



Early Childhood Education Programs

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Summary

Key Observations

Consider adhering to one of the numerous instructional philosophies that incorporate learning through guided play. Early childhood education (ECE) programs in the United States embrace a range of instructional philosophies. Broadly, these philosophies vary along a continuum based on the amount of focus that educators devote to free play versus teacher-directed academic instruction. EAB researchers did not uncover definitive research to espouse or reject any specific ECE philosophy. However, administrators should consider the potentially negative implications of embracing an ECE philosophy at either end of the continuum: entirely play-based programs may fail to prepare students for the academic components of kindergarten, and overly didactic programs may not allow students to develop the ability to learn autonomously. Profiled districts' ECE instructional philosophies prioritize both playful, engaging activities that educators guide to teach academic concepts and—particularly at District A—short periods of direct academic instruction.

Design ECE programs to address achievement gaps related to race, socioeconomic status, and special education status. Research shows that accessible ECE programs—and in particular, full-day programs—can narrow achievement gaps between more- and less-traditionally disadvantaged students.¹ Administrators at District A and District D designed their ECE programs' curricula to narrow achievement gaps between students from more- and less-advantaged families. For example, District D's program focuses on creating varied experiences to ensure students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have opportunities to build their vocabularies. Administrators at District B and District C express a commitment to equality through efforts to fully include students with special needs in their ECE program. For example, administrators at District B plan to eliminate all self-contained classrooms for special education students.

Devote explicit time each day to social-emotional learning (SEL), but also ask instructors to embed SEL instruction into activities throughout the day. At District A, District D, and District C, educators spend approximately 10 minutes each day delivering direct SEL instruction. To ensure students retain the information from these lessons, educators at all profiled districts continuously reinforce SEL lessons throughout the day. At District B, to ensure that educators embed evidence-based SEL instruction into their interactions with students, administrators partner with the [Pyramid Model Consortium](#). With the support of this organization's resources, administrators are currently implementing a standardized, tiered approach to SEL instruction. The implementation process encourages educators to reflect on and improve existing SEL practices.

Use report cards, student portfolios, and/or standardized assessments to measure student achievement, report progress to parents, and deploy supports. At all profiled districts, educators continuously evaluate student progress and comprehensively assess student achievement at three distinct points throughout the school year. All profiled districts use these assessments to report student progress to parents and to design supports for students who are not meeting development goals. At District A, educators mark students as "beginning," "developing," "established," or "going beyond" in seven different domains. Similarly, at District B and District C, educators create a portfolio that documents student work in seven early childhood development areas: social/emotional, physical/fine motor, literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and fine arts. At District D, educators use the standardized [CIRCLE Progress Monitoring System](#) to measure students' development in relation to national/regional benchmarks for early childhood development.

1) "Full-Day Pre-K Programs," EAB, 2019, <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/resource/full-day-pre-k-programs/>.

2) Instructional Components

Philosophy

Early Childhood Instructional Philosophies Range from Entirely Play-Based to Didactic

Early childhood education (ECE) programs in the United States embrace a range of instructional philosophies. Broadly, these philosophies vary based on the amount of focus that educators devote to free play versus educator-directed academic instruction. Programs fall along a spectrum, rather than a binary, between play-based and academic-focused programs. ECE programs can incorporate both free play and academic instruction, and they can teach academic standards through educator-guided play.² Research identifies both benefits and disadvantages of philosophies that fall across the spectrum.

Snapshot of Evidence Across the Spectrum of ECE Philosophies

Philosophy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Entirely Play-Based</p> <p>This philosophy explicitly avoids all academic instruction.³</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waldorf 	<p>Higher Achievement in Later Years</p> <p>In one study, by eighth grade, Waldorf students exhibited greater academic achievement (i.e., higher scores on standardized math and reading tests) than students in non-Waldorf schools at the same districts.⁴</p>	<p>Delay in Benefits</p> <p>The same study shows that students at Waldorf schools develop academic competencies more slowly—therefore, entirely play-based programs may not adequately prepare students transitioning to a traditional kindergarten environment.⁵</p>
<p>Learning Through Guided Play and Exploration</p> <p>Playful activities drive instruction—however, educators also ensure that students practice academic skills and concepts.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reggio-Emilia • Montessori • Creative Curriculum 	<p>Long-Term Cognitive Development</p> <p>A 2016 literature review documents evidence in support of learning through play within an adult-guided environment. For example, one study shows that young children learn more about a toy's function through child-directed discovery with adult guidance than through adult demonstration.⁶</p>	<p>Potential for Greater Immediate Gains</p> <p>A 2017 study showed that, when compared to students in less academic programs, students in more strictly academic-focused ECE programs demonstrated higher academic achievement gains and equal social-emotional development in kindergarten.⁷</p>

More Play

2) Laura Lewis Brown, "Comparing Preschool Philosophies: Play-Based vs. Academic," text/html, PBS, December 17, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/comparing-preschool-philosophies-play-based-vs-academic>.

3) Dana Goldstein, "Free Play or Flashcards? New Study Nods to More Rigorous Preschools," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2017, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/us/preschool-academics-study.html>.

4) Abigail L. Larrison, Alan J. Daly, and Carol VanVooren, "Twenty Years and Counting: A Look at Waldorf in the Public Sector Using Online Sources," *Current Issues in Education* 15, no. 3 (October 5, 2012), <https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/807/386>.

5) Larrison, Daly, and VanVooren, "Twenty Years and Counting."

6) Deena Skolnick Weisberg et al., "Guided Play: Principles and Practices," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 3 (June 1, 2016): 177–82, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Guided-Play-Principles-and-Practices-Weisberg-Hirsh-Pasek/441418c435cf06d6f38bd72136482608ae723d31>.

7) Bruce Fuller et al., "Do Academic Preschools Yield Stronger Benefits? Cognitive Emphasis, Dosage, and Early Learning," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 52 (2017): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.05.001>.

Didactic

Didactic ECE programs primarily feature direct instruction of elementary standards, such as literacy and numeracy skills. These programs may designate distinct times during the day for students to play freely.⁸

Improved Kindergarten Readiness

Academic instruction in ECE improves students' kindergarten readiness.⁹ Thus, proponents of this model believe that devoting more time to academic instruction will translate to higher levels of kindergarten readiness.¹⁰

Structure

In addition, some parents may prefer a highly structured environment for their students.¹¹

Play Necessary for Young Children

A 2002 longitudinal study of students who attended different preschool models found that children who attended academic preschools had lower grades in sixth grade than students who had attended less-academic preschools. The author suggests that over-exposure to formal learning at an early age inhibited these students' development of skills conducive to learning in later years.¹²

In addition, psychologists link deprivation of play in young children with psychological issues (e.g., increased levels of anxiety, lessened self-control) in later years.¹³

Direct Instruction Ineffective

One study of ECE programs focused on academic standards shows that educators in those programs rely on whole-group instruction—i.e., direct instruction to the whole class at once.¹⁴ Experimental evidence from Tennessee's ECE program shows that reliance on direct instruction negatively impacts student achievement.¹⁵



More
Academics

Consider Implementing an Instructional Philosophy that Embraces a Middle Ground

EAB researchers did not uncover definitive research to espouse or reject any specific ECE philosophy. However, administrators should consider the potentially negative implications of embracing an ECE philosophy too far on either end of the spectrum illustrated above. Entirely play-based programs may fail to fully prepare students for kindergarten, as students who participate only in free play do not learn academic concepts (e.g., pre-literacy, numeracy) that are important for kindergarten readiness.¹⁶

8) Brown, "Comparing Preschool Philosophies."

9) Fuller et al., "Do Academic Preschools Yield Stronger Benefits?"

10) Goldstein, "Free Play or Flashcards?"

11) Brown, "Comparing Preschool Philosophies."

12) Rebecca A. Marcon, "Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success," *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2002), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED464762>.

13) Peter Gray, "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents," *American Journal of Play* 3, no. 4 (2011): 21.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/1195/ajp-decline-play-published.pdf>.

14) Anya Kamenetz, "A Harsh Critique Of Federally Funded Pre-K," NPR.org, July 19, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/07/19/486172575/a-harsh-critique-of-federally-funded-pre-k>.

15) Dale C. Farran, "Federal Preschool Development Grants: Evaluation Needed" (Brookings, July 14, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/federal-preschool-development-grants-evaluation-needed/>.

16) Larrison, Daly, and VanVooren, "Twenty Years and Counting."







A **report** from the non-profit research organization the Alliance for Childhood advocates for an approach that combines playful activities and teacher-guided learning at the kindergarten level. This recommendation may prove transferrable to ECE programs as well.¹⁸

Overly didactic programs, however, may rely too heavily on whole-class and direct instruction. When students do not have the opportunity to learn concepts autonomously or semi-autonomously through play, they may not as fully develop the ability to easily learn more complex academic concepts in the future. Therefore, though students from didactic classrooms may exhibit greater academic abilities in kindergarten—when the academic standards closely relate to those taught in didactic ECE programs—in later years they may fall behind their peers who learned through play, as these peers developed mindsets better conditioned for learning.¹⁷ Therefore, consider designing an ECE program that incorporates both playful activities and a teacher-guided focus on academic standards.

Nationally Recognized Criteria for High-Quality ECE Apply to A Range of Program Philosophies

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)—a leading early childhood education organization—and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI)—an educational research organization—both address how to optimize ECE programs to effectively serve students and their families. These organizations refrain from espousing a single ECE philosophy—rather, each provides a list of ten features of high-quality programs. The NAEYC [list](#) and the LPI [list](#) contain some common criteria. In total, the lists provide 12 discrete criteria to define high-quality ECE programs. Thus, regardless of overall philosophy, administrators should align their ECE programs with these criteria to prepare students for success in elementary school and beyond.







Twelve Recommended Criteria for a High-Quality ECE Program¹⁹

Program Management		
 <p>Program Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program administrators conduct regular assessments of the program Holistic assessments consider both structure (e.g., class sizes) and quality of educational experiences 	 <p>Qualified Administrators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators have higher education credentials related to early childhood education Administrators clearly communicate policies and philosophy to parents 	 <p>Community Partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators liaise with community partners (e.g., museums, petting zoos) to facilitate enriching experiences for students
Physical and Logistical Components		
 <p>Adequate Facilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students have access to enriching, safe, and clean materials and equipment Facilities contain sinks, child-size furniture, and comfortable areas to sleep Facilities contain safety equipment 	 <p>Sufficient Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full-day ECE programs may produce greater benefits for students than half-day programs Year-round and multi-year ECE programs also benefit students more than shorter-duration programs 	 <p>Health and Safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff receive pediatric first aid training Programs provide healthy food Policies mandate regular hand washing and sanitization of surfaces

17) Weisberg et al., "Guided Play"; Marcon, "Moving up the Grades."

18) Edward Miller and Joan Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* (Alliance for Childhood, 2009), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED504839>.

19) "The 10 NAEYC Program Standards," NAEYC, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards>; Marjorie Wechsler et al., "The Building Blocks of High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs," April 20, 2016, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/building-blocks-high-quality-early-childhood-education-programs>.

Staffing		
 <p>Staff-Student Ratio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The student-to-staff ratio does not exceed 10:1 Classes enroll no more than 20 students 	 <p>Warm Educator Disposition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program administrators and educators cultivate positive relationships with families Educators interact warmly with students 	 <p>Investment in Educators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators have higher education credentials in early childhood education Educators receive coaching and mentoring Programs provide competitive compensation to educators to reduce turnover
Student Learning		
 <p>Learning Assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators systematically measure student progress in all areas and target instruction accordingly Educators report student progress to families 	 <p>Services for All Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program administrators enroll and support English language learners and students with special needs 	 <p>Standards and Curricula</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educators use a curriculum that addresses academic, social-emotional, and physical development standards Students receive opportunities for exploration and play Activities help children improve in reasoning, solving problems, getting along with others, using language, and developing skills

Select or Create an ECE Curriculum that Aligns with Evidence-Based Research and State Standards

All profiled districts embrace ECE instructional philosophies that incorporate both play and teacher-facilitated instruction. The philosophies vary according to the degree to which they focus on academic standards. At profiled districts, these philosophies manifest through administrators' choice of curriculum. For example, at District B, contacts cite developmentally appropriate practice as a guiding principle. NAEYC's position statement defines developmentally appropriate practice as a child-centered approach that views students in terms of their strengths (i.e., an asset-based approach) and builds on those strengths to promote each child's full potential.²⁰ Contacts at District B report that administrators believe that a play-based approach—which enables students to in part direct their own learning—is the most effective way to implement developmentally appropriate practice. Thus, this philosophy led administrators to adopt the play-based [Creative Curriculum](#) for their ECE program.

At District D, the ECE program operates in a building with immersive classrooms—for example, one classroom is designed to resemble a spaceship.

At District C, and District D, administrators enhance play-based curricula through the application of state standards. At District D specifically, administrators and educators designed a curriculum that combines active play and state standards in two-week-long units. For example, educators teach phonological awareness through a game in which students jump on trampolines while practicing different phonemes. After every unit, students rotate to a different classroom centered around a specific experience, which the teacher connects to the unit's content. For example, in the space-themed classroom, teachers use the nursery rhyme "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to teach pre-literacy skills.

20) "What Is Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)?," NAEYC, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/dap-introduction>.

At District A, administrators adopted a philosophy influenced by the Reggio Emilia ECE philosophy, which features a rich, exploratory classroom environment, allows students to choose topics to learn based on their interests and curiosity, and requires educators to continuously document student progress.²¹ Administrators combined this philosophy with a close focus on academic standards, particularly literacy skills, to write a publicly-available curriculum and accompanying guides for educators. The curriculum covers six units: family, friends, the environment, color, light, and plants and animals. Within each unit, students practice literacy and math through playful, exploratory activities.

Math- and Literacy-Intensive Exploratory Activities at District A²²



Activity: Students create collages out of different types of paper

Literacy Components: Educators teach students vocabulary such as “technique” and “adhere.” Educators encourage students to describe the colors and textures of the materials they use.



Activity: Students build towers and other structures from blocks

Math Components: Educators encourage students to think mathematically and scientifically through questions such as:

- Which tower is taller? How do you know?
- Which materials will make the strongest structure? Why do you think so?

Contacts at all profiled districts cite research evidence that supports their instructional philosophies and chosen curricula. A particularly extensive body of research supports the approach to ECE at District A: Multiple organizations non-affiliated with the district (i.e., the Institute of Educational Sciences and Harvard University) have evaluated the outcomes of students who attend District A’s ECE program and these evaluations document positive results.²³

21) “The Reggio Emilia Approach,” Scholastic, accessed December 26, 2019, <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/reggio-emilia-approach/>.

22) “[District A ECE Curriculum],” District A Department of Early Childhood, accessed January 6, 2020.

23) “Results,” District A [ECE Curriculum], accessed January 6, 2020.

Evidence Cited by Contacts to Support Profiled Districts' ECE Program Instructional Philosophies and Curricula

Curriculum Evaluations		
<p>District-Created Curriculum</p> <p><i>District A</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacts highlight research from the Institute of Educational Sciences and Harvard University, which demonstrate that District A's internally developed ECE curricula produces significant improvements in students' language, literacy, math, cognition, and social-emotional development. The program also narrows achievement gaps between more- and less-disadvantaged students.²⁴ 	<p><u>Creative Curriculum</u></p> <p><i>District B</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacts note that Creative Curriculum advertises research in support of the curriculum. For example, Creative Curriculum's parent company, Teaching Strategies, LLC., has published research showing that students in classrooms with Creative Curriculum demonstrate higher language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics scores.²⁵ 	<p><u>High Scope</u></p> <p><i>District C</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacts note that The Perry Preschool Project, which created High Scope, advertises research in support of the curriculum. For example, the Perry Preschool Project conducted a randomized, longitudinal study of 123 preschool students, which found that High Scope's active learning approach produced life-long benefits (e.g., higher levels of educational attainment) compared to students who did not attend preschool.²⁶

Pedagogy Research	
<p>Explorative Experiences</p> <p><i>District D</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacts report that research published in the journal <u>Education</u> and by <u>Harvard University</u> shows that experiences (e.g., field trips, interactions with parents) positively impact student learning and help young children's brains develop.²⁷ Contacts cite <u>research</u> that shows that prior knowledge, which students construct from experiences, directly influences students' reading comprehension skills.²⁸ Contacts also cite <u>research</u> that recommends focusing early childhood learning on play and language.²⁹ 	<p>Pre-Literacy</p> <p><i>District A</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacts cite a substantial body of literature that advocates for direct instruction of pre-literacy skills to teach students to read. For more information on this body of literature, consider reviewing the 2019 EAB report <u>Narrowing the Third Grade Reading Gap</u>.³⁰

24) "Results."

25) "Effectiveness Study: The Creative Curriculum for Preschool" (Teaching Strategies, LLC, 2013), <https://teachingstrategies.com/our-approach/research/>.

26) "Perry Preschool Project," HighScope, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://highscope.org/perry-preschool-project/>.

27) Martha L. Nabors, Linda Carol Edwards, and R. Kent Murray, "Making the Case for Field Trips: What Research Tells Us and What Site Coordinators Have to Say," *Education* 129, no. 4 (2009): 661-67, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ871617>; "Brain Architecture," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>.

28) Donna R. Recht and Lauren Leslie, "Effect of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers' Memory of Text," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, no. 1 (1988): 16-20, <https://www.literacyhow.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Effect-of-Prior-Knowledge-on-Good-and-Poor-Readers-Memory-of-Text.pdf>.

29) Gay Su Pinnell and Irene C. Fountas, *Literacy Beginnings* (Heinemann, 2018), <https://www.heinemann.com/products/e09925.aspx>.

30) "Narrowing the Third-Grade Reading Gap Research Brief," EAB, 2019, <https://eab.com/research/district-leadership/study/narrowing-the-third-grade-reading-gap-research-brief/>.

Embrace Equity and Inclusion as Central Tenants of ECE Instructional Philosophy

Contacts at all profiled districts highlight equity as a key component of their ECE programs' philosophy. For example, administrators at District A and District D designed their ECE programs' curricula to narrow achievement gaps between students from more- and less-advantaged families. Contacts at District A report that the asset-focused thinking of their Reggio Emilia-inspired philosophy—which assumes that, with effective facilitation and structures, all students will perform at a high level—and their program's focus on early literacy close racial and income gaps in student achievement. In addition, when creating the curriculum at District A, administrators incorporated cultural sensitivity and culturally responsive practices.

80%

of African American students who participated in District A ECE program demonstrated proficiency on kindergarten readiness assessments, compared to 56 percent of African American students who did not.³¹

Example Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices³²



Self-Reflection

Educators examine their biases before, during, and after interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds. Reflective questions include:

- What are my initial reactions to this child and their family?
- What do my reactions tell me about my personal beliefs and assumptions?



Representative Materials

Educators stock their classroom bookshelves with books featuring characters from a variety of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.



Inclusive Classroom Values

Educators take the time to learn about students' families and cultures, and subsequently develop classroom values and expectations that reflect the norms from students' families.

At District D, administrators created an experience-based ECE program in response to a study—referenced above—conducted by researchers Donna Recht and Laruen Leslie. Recht and Leslie showed that prior knowledge, which students construct from experiences, directly influences students' reading comprehension skills. Students exposed to experiences can more easily comprehend texts about those experiences.³³ Therefore, administrators at District D designed their ECE program to introduce disadvantaged students to a variety of experiences to which they otherwise might not be exposed. These experiences build students' vocabularies and subsequently prepare them to read at the same level as their more-advantaged peers in elementary school.

Administrators at District B and District C express a commitment to equality through efforts to fully include students with special needs in their ECE program. For example, contacts at

- District B report that administrators plan to eliminate all self-contained classrooms for special education students. Contacts cite this priority as a component of the programs' overarching instructional philosophies.

EAB's report **Sustaining Inclusive Classrooms** provides more information on eliminating self-contained classrooms at all grade levels.

31) "Results."

32) Chris Lauren Price and Elizabeth A. Steed, "Culturally Responsive Strategies to Support Young Children with Challenging Behavior," NAEYC, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2016/culturally-responsive-strategies>.

33) Recht and Leslie, "Effect of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers' Memory of Text."

Philosophy Represents One ECE Program Component that Contacts at Profiled Districts Highlight as Most Innovative

Contacts at all profiled districts discussed the most innovative, exciting, and/or effective characteristics of their ECE programs.

Innovative, Exciting, or Effective ECE Program Characteristics Cited by Contacts at Profiled Districts



Emphasis on Collaboration

Contacts at District C highlight the way that educators collaborate with their colleagues and students' families to ensure student success. For example, contacts note that educators prioritize learning about their students' families and welcoming parents into the classroom.

Contacts at District B highlight their program's willingness to collaborate with other community-based ECE programs (e.g., the regional child welfare office, the library system, local Head Start locations) to holistically serve students in their district.



Immersive Facility

Contacts at District D highlight the ECE program's physical space, which exposes students to a different, immersive experience every two weeks.



Customized Curricula

Contacts at District D highlight that the ECE program's custom-designed curriculum synthesizes the state's early learning standards with research-backed instructional practices.

Contacts at District A highlight that the ECE program's Reggio Emilia-inspired philosophy, culturally responsive practices, and focus on literacy instruction have narrowed achievement gaps.



Letters to the Mayor

Contacts at District A highlight that their ECE students rise to high expectations. For example, ECE students engage with a local government initiative, where educators help them write letters in response to the mayor's prompt that asks, "How can we make our city a fairer and more interesting place?" Students develop their own responses.

Social-Emotional Learning

To Build Students' Social-Emotional Skills, Incorporate Both Explicit and Embedded Social-Emotional Learning

At some ECE sites at District A and District C, educators supplement the general curriculum with an additional curriculum that specifically targets social-emotional learning (SEL). This curriculum—**Second Step**—teaches social-emotional skills and concepts through five-to-seven minute daily activities. Second Step provides instructional materials to support these activities.³⁴ At these districts and at District D, educators spend approximately 10 minutes each day delivering direct SEL instruction. For example, educators may demonstrate breathing exercises or basic yoga poses, discuss positive ("thumbs-up") versus negative ("thumbs-down") decision-making, and encourage students to reflect on their feelings. At District D, educators use this time to teach students about four guiding concepts: kindness, excellence, service, and respect.

34) "Early Learning Curriculum," Second Step, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.secondstep.org/early-learning-curriculum>.

However, contacts at District C note that, to ensure students retain the information from these SEL lessons, educators must continuously reinforce the lessons throughout the day. Contacts at all other profiled districts—District A, District B, and District D—also report that SEL instruction occurs as an embedded component of the curriculum and instructional approach. For example, after introducing the concept of “negotiation” during direct SEL instruction, an educator who notices an example of students’ sharing effectively during an activity would explicitly praise the students for “negotiating.” By using an SEL-related word in its applied context, educators reinforce and reward the taught behavior.

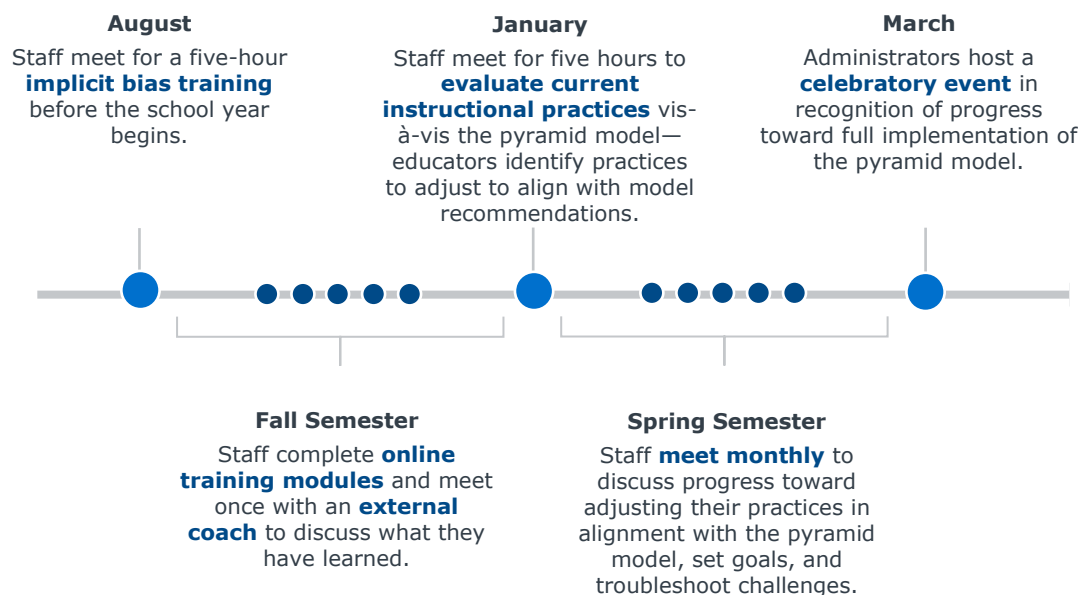
EAB’s best-practice research study **A Systemic Approach to Managing Behavioral Disruptions in Early Grades** addresses district- and school-level PBIS implementation.

School-wide SEL initiatives such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice also contribute to SEL instruction at profiled district’s ECE programs. Contacts at District A and District C explain that some of the districts’ elementary schools that operate ECE programs have implemented PBIS and/or restorative practices on a school-wide basis. Therefore, the ECE programs at these schools also implemented these frameworks and practices. At District D, administrators implemented restorative practices (e.g., opening and closing circles during which students discuss their emotions or practice breathing to calm down) at the ECE program specifically.

To Implement and Sustain SEL Initiatives, Incubate and Scale Educators’ Existing SEL Practices

At District B, administrators are currently standardizing educators’ approach to SEL to align with the evidence-based **Pyramid Model**, a tiered approach to early childhood PBIS based on standardized systems and policies. The model mandates three tiers: “universal supports” to nurture all students, “secondary prevention” to target specific SEL skills and pre-empt problems, and “intensive intervention” for individual students that engages families and builds SEL skills.³⁵ Contacts anticipate that implementation of this model will take approximately a full school year. Contacts explain that, in most cases, educators are already using evidence-based practices to teach SEL—therefore, the implementation process relies on recognizing those ongoing practices and aligning them with the Pyramid Model’s **recommended practices**. Administrators rely on the Pyramid Model Consortium for resources and support throughout the implementation process.

Pyramid Model Implementation Process at District B



35) “Pyramid Model Basic Overview, Framework, Beginners,” accessed December 19, 2019, <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Pyramid/overview/index.html>.

3) Program Management

Structure

Half-Day Programs Streamline Program Management, While Full-Day Programs Boost Equity

All profiled districts operate ECE programs that students attend five days each week, Monday through Friday. At District A and District B, students attend full-day ECE programs (approximately six hours each day). At District D and District C, students attend half-day ECE programs (approximately three hours each day).

Research shows that full-day pre-K programs help to close achievement and other equity gaps between more- and less-advantaged families within a school district. These programs provide educators with more time to deliver instruction that can prepare students for kindergarten. While research on the long-term impact of this extra preparation is mixed (i.e., some studies have shown that achieving gaps reappear later in elementary school), the economic implications of affordable, full-day childcare provide significant, long-lasting benefits for low-income families.³⁶

Sample Full-Day Agenda at District A³⁷


	
<i>Morning</i>	
8:30-9:00	Arrival and Breakfast
9:00-9:15	Greeting and Introduction to Centers
9:15-10:15	Centers (i.e., playful activities that teach unit content)
10:15-10:25	Thinking and Feedback (i.e., educators encourage students to reflect and share their progress)
10:25-10:45	Small Groups (i.e., targeted literacy or math learning)
10:45-11:00	Let's Find Out About It (i.e., whole group instruction about academic concepts, such as "letters")
11:00-12:10	Lunch and Recess
<i>Afternoon</i>	
12:10-12:30	Read Aloud
12:30-1:00	Rest Time
1:00-1:10	Songs, Word Play, and Letters (to teach phonological awareness)
1:10-2:00	Specialists (e.g., music, gym, library)
2:00-2:30	Story Acting and Dismissal

³⁶) "Full-Day Pre-K Programs."

³⁷) "[District A ECE Curriculum]," District A, accessed January 6, 2020.

Alternatively, the half-day structure of the ECE program at District C allows administrators to accommodate a greater number of students from the district. At District C, educators teach for a full school day, and students either attend the morning or afternoon session.

Sample Half-Day Program Components at *DISTRICT C*

	
10 minutes	Circle time
50 minutes	Play time
20 minutes	Motor-skill time
10 minutes	Story time
Varied	Snack time
Varied	Small groups three times a week

The two-session-per-day structure results in a 90-minute break for educators between the morning and afternoon session. This break serves as designated planning and coaching time for ECE educators.

Most Profiled Districts Enroll Predominately Four-Year-Old Students

District A, District B, and District D typically enroll only four-year-old students—however, at District D, students who qualify for special education can enroll at the age of three. In accordance with administrators’ philosophy of inclusion, these students participate in the program alongside the four-year-old students in general education. At District C, funding covers ECE attendance for three-, four-, and five-year old students. Administrators use multi-age classrooms to serve these students (i.e., students all attend the same class). Experts note that research on multi-age classrooms is not conclusive. Multi-age classrooms may benefit younger students but hinder the academic progress of older students—however, it is possible that older students receive non-academic benefits such as leadership skills.³⁸

Professional Development

Focus Professional Development on Curricula, Instruction, and Assessment

At all profiled districts, administrators use presentations and workshops during designated professional development days and/or staff meetings to achieve program goals in areas such as curriculum, instruction, and assessment. For example, the ECE programs at District A and District D use district-created curricula. Comprehensive implementation of the curricula in each classroom represents a key priority for these districts. Therefore, administrators design professional development sessions for educators that center around these curricula.

At District A, the ECE program director and ECE instructional coaches, who developed the district’s curriculum, also created accompanying resources to teach that curriculum to

38) “Mixed-Age Classes Hinder Kids’ Academic Progress in Head Start,” Association for Psychological Science, accessed January 7, 2020, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/mixed-age-head-start-classes-hinders-kids-academic-progress.html>; Peckie Peters, “Mixed-Age Classrooms Provide Optimal Learning Environment | Bing Nursery School,” Stanford University Bing Nursery School, accessed January 7, 2020, <https://bingschool.stanford.edu/news/mixed-age-classrooms-provide-optimal-learning-environment/>; Alice Callahan, “Mixed-Age Preschool: Benefits and Challenges,” *The Science of Mom* (blog), April 2, 2013, <https://scienceofmom.com/2013/04/02/mixed-age-preschool-benefits-and-challenges/>.

educators. The program director, site-based administrators, and instructional coaches use these resources to lead professional development sessions during five full days—two during the summer and three throughout the year. For the three days during the school year, some ECE program sites close to students for the day, whereas others hire substitute teachers. Contacts at District A report that administrators initially offered stipends for educators to attend professional development on the new curriculum. In recent years, administrators adjusted educators’ contracts to include the five professional development days.

At profiled districts that use third-party vendors to provide curricula, administrators focus program-designated professional development days on assessment and instructional strategies.

Non-Curricular Professional Development Sessions at Profiled Districts



Assessments

At District B, the ECE program director led a 90-minute session during a designated professional development day over the summer. The session described how to complete student assessments in compliance with state standards.



Play-Based Instruction

At District C, analysis of student achievement data showed that students lacked basic skills related to the use of toys. During a monthly, 90-minute staff meeting, educators created prop boxes (containers of materials related to a specific topics) and discussed how to encourage students to play. During subsequent staff meetings, educators and specialists reviewed achievement data to ascertain the impact of the prop boxes.

Incorporate Educators’ Preferences and Expertise into Professional Development Offerings

Administrators at District B and District C solicit educators’ input to ensure that professional development aligns with the needs of program staff. For example, administrators at District B used a Google survey to allow educators to identify high priority topics for further training. Using survey responses, administrators designed a menu of options for educators to choose from during a designated professional development day. For example, educators could learn from the district’s occupational therapy specialist about how to develop motor skills or attend a session with an external speaker on the importance of visual instructional supports.

At District C, the district’s Early Childhood School Improvement Team designs most of the programming for designated professional development days. Each ECE site sends one or two educators to join this team. This structure ensures that educators themselves suggest and design professional development that will be most useful for them and their colleagues.

To further facilitate educators’ ability to attend professional development in accordance with their preferences, educators at District C receive 9-10 professional development days as a part of their contracts. While program-wide, designated professional development days use some of that time, educators can use the remaining days to pursue other professional development opportunities. For example, some educators travel to attend expert presentations on adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and trauma-informed care.

Employ Coaches to Help Educators Integrate Curriculum into Instruction

Instructional coaches at District A and District D visit classrooms to provide targeted curriculum support. At District A, coaches use a fidelity checklist derived directly from the district’s curriculum. Instructional coaches observe teachers and check off each practice used by the teacher on the checklist. If the educators do not use all recommended practices, the coach meets with them to discuss how to incorporate the missing practices into their teaching. Contacts at District A report that each instructional coach should serve no more than ten ECE classrooms.

Contacts at District D recommend that instructional coaches work with educators to help them incorporate research-backed instructional tactics (e.g., ECE students learn through movement) and curriculum- or standards-based content (e.g., pre-literacy skills) into actionable lesson plans. At District D, educators meet with instructional coaches once per week to plan lessons.

Additional Specialists Provide SEL Expertise as Needed

At District D and District C, specialists with expertise in early childhood social-emotional learning provide additional support for educators. At District D, the ECE program employs a full-time counselor. The counselor works with educators to help them implement research-backed social-emotional and discipline strategies. Similarly, at District C, the program’s social workers help educators implement the SEL curricula Second Step.

Assessment

Measure and Report Student Achievement Multiple Times Each Year

At all profiled districts, educators measure student achievement three distinct times throughout the school year—for example, at District D, educators evaluate each student in November, February, and May. Educators translate student progress into a report card, which they communicate to parents. Profiled districts each use different assessment instruments.

Student Assessment Instruments at Profiled Districts

Report Cards

A+

- At District A, educators fill out a report card that rates student progress as either “beginning,” “developing,” “established,” or “going beyond” in accordance with seven different domains.
- To review this report card, see **Appendix A**.

Portfolio of Student Work



- At District B and District C, educators create a portfolio that documents student work in seven early childhood development areas, specified by profiled districts’ state department of education: social/emotional, physical/fine motor, literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and fine arts.
- Though these portfolios do not translate to specific scores or grades, they do help educators track and communicate students’ development and progress.

Assessment Products



- At District D, educators use the Children’s Learning Institute’s CIRCLE Progress Monitoring System assessment tool. District D’s state department of education provides free access to the tool to all ECE programs.
- This assessment tool is standardized and criterion-referenced, based on longitudinal data sets—compiled by the Children’s Learning Institute—from preschools in Texas, Maryland, Ohio, and Florida.
- The assessment scores students on measures (e.g., phonological awareness) and denotes each score as “needs support,” “monitor,” or “on-track.”³⁹

Additional Assessment Option

The Learning Policy Institute highlights the observation-based assessment, norm-referenced product **Teaching Strategies GOLD** as a research-backed assessment of student progress.⁴¹

State Assessments



- At District C, educators use the **Desired Results Developmental Profile** (DRDP), used by the California and Illinois Departments of Education, to assess students in accordance with 42 measures of student progress.
- To complete the assessment, educators collect documentation (e.g., student work, anecdotes) of student progress.
- The DRDP assesses students across measures within eight domains: self-regulation, social and emotional development, language and literary development, English-language development, cognition (including math and science), physical development, history (social science), and visual and performing arts.
- For each domain, educators indicate students’ level of mastery.
- DRDP creators cite child development **research** to support measures in each DRDP domain.⁴⁰
- Information from 2015 suggests that the DRDP was not yet a normed measure—i.e., a 2015 presentation notes the DRDP aims to develop norming samples.⁴² However, contacts report that the DRDP is a normed assessment.

39) “Student Summary Report,” CLI Engage Public, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://cliengage.org/public/training/support/how-to-guides/student-summary-report/>.

40) “Research Summaries by DRDP (2015) Domain,” Desired Results for Children and Families, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.desiredresults.us/research-summaries-drdp-2015-domain>; “The Commissioner’s List of Approved Prekindergarten Assessment Instruments,” Texas Department of Education, accessed January 14, 2020, https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/Appendix_H_Final_List_of_Pre-K_Recommendations.pdf.

41) Wechsler et al., “The Building Blocks of High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs,” page 1.

42) “DRDP(2015) – Fulfilling the Vision for Early Childhood Assessment in California, Illinois, and Beyond,” UC Berkeley BEAR Center, February 03, 2015, <https://bearcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/BEAR%20Seminar.pdf>.

To Optimize Instruction and Deploy Academic Supports for Each Student, Continuously Document Student Progress

Administrators at District B require educators to document student progress in all seven of the above domains within each student's portfolio twice each trimester (i.e., six times each year). Educators must collect a piece of evidence (e.g., student work, description of behavior) each time they document progress. Contacts explain that continuous assessment allows educators to develop a longitudinal sense of student progress. Educators can use this information in several different ways.

Uses of Data from Ongoing Assessments at District B



Group Students

Educators use information about student progress to assign groups for small-group instruction. For example, educators may group students who are struggling with counting and subsequently work with that group on counting.



Differentiate Instruction

Educators use information about student progress to encourage high-achieving students to take on additional challenges and to provide remediation for struggling students.



Initiate Special Education Interventions

Administrators use information about student progress to identify students who may require screening for special education services.

At District C, where administrators use DRDP data to identify individual students who are struggling to develop at an adequate pace to remain on-track for kindergarten, a problem-solving team meets monthly to design personalized strategies to help these students improve. The team comprises a developmental specialist, occupational therapist, psychologist, teacher, and the site's director.

Use Aggregated Student Achievement Data to Develop Program-Wide Academic Interventions

Administrators at District C aggregated student achievement data from the DRDP to analyze areas for growth shared among the entire student body. Administrators identified behaviors related to play (e.g., using toys, sharing) as an area where students consistently failed to demonstrate age-appropriate levels of mastery. Contacts suggest that technology overuse at an early age may impede students' normal development related to play. In response, administrators worked with an early childhood development specialist to create a rubric that isolates the three DRDP standards specifically related to play. The specialist visits ECE classrooms and works one-on-one or in small groups with students to help them develop play-related behaviors in accordance with these three standards.

Evaluate Instructional Quality to Assess Overall Program Performance

All profiled districts evaluate instructional quality. While profiled districts differ in the extent to which they rely on instructional quality to indicate overall ECE program performance (administrators at District C rely primarily on student achievement data), contacts at District

A state that instructional quality is the most important indicator of program performance because instructional quality directly impacts student achievement.

Contacts report numerous practices to evaluate instructional quality. For example, at District A, administrators partner with researchers from local universities to assess educators’ instructional strategies before and after professional development initiatives. At District D and District C, ECE program administrators conduct classroom observations to evaluate instructional quality. At District C, administrators use [Danielson’s Framework for Teaching](#) to guide observations and provide feedback. At District D, ECE program administrators conduct a curriculum calibration exercise following teacher observations.

Curriculum Calibration Process at District D

At District D, the curriculum calibration team includes the district’s early literacy director, an English language learner specialist, an instructional coach, and an ECE program administrator.



Classroom Observations

The curriculum calibration team observes classrooms each week and collects evidence of instruction (e.g., pictures of the classroom during a lesson, worksheets from an activity)



Weekly Meeting

The team meets once a week to discuss alignment between the documented evidence of instruction and the curriculum. The team uses a calibration document (**Appendix B**) to complete this process. The document checks for content, cognitive, and context alignment.



Feedback

If the team identifies a discrepancy between the instruction they observed and the curriculum, an administrator meets with the educator to deliver feedback and provide coaching. Contacts stress that these meetings are non-punitive—the meetings aim to improve educators’ instruction.

Supplement Instructional Evaluations with Parent Surveys to Identify Areas of Program Improvement

At District B and District C, parents complete a satisfaction survey at the end of each school year. Administrators review parent feedback and subsequently incorporate changes into the program. For example, at District B, administrators may add a class of students to the ECE program if students enroll after the beginning of the year. Based on feedback from the parent survey stating that parents felt overwhelmed by the mid-year start date, administrators decided to implement an orientation for these parents.

Sample Parent Survey Questions at District B⁴³



My student’s teacher...

- Was easy to contact, and answered phone and written messages promptly
 - Y/N
- Made me feel comfortable and welcome
 - Y/N
- Communicated with me about my child’s needs.
 - Y/N
- Gave me regular feedback regarding my child’s progress.
 - Y/N
- Invited me to participate either by attending a family fun activity, field trip, party, or by volunteering my time
 - Y/N

43) [Program Survey],” District B, provided December 5, 2019.

4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- According to secondary research, what are the components of a high-quality early childhood education (ECE) program?
- According to secondary research, what are the benefits and disadvantages of a play-based approach to ECE?
- According to secondary research, what are the benefits and disadvantages of an academic-focused approach to ECE?
- Do administrators at contact programs apply an overarching philosophy to their ECE program? If so, what is the philosophy and, if applicable, what is the name of the specific model?
- What research, if any, do administrators at contact programs use to inform their approach to ECE?
- Why did administrators at contact programs decide to adopt this philosophy?
- What professional development and planning opportunities do administrators at contact programs offer for ECE educators?
- Do administrators at contact programs incorporate social and emotional learning curricula into program offerings? If so, how?
- What is the structure of contact programs?
- How many days per week and hours per day do students attend contact programs?
- Do contact programs offer multi-age courses or age-specific courses?
- How do administrators at contact programs measure student performance and outcomes?
- What is the structure of the student assessment systems that administrators at contact programs use?
- How do administrators at contact programs assess overall program performance?
- What innovative, exciting, or effective characteristics of their ECE program do administrators at contact programs highlight?

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Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators who manage exemplary early childhood education programs—identified through EAB research and analysis, state rankings, and national awards—at the following school districts.

District	Location	Approximate District Enrollment
District A	Northeast	50,000
District B	Midwest	6,000
District C	Midwest	40,000
District D	South	35,000

Appendix A

Educators at District A use the following report card to communicate ECE student progress to families.

District A Early Childhood Report Card⁴⁴

B = Beginning D = Developing E = Established G = Going Beyond
 NY = Not Yet Observed NT = Not Yet Taught

Social Development	
Self-Awareness	Recognizes and expresses feelings; describes information about self and family; demonstrates confidence in abilities
Self-Management	Uses strategies to handle challenging situations and feelings; demonstrates flexibility and self-control
Social Awareness	Recognizes that people have different feelings; recognizes diversity and demonstrates respect for others
Relationship Skills	Seeks and offers help; communicates with others; resolves conflicts and build relationships
Responsible Decision-Making	Understands and follows rules; is self-reflective; supports others in the group; demonstrates responsibility
Literacy and Language	
Reading Literature and Informational Text	Discusses key details, characters, vocabulary, and illustrations in a story or informational text; identifies different texts on the same topic
Reading Foundational Skills	Handles books appropriately; recognizes and names some lower and upper case letters and their sounds; identifies beginning sounds in words; identifies and produces rhyming words
Writing	Uses drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a story or tell information
Speaking and Listening	Participates in conversations; asks and answers questions to seek help, get information, or clarify; expresses thoughts, feelings and ideas clearly
Language	Speaks using standard English; speaks in complete sentences; explores word meanings and uses new vocabulary
Math	
Practices	Makes sense of problems and persists in solving them; thinks about and communicates math ideas
Counting and Comparing	Counts to answer "how many" questions (0-10); recognizes and names numerals; compares groups; instantly recognizes small groups
Adding and Subtracting	Uses objects to solve simple addition and subtraction problems
Measuring and Sorting	Describes objects using words such as long, short, tall, heavy, light, big, small, wide, narrow, etc.; compares two objects by length and weight; sorts objects
Working with Shapes	Identifies, describes and compares two-dimensional shapes
Science	
Earth and Space Sciences	Observes and describes weather; describes how plants and animals affect and are affected by the environment; describes environmentally responsible behaviors, observes and describes how the position of the sun changes throughout the day

44) "[ECE Report Card]," District A, Accessed January 10, 2020.

Life Science	Describes and compares animal and plant structures; uses five senses to explore the world around him/ her; observes and communicates that animals and plants grow and change over time and need food, water, and air to survive
Physical Science	Explores solids and liquids; investigates motion and stability; explores sounds and shadows; compares natural and human-made materials
Social Studies	
Civics	Describes family and community members who take care of children and adults; retells stories that illustrate positive qualities: e.g., kindness, friendship, responsibility
History and Geography	Describes school/ home neighborhood; describes personal & family events in chronological order
Economics	Describes different kinds of jobs and why people work; understands that people buy things with money
Physical Education	
Fine Motor	Holds and uses tools (e.g., writing utensils, scissors, paint brushes, etc.) appropriately
Large Motor	Hops, skips, jumps, runs; climbs stairs with alternating feet; catches and throws balls; moves through space with awareness of own body, other people, and objects
Arts	
Dance	Creates and performs dances
Music	Sings and plays a variety of songs and instruments alone and with others
Theatre	Creates and acts out improvised and scripted stories
Visual Arts	Explores a variety of materials, concepts and techniques

Appendix B

Administrators at District D use this document to determine whether educators' instruction—represented via a work sample that administrators collect during weekly classroom observations—aligns with the ECE program's curriculum.

District D Early Childhood Calibration Worksheet⁴⁵

Subject: _____ Teacher: _____ Date: _____

I. **Content:** Alignment with PK Guidelines and MISD PK Curriculum

	Guidelines Aligned On-Grade Level/ Curriculum	Not aligned with the Curriculum	Not Aligned with Guidelines Not Grade/Course Aligned Not in Curriculum*
Questions/Activities			

II. **Cognitive:** Alignment to the verbs and academic vocabulary of the PK guidelines.

Work Sample verbiage must be cognitively comparable to the verbiage in state standards (SSs).

SSs	Q#	Verbs/Vocabulary In Guideline	Verbs/Vocabulary In Work	#Aligned
	Total	Total Aligned out of Total Questions = % aligned		Total

III. **Context:** Work is aligned to the background knowledge/context of the experience.

Tally the total number of questions from student work for each level and then determine the percentage of questions at each level.

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Activity is aligned to PK guidelines, but not to the context/background knowledge of the experience.	Activity is aligned to both the PK guidelines and to the context of the experience.	Activity is aligned to both the PK guidelines and to the context of the experience. A connection to background knowledge is evident, and it is apparent that students are learning both the guideline and the context of the experience.
Total Level 1 / %	Total Level 2 / %	Total Level 3 / %

Notes/Comments:

⁴⁵"PK Calibration Worksheet," District D, provided January 10, 2020.