabama** has a comprehensive set of requirements for teachers related to ELLs. These requirements include: knowledge of the language acquisition process, ability to differentiate between learner difficulties that are related to cognitive development and those that are related to language learning, and collaboration with teachers of ELLs to assist those students with full integration into the regular classroom.

**Minnesota** requires that K-3 teachers have knowledge of the interrelated elements of language arts instruction that support the reading development of ELLs, including the processes involved in transferring literacy competencies from one language to another.

## Family Engagement

During this key developmental period, it is crucial that parents and families are meaningfully engaged in their children's education. Education Commission of the States examined state requirements around family engagement in three areas: pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, retention/promotion decisions and ELL programs.

### Highlights

- Fourteen states require their pre-K to kindergarten transition programs to engage families of future kindergarteners. Many of these states simply require that plans for family engagement are included in transition plans and reports. In **Michigan**, families of at-risk students are engaged through home visits.
- Twenty-one states plus D.C. require some level of parental involvement in the promotion/retention process. In most of these states, parental notification is the minimum requirement. Parental appeal of retention decisions is allowed in **Texas, South Carolina, New Mexico, Georgia** and **Delaware**. In **Oklahoma**, the parent or guardian of the student is part of the Student Reading Proficiency Team.
- Twenty states plus D.C. require parental engagement for ELLs. Most of these states require parental notification in the home language when students are placed in, or exited from, ELL programs. Some states require more rigorous engagement. For example, **New Jersey** requires each district board of education that implements a bilingual education program to establish a parent advisory committee, of which, the majority of members must be parents of ELLs. **New Mexico** also requires a parent advisory committee and **Rhode Island** requires a parent representative of ELL students on School Improvement Teams.

## Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional skills have a profound impact on the ability of a student to succeed academically. As states begin to recognize the importance of social-emotional learning, social-emotional elements are being incorporated into state policies. As it relates to K-3, social-emotional learning is usually required either as a key measure on kindergarten entrance assessments, as a part of the state's school readiness definition, as a key knowledge requirement for K-3 teachers or as a domain within Early Learning Guidelines.

### Highlights

- Thirty-six states plus D.C. emphasize social-emotional learning in grades K-3 in statute, rules or regulations.
- At least nine states include a measure of social-emotional development in their kindergarten entrance assessments by statute.
- **Colorado, Maryland, Minnesota, Texas, West Virginia** and **D.C.** all include social-emotional development in their official state definition of school readiness.
- At least 13 states require teachers in K-3 to have training in social-emotional development.
- Social-emotional development is included as a domain in seven of the states with Early Learning Guidelines that include K-3.

## FINAL THOUGHT

Providing a seamless, high-quality early education system from birth through age eight is crucial for children's overall academic success. It is critical to include the K-3 years as states aim to implement quality early childhood education policies. Education Commission of the States' K-3 Quality 50-State Comparison is meant to help policymakers evaluate their K-3 policy climate.

### Special Thanks to Our Collaborative Partners:

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## Endnotes

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2. Dominic F. Gullo, "The Long Term Educational Effects of Half-Day vs Full-Day Kindergarten," *Early Child Development and Care* 160 (2000) 17-24.
3. Donald J. Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills And Poverty Influence High School Graduation* (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012) <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf>

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