High-quality Start for All:
A Roadmap for strengthening Pre-K and early learning opportunities for all Nashvillians

Office of Mayor Megan Barry
Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County Tennessee
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Young girls engage with blocks in a Metro Nashville Public Schools Pre-K classroom.

(Left to Right) MNPS Pre-K Coordinator for Community Sites Florence Kidd, Mayor Megan Barry, and Metro Action Commission Executive Director Cynthia Croom at the Metro Nashville Public Schools Excellence in Early Education Summit in June 2017.

District and community leaders pose for a photo during the Metro Nashville Public Schools Excellence in Early Education Summit in June 2017.
Dear Nashvillians:

Earlier this year, I called together a group of early childhood education leaders to help me deliver on one of my most important campaign commitments: ensuring that all 4-year-olds in Davidson County have access to high-quality Pre-Kindergarten.

The research is clear. Access to high-quality Pre-K prepares children for Kindergarten, builds their capacity to be strong readers, reduces the likelihood that they'll need interventions by addressing needs early, and lays the foundation for improved social and emotional development. It also strengthens families by making it easier for them to participate fully in the workforce.

In Nashville, we are fortunate that our families have access to Pre-K provided by many partners, including Metro Nashville Public Schools, the Metro Action Commission – which administers Head Start – and many community providers. Together, they served 7,517 4-year-olds in the 2016-17 school year.

Unfortunately, work remains to ensure that all of our 4-year-olds have access to high-quality Pre-K.

Local research has shown that not all of our Pre-K classrooms provide an education that leads to long-term benefits for children. Within and across providers – Pre-K, Head Start, and child care – we lack a set of shared expectations and beliefs around what high-quality means and how to achieve it. Families, especially our most vulnerable, face barriers when navigating a disconnected and disparate system. We lack the infrastructure to highlight best practices across programs and identify opportunities to solve problems collectively. In addition to quality concerns, we see an increasing need for additional Pre-K classrooms. There are 1,832 4-year-olds without a seat at the moment. This gap will only widen as the city continues to grow.

We can and must do more.

We must be clear about what research says are high-quality environments for 4-year-olds. We must also ensure that we keep families at the core, that we intentionally leverage the strengths we have across programs, and that we use data to identify where additional services are most needed and where we need to change course. Following this plan will ensure that no matter where our children live or whether they are economically disadvantaged or English is not their first language, they will have access to an early education that prepares them for success in school and life.

"High-quality Start for All" encompasses the work of both state and local leaders. It represents the best of our collective thinking and outlines our city's plans for implementing a shared vision for high-quality early learning and the role all of us must play to achieve it.

Thank you all in advance for your ongoing commitment to supporting our youngest Nashvillians.

Kind Regards,

Megan Barry
Mayor
Acknowledgments

Parents and Community Members,

As the leaders of the systems that will benefit from this comprehensive approach, we share with you our commitment to fully embrace its values and to deliver on its promise by working together to bring the best each of us has to offer to work collaboratively for our children.

For too long, we have each labored in our own system to bring greatness to our services. We have accomplished a lot. But we can do more by sharing lessons, pooling resources and strategies, and serving communities in coordination.

We thank Mayor Barry for bringing us together and committing her support. Under the leadership of Laura Moore, coming together has offered us the creative space to make this work happen. Continuing to work in collaboration as our working group becomes a permanent governance committee is critical to our success.

The road ahead will be hard. Driven by the core values – families at the center, supporting our front-line educators, and promoting evidence-based best practices – we believe we have the formula for success. It is time to get the work underway. We are eager for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Shawn Joseph, Director of Schools,
Metro Nashville Public Schools

Cynthia Croom, Executive Director
Metro Action Commission

Erica Mitchell, Senior Director, Community Impact
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville
The Early Childhood Education Working Group

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Executive Summary

Research shows that having access to high-quality Pre-K lays a foundation that prepares children for success in school and life. Children who participate in Pre-K have stronger math and reading skills in elementary school, are less likely to drop out of school and become teen parents, and are more likely to attend college. Over the last decade, Tennessee has taken great strides to expand the access that children, particularly those who are most vulnerable, have to Pre-K throughout the state. However, researchers from Vanderbilt University’s Peabody Research Institute found that while children who had participated in Tennessee’s Pre-K initially showed an advantage over their peers who had not, children who had not participated caught up by the end of Kindergarten. By second grade, the students who had not participated in Pre-K were outperforming those students who had.

The problem, according to researchers, was that not enough had been done to articulate what quality learning environments look like for young children. Nor had there been enough done to support educators and families to implement and reinforce quality. Second, the connection from Pre-K into elementary school is often unclear, making it difficult for educators to build on the strengths of children developed prior.

In January 2017, Mayor Megan Barry convened an Early Childhood Education Working Group of leaders from the city’s and state’s early childhood community to identify the barriers faced by parents, children, and educators in Nashville, and define strategies that would ensure a high-quality early education opportunity for all young children and prepare every 4-year-old in Davidson County for success in school and life.

This Roadmap, “High-quality Start for All,” is a result of this effort. The Roadmap charts a path to Kindergarten readiness and 3rd grade literacy by outlining a set of clear commitments, definitions, proven strategies, and initiatives for strengthening Pre-K and early childhood education for all Nashvillians.
Defining High-quality for Nashville
The first section of this report outlines the results of the Working Group’s efforts to develop a shared, research-based definition of high-quality Pre-K. Through a comprehensive review of research and best practices, the group collectively agreed to 21 quality standards that all Nashville Pre-K programs, whether run by Metro Nashville Public Schools, Head Start, or community providers, should subscribe to, train, and evaluate against.

These quality standards include a set of 10 program standards that highlight the structural expectations for every facility providing services. Research shows that these standards, which include a priority around actively recruiting families through coordinated outreach efforts and prioritizing daily attendance and supporting teachers to focus on listening to children and being responsive to their needs, are aligned with long-term benefits for children and sustainability for programs. They also include a set of 10 instructional quality standards that reflect findings from local research conducted by the Tennessee Department of Education with Vanderbilt University’s Peabody Research Institute, much of which has occurred here in Nashville. These standards, which include an intentional focus on oral language and literacy development as well as maximizing instructional time, reflect practices that ensure accelerated cognitive and academic gains for children. Lastly, there is an additional standard that specifically highlights the importance of creating alignment between Pre-K and early elementary that includes ensuring that educators better understand the strengths and opportunities their students enter Kindergarten with and providing them with the necessary supports to differentiate their instruction and supports from Day 1. Integrating these practices into programs will ensure that children have access to an education that prepares them for success in school and life, beginning with laying the foundation for them to be strong readers by the end of 3rd grade.

The Roadmap to Quality
While defining a shared vision of high-quality Pre-K is crucial, articulating a vision alone will be insufficient to ensure that MNPS, Head Start, and other service providers will be able to reach the standards. The second half of this report outlines a set of 24 strategies identified by the Working Group that will be thoughtfully and sequentially implemented, monitored, and assessed over the course of the next five years. These strategies are aligned with four structural areas that are key for a successful early education environment:

Family Outreach, Engagement, and Support – Positive experiences in the classroom are key for the proper development of children at a young age. However, what happens at home and in the community is equally important. Parents should be able to easily enroll their children in Pre-K and understand what to expect for their children. Programs should
also better engage parents and the community to support young children and address their barriers inside and outside of the classroom and hold the community accountable for high-quality.

**Staffing and Professional Development** – Research has demonstrated that high-quality teaching combined with early childhood-focused school and program leadership, a positive learning environment, and strong classroom management support a preschooler’s healthy development, academic growth, and Kindergarten readiness. Teachers, assistant teachers, and program leaders should be supported through training, coaching, and professional development. Creating avenues for peer learning across programs, connecting educators with resources on effective strategies, strengthening the teacher pipeline, and addressing salary parity issues will also be important.

**Quality Tracking, Monitoring, and Improvement** – One of the main challenges of improving the quality of Pre-K in Nashville has been the lack of comprehensive data on the current conditions of Pre-K. Data should be integrated across programs and used to enable correct investment of resources and to evaluate whether strategies being implementing should be expanded, altered, or discontinued.

**Quality Expansion** – In the first two years of implementation, the Working Group recommends that Nashville focus its attention on activities that standardize and increase quality citywide. Following that, the Working Group recommends moving to close the availability gap and begin work to provide Pre-K to every 4-year-old in Nashville.

Ensuring that all 4-year-olds have access to high quality Pre-K in Nashville will not be easy. As the work outlined in this report occurs over the coming years, challenges will arise and adjustments will be needed to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. However, there is no better investment that can be made in Nashville. With the shared commitment of goals and guidelines highlighted in this report, the engagement of public and private partners moving forward, and the leadership and support of Mayor Barry, Nashville is poised to become a model in Pre-K and early childhood education. Investing in early childhood education will prepare the city’s youngest residents for a more diverse and dynamic city. This work will not only benefit many parents and young children. It will also benefit the entire community for generations to come.
Young children work together to build a structure during a unit of study focused on roads at the Casa Azafran Model Early Learning Center.
Introduction

“We have an obligation to create a citywide foundation of high-quality Pre-K, because if we can ensure that kids coming into Kindergarten have a common experience and common framework, we'll be able to help them be more successful.”

– Mayor Megan Barry

As a city, Nashville is on an upward trajectory. A booming economy has brought rapid population growth with more than 100 people moving to the region every day for work, study, and quality of life. The child population of the city is also growing with the number of babies born in Nashville increasing from 9,557 in 2010 to 10,322 in 2015.¹² Growth means increased need by native and newcomer families for early learning opportunities and increased expectations that Nashville public schools, Head Start programs, and community child care sites must prepare every child for Kindergarten.

Research here in Nashville, across the state of Tennessee, and nationally, shows that uneven availability of quality early learning experiences means that too many children are unprepared for school and too many parents are unsure of what quality looks like. According to a study from the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, children that enter Kindergarten ready to learn have an 82% change of mastering basic skills by age 11, compared with a 45% chance for children who are not Kindergarten ready.³ Successful experiences including in Maryland, Alabama, New York, and North Carolina show that Pre-K can give children stronger math and reading skills in elementary school. However, of the 9,349 4-year-olds in Davidson County, only 7,517 could be enrolled in a Pre-K program, leaving an opportunity gap for more than 1,800 4-year-olds.⁴ According to the Ounce of Prevention Fund, children who do not get high-quality early childhood experiences are 25% more likely to drop out of school, 40% more likely to become teen parents, and 60% less likely to attend college.⁵

In January 2017, Nashville Mayor Megan Barry brought together leaders from the city’s and state’s early childhood community to develop a roadmap to ensure a high-quality early education opportunity for all young children and to prepare every 4-year-old in Davidson County for success in school and life.

The goal is to ensure that over the next five years, every Nashville 4-year-old gets a fair start, regardless of family income, neighborhood, English language proficiency or parents’ educational attainment.

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¹ Davidson County Natality Report, Data from 2010. http://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Health/PDFs/HealthData/Natality2010.pdf
⁴ Metro Nashville Public Schools, Pre-K Department; Metro Action Commission, Head Start; Tennessee Department of Human Services
Her charge to the Nashville Early Childhood Education Working Group was framed in three questions: How should Nashville be thinking about quality and effectiveness across all early learning programs? What are the best ways to engage Nashville families as early learning partners? How can Nashville’s early childhood programs work together differently to reduce barriers and generate greater impact from available resources?

The Working Group met seven times over the course of six months to review the latest research, develop a shared, research-based definition of quality, and identify key educational and developmental child outcomes that will drive the city’s efforts over the next five years.

Their work produced this Roadmap framed by four pillars selected to meet the Mayor’s quality challenge:

- Adopt a citywide-research-based quality standard for all current and future early childhood education settings.
- Establish an Early Childhood Governance Committee convened by Mayor Barry and tasked to monitor the coordination and implementation of quality improvement strategies.
- Leverage a mix of private and public funding to build and support the implementation of quality initiatives.
- Premise expansion on a system built on quality.

Building on the pillars is a four-part strategy that will move Nashville’s early childhood system to quality. Undergirding each strategy is a set of programmatic, staffing, data, and performance initiatives that will roll out over five years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Outreach, Engagement &amp; Support</th>
<th>Staffing &amp; Professional Development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality Tracking, Monitoring &amp; Improvement</td>
<td>Quality Expansion</td>
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**Working Group Meeting Timeline 2017**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>January</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kick-off with Working Group and Children’s Champions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Reviewed national best practices and initiated early planning</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>February</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Developed a shared vision for High-quality Pre-K in Nashville</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Identified opportunities for “quick wins”</td>
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<td><strong>March</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Reviewed national and state quality standards for Pre-K</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Adopted research-based program and instructional quality standards for all Nashville programs</td>
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<td><strong>April</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Identification and prioritization of implementation strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>May</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Identification of child outcomes and ideal governance structure for Nashville</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Finalization of the Roadmap and ongoing Governance Structure</td>
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</table>
The following Roadmap encompasses the marriage of research-based, best instructional and classroom management practice with enhanced teacher recruitment and professional development strategies, and a new technology-supported parent engagement platform.

The goal is to ensure that over the next five years, every Nashville 4-year-old gets a fair start, regardless of family income, neighborhood, English language proficiency or parents’ educational attainment. This will ensure that children have access to an education that prepares them for success in school and life, beginning with laying the foundation for them to be strong readers by the end of third grade.

This ambitious undertaking will require the talent, energy, and resources of the broad early childhood community.
Defining High-quality for Nashville

“It is clear that the term … ‘high-quality’ Pre-K does not convey actionable information about what the critical elements of the program should be. Now is the time to pay careful attention to the challenge of serving the country’s youngest and most vulnerable children well in the Pre-K programs that have been developed and promoted with their needs in mind.”

– Peabody Research Institute, 2015

Near the end of 2015, Vanderbilt University’s Peabody Research Institute issued the results of their longitudinal assessment of Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K Program (VPK), a program created in 2005 to expand access to Pre-K programs for 4-year-olds in need throughout the state. While the research found significant positive impacts on students who had participated in the program at the end of the Pre-K year, by the end of Kindergarten, the children who had not participated in the program had caught up. By second grade, the students who had not participated in Pre-K were outperforming those students who had.

The problem, according to the researchers, was two-fold. First, there had not been enough done to articulate what quality learning environments look like for young children. Nor had there been enough done to support educators and families to implement and reinforce quality. Second, the connection from Pre-K into elementary school is often unclear, making it difficult for educators to build off the strengths of children developed prior.

In Nashville, the desire to define quality is complicated by the existence of many different providers, who each have their own set of quality expectations.

With this in mind, the Working Group reviewed and cross-walked Head Start standards, the Tennessee Department of Education’s (TDOE) standards for the Voluntary Pre-K program, child care regulations, research-based quality parameters, peer-validated national accreditation standards, and best practice and policy standards to develop a shared definition of quality to drive system design, program enhancements, and expansion throughout the city going forward.

Efforts in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and New York City among other cities were also studied. While the Working Group was going through this

Pre-K Providers

MNPS
• 4 Model Early Learning Centers with 35 classrooms
• 57 School-Based with 186 Classrooms
• 2 Montessori sites with 21 classrooms
• 7 Partnerships with Community Based Organizations with 8 classrooms
• In total, offer over 3,352 Pre-K seats

Head Start
• 7 Head Start Centers Across Nashville
• Enroll over 1,200 4-year-olds

Community-Based Organizations
• Over 100 3-star sites regulated by the TN Department of Human Services
• Offer close to 3,000 Pre-K seats

Source: Metro Nashville Public Schools, Pre-K Department; Metro Action Commission, Head Start; Tennessee Department of Human Services
## Snapshot of Pre-K Quality Definitions Used in Nashville

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>NIEER</th>
<th>NAEYC</th>
<th>Federal Expansion Grant</th>
<th>VPK</th>
<th>QRIS Star Rating – Family &amp; Group Homes</th>
<th>QRIS Star Rating – Child Care Centers</th>
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*State VPK Early Learning Standards informed by NAEYC, Head Start, & Tennessee’s State Standards for Kindergarten

**Head Start has highly specific standards, but also must adhere to QRIS

NIEER: National Institute for Early Education Research

NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

VPK: Voluntary Pre-K Program

QRIS: Quality Rating and Improvement System
process, TDOE was revisiting its operating and quality standards and realigning them with the latest research. The framework TDOE was working on captured the sentiments of the Working Group, and it was agreed that all Nashville early education programs would adopt the research-based elements.\textsuperscript{6} Among the many benefits of this consensus decision is the recognition that embracing the new TDOE definition will align Nashville’s quality standards with key components of the quality legislation recently passed by the Tennessee Legislature and put Nashville in a strong position as the state links Pre-K quality to funding.

Program Quality Standards

The Program Quality Standards refer to the principles that should serve as structure for every facility providing services. Research shows that these standards are aligned with long-term benefits for children and sustainability for programs:

- **Strategic allocation of funds to maximize benefits**
  Funding for Pre-K programs should be targeted to serve children who will benefit the most from programs, as well as ensuring equity and quality for all children, irrespective of socioeconomic status, learning abilities, home language and culture, and community and family contexts.

- **Focus on access and attendance**
  It is essential that programs actively recruit families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—those families that research shows benefit the most from high-quality programs—through coordinated outreach efforts, and prioritize daily attendance.

- **The use of data for continuous improvement**
  Programs should use quantitative and qualitative data to set goals and improve program outcomes. Programs should focus on specific program priority assessments, while minimizing multiple assessments that have the potential to disrupt teaching and learning.

- **Quality curriculum aligned to early learning standards**
  Any curriculum adopted by a program should be evidence-based, aligned to the Tennessee Early Learning Development Standards, and include curriculum materials and resources, as well as upfront and ongoing teacher training and support.

- **Developmentally-appropriate daily schedule**
  Pre-K schedules should provide ample time for gross motor movement, cooperative peer interactions, experiential, inquiry-based learning, unstructured play, and a balance of teacher and child directed activities.

- **Responsive teacher-student interactions**
  Teachers should focus on listening to children, being responsive to their needs, and modeling and teaching how to care for others and the learning environment.

- **Leadership committed to early education**
  Leaders must be knowledgeable about child development, Pre-K curriculum, and the developmental-interaction approach to learning so that they can effectively support Pre-K teachers to improve their practice.

- **Culture of continuous improvement**
  Teachers, leaders, and staff should be supported through multiple means of professional development to consistently improve their practice and service to young children and families.

- **Focus on family engagement**
  Programs should provide multiple ways for families to engage in the life of the school and provide resources to parents to support children’s learning outside of the school day.

- **Focus on community partnerships**
  Programs, schools, and districts should establish partnerships with community organizations to provide support services for children and families, including health screenings, healthcare, mental health counseling, legal services, financial counseling, and job training/placement for parents.

\textsuperscript{6} Lisa Wiltshire, draft of “Defining Quality in Early Education,” TN Department of Education, March 2017, included in full in the Appendix of this report.
Instructional Quality Standards

While program quality standards help create the conditions for a quality sustainable program, much of the work of quality occurs in the classroom. The following instructional quality standards reflect findings from local research conducted by TDOE in partnership with Vanderbilt University’s Peabody Research Institute, much of which has occurred here in Nashville. They reflect practices that ensure accelerated cognitive and academic gains for children, wherever service is provided:

- **Environment, curriculum, and pedagogy guided by a developmental-interaction approach to learning**
  Learning environments and activities must be designed to scaffold children's learning based on their developmental stage and abilities in order to support children's intellectual curiosities and motivation to inquire, as well as maximize long-term academic gains.

- **Engaging, child-centered learning environments**
  Learning environments should enable and invite experiential learning and interactive experiences, as well as promote the skills and competencies that support academic success.

- **Maximum instructional time with focused, targeted activities and lessons**
  Instructional time should be maximized by reducing time spent in transitions, and using transition time to embed learning.

- **Effective use of learning centers**
  During learning centers, teachers must be actively observing children, assessing and recording children's skills and abilities (aligned to objectives and standards) and engaging with children to scaffold their learning.

- **Intentional focus on work skills, social skills, and personal competencies**
  Teachers must facilitate the development of skills and competencies connected to learning such as the ability to persevere, resolve conflicts, focus, engage, and understand and regulate the emotions of self and others.

- **Intentional focus on oral language and literacy development**
  Teachers should spend significant time each day listening to children, reading stories with children, and asking questions that prompt children's critical and inferential thinking.

- **Intentional focus on vocabulary acquisition**
  Teachers must intentionally teach vocabulary through effective methods including teacher-student conversations about curriculum and content and student work, read-alouds, experiential activities that introduce new materials and invite experimentation, and curricular content focused on science concepts, social studies, creative arts, music, and gardening.

- **Intentional focus on mathematics**
  Teachers should incorporate math throughout the day using the developmental interaction approach.

- **Facilitated sequential activities**
  Teachers should facilitate sequential activities – learning experiences that progress through a series of steps or levels of complexity – through teacher interactions, peer interactions, and work with autodidactic materials.

- **Interdisciplinary content, based on units of study**
  Curriculum should be based on units of study that extend several weeks and provide opportunities for children to explore and learn about content at deeper levels of cognitive complexity.
Alignment between Pre-K and Early Elementary

Finally, all members of the Working Group have noticed the significant gap between what happens in Pre-K and in early elementary grades that aligns with the findings of Vanderbilt’s research. Aligning Pre-K and early elementary does not just mean facilitating a transition strategy from Pre-K into Kindergarten for children. It also means helping educators better understand the strengths and opportunities that their students enter Kindergarten with and providing them with the necessary supports to differentiate their instruction and supports from Day 1. Additionally, the programmatic and instructional supports that research shows children need in Pre-K are also required when they transition into Kindergarten and matriculate through the third grade. More must be done to integrate this developmentally appropriate focus into the early elementary grades at the same time that academic standards become more rigorous.
How to get there – The Roadmap to Quality

Having a shared vision of what high-quality Pre-K is for all child care providers in Nashville is key to strengthening our collective effort toward building a city in which every child has equal opportunities of receiving high-quality education that prepares them for success in school and life.

However, articulating a common concept for quality is not enough.

To that end, the Working Group identified a set of strategies to address the most pressing barriers that have been preventing quality throughout the city. The strategies align with these four areas:

Family Outreach, Engagement, and Support

Young children, especially from ages 0-4, create permanent brain connections through their interaction with the environment and the adults around them. These connections, which are formed by the hundredths per second in such early ages, become the socio-emotional and cognitive pillars that will be used by these young individuals throughout their childhood and adulthood.

Positive experiences in the classroom are key for the proper development of children at a young age. However, what happens at home and in the community is equally important.

Families and Pre-K services must work together. Parents should be able to easily enroll their children in Pre-K and understand what to expect for their children. Programs must also better engage parents and the community to support young children and address their barriers inside and outside of the classroom and hold the community accountable for high-quality.

Staffing and Professional Development

Research has demonstrated that high-quality teaching combined with early childhood-focused school and program leadership, a positive learning environment, and strong classroom management supports a preschooler’s healthy development, academic growth, and Kindergarten readiness. Key to these outcomes are classroom teachers and assistant teachers who are grounded in child development theory and demonstrate mastery of a quality curriculum, who have learned to sequence activities and structure daily transitions, and who skilfully manage child behavior.
In a blended system like Nashville's, where public schools, Head Start, and community organizations provide Pre-K, the route to a high-quality early education experience must be reinforced through training, coaching, and professional development.

The Working Group sees value in cross-training and sharing resources. To the extent possible, available training should be open to teachers regardless of setting. The implementation challenge is not in the openness to or availability of training opportunities but the training schedules and release time for teachers.

Just as it is the case nationally, teacher turnover is also a challenge in Nashville's Pre-K programs. MNPS has a 20% turnover rate that translates into 68 teachers per year while Head Start loses 24% of its teachers annually, translating into 34 teachers per year. The differential between Head Start and MNPS starting salaries accounts for much of the turnover in Head Start. Frequent turnover among early childhood teachers affects the development of a secure attachment and a strong relationship with the teacher, which in turn affects a child's social, emotional and language development, and parent relationships.

The need for qualified teachers will become even more urgent as the quality initiatives roll out and Pre-K expansion to move to universal availability is implemented in years 3-5 of this plan.

**Quality Tracking, Monitoring, and Improvement**

One of the main challenges of improving the quality of Pre-K in Nashville has been the lack of comprehensive data on the current conditions of Pre-K. Currently, there are no integrated data on quality of programs being provided, on school readiness before children enroll in Kindergarten, or on the effectiveness of teachers. Access to data has been reserved to those producing it, preventing experiences from being shared. Data are key to enable correct investment of resources and to evaluate whether strategies being implemented should be expanded, altered, or discontinued.

For the first time in Nashville's history, providers of Pre-K have agreed to share data and to work toward the same measurable goals.

**Quality Expansion**

In the first two years of implementation, the Working Group recommends that Nashville focus its attention on activities that standardize and increase quality citywide, across programs, regardless of provider. Following that, the Working Group recommends moving to close the availability gap and beginning work to provide Pre-K to every 4-year-old in Nashville.

Based on the analysis of these barriers, 24 strategies were designed to ensure that in the next five years all child care providers in Nashville have reached the New Quality Standards. Most of these strategies are cumulative and will be implemented throughout the five years and beyond.

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7 For a complete description of the strategies, please refer to the Appendix to this document.
The Working Group identified the steps that will be followed to ensure the successful staging of this work.

In 2017, the priority will be to hire a project manager and develop detailed plans for each of the initiatives, including budget requests that will be submitted by the end of the calendar year for actions starting in the following fiscal year. It will be important to ensure that every existing dollar is leveraged for maximum transformation of the underlying system.

In addition, the Working Group has identified developing a coordinated enrollment system that enables families to apply for Pre-K seats across providers, beginning with MNPS and Head Start, simultaneously as a top priority to complete in the next 12 months. Currently, families in Davidson County who are interested in enrolling their children in Pre-K must interface individually with MNPS, Head Start, and any number of the more than 400 community providers, making it difficult for families to make the best decisions for their children and for programs to ensure all of their seats are filled in a timely fashion. Creating this system will help ensure that there are no empty seats, which are an intolerable waste of missed opportunities.

To ensure accountability for outcomes, a data strategy and evaluation structure will be put in place within these first months.

Looking forward, work will continue to align the underlying systems to support the implementation of the remaining strategies. The first full year of implementation, starting in the 2018/19 school year will focus on designing and conducting training for teachers and program leaders, in addition to building the supports for family engagement, as well as strategies to recruit and retain qualified staff.

In the second full year of implementation, quality improvement feedback loops to classrooms will be built. Attention will also be turned to the community networks of support that show evidence of producing the best outcomes for children.

While quality improvement strategies are being implemented, planning for expansion to meet the needs of all 4-year-olds in Nashville will begin. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, the number and location of needed seats will be identified in order to map out a strategy for adding capacity to meet the need, taking into account steps necessary to fully integrate quality components into that expansion. In subsequent years, capacity for expansion will be built by creating a pipeline of trained and able teachers and school leaders, using the recruitment and retention strategies outlined above. Then, work will begin to increase seats in neighborhoods with the greatest need, and citywide by expanding Pre-K in schools, Head Start programs, and high-quality community based child care settings. We anticipate a multi-year expansion to child care settings, with the goal of creating a universal quality system by the 2022-23 school year.
### Recommendations – Strategies Timeline

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<td>3. Family Education on Standards</td>
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<td>4. Assess and Track Family Engagement</td>
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<td>11. Peer Learning opportunities</td>
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<td>13. Rewrite/Adapt lessons plan</td>
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<td>16. Citywide list of effective strategies for centers</td>
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<td>17. Kindergarten Inventory</td>
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<td>18. Independent Evaluator</td>
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<td>19. Mobile Portal</td>
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<td>20. Tracking teacher evaluations</td>
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<td>21. Training and material development for portal</td>
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<td>22. Planning for Quality Expansion</td>
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<td>23. Building operational capacity for expansion</td>
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<td>24. Expansion</td>
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An Unprecedented Collaboration

**Governance Structure**

Moving forward, close coordination will be critical for success. This is a multi-year effort that will require the participation of private and public partners. Many organizations and people have an important role to play.

To ensure strong collaboration, open communication, and effective problem solving, an ongoing governance committee will be created to oversee implementation and tracking outcomes for success.

The governance committee will be led by the Mayor’s Office, with participation of State and private sector partners. Each local service setting will have a strong and equal leadership role. No one entity can make this happen alone. The committee will include representatives from all organizations who influence quality in the early learning setting.

The committee will be governed by a shared value of improving the resources, skills, and actions of teachers, support staff, community partners, and parents themselves in the early child development setting.
The committee will have a charter and meet regularly. Initial work will focus closely on implementation of the strategies outlined in this report, and outcome data will be collected and discussed as quickly as they are available. The committee’s ongoing responsibility will be to work with the data to uncover issues and provide feedback and support for continuing improvement. The independent evaluator will be crucial to supporting this ongoing research as well as assessment of the overall impact of efforts on improving child outcomes. As the work shifts toward expansion, the evaluator will be critical to identifying needs and mapping out a quality-focused expansion.

Funding Strategies and Opportunities for Public-Private Collaboration
The efforts of the Working Group have been accompanied by the support of the Children’s Champions, a group of 17 local business, community, and philanthropic leaders committed to identifying funding opportunities outside of government.

The Children’s Champions will continue their work to find the appropriate synergies for collaboration and financial support.

Whether helping to accelerate pilot strategies to test out new and measurable methodologies before expansion, or to complement investments initiated by the local government, private partners will be key to implementing the New Quality Standards for all 4-year-olds.

The Children’s Champions

Harry Allen, Chief Relationship Officer (Co-Chair) SFH Pursuit Company
Tara Scarlett, President and CEO (Co-Chair) Scarlett Family Foundation
Mario Avila, Director, Turner Family Center for Social Ventures at Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management
John Ayers, Executive Vice President Ayers Asset Management/Asset Capital
Ledja Cobb, Community Volunteer
Krystal Clark, Director, Vanderbilt University Office of Student Leadership
Landon Gibbs, Managing Partner Clayton Associates
Dan Hogan, Founder Medalogix
Shannon Hunt, President and CEO Nashville Public Education Foundation
Diane Janbakhsh, Founder and President, Hispanic Family Foundation
Kristen Laviolette, Nashville Predators Foundation
Tanaka Vercher, Metro Council – District 28
Whitney Weeks, Senior Vice President of Policy, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce
Brittany Wegusen, Partner/Director of Operations, DevDigital
Mark White, State Representative – District 83
Marcus Whitney, President and Co-Founder, Jumpstart Foundry
D.J. Wootson, Principal Owner, Titus Young Real Estate
Measuring Success

Core to this work will be accountability for results in implementing these recommendations and producing improved outcomes for our children.

Transition Outcomes and Indicators
Detailed implementation plans for each of the initiatives identified for Year 0 (2017/2018) and Year 1 (2018/2019) will be developed by December 1. The plans will include responsible project managers, detailed milestones, and clear output and outcome measures, and data collection strategy.

Evaluation Strategy for Transition Outcomes
The committee will be provided monthly updates by project managers on implementation progress against goals, including explanation for deviations from expectations and actions being taken to address those.

Child Outcomes
While tracking activities is important, it is imperative to look at the bottom line outcomes for children. The Working Group has identified these critical indicators as most the important among the many candidates for attention:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Positive Child Outcomes:</th>
<th>Clinical Outcomes:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Kindergarten Readiness</td>
<td>• Improved Attendance (Chronic Absenteeism)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Improved Student Interpersonal Interactions</td>
<td>• Reduced Disciplinary Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Improved Language/Vocabulary</td>
<td>• Fewer Referrals to Special Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased Literacy</td>
<td>• Reduced Racial and Ethnic Disparities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased Numeracy</td>
<td>• Increased Self-Regulation</td>
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These indicators are the capabilities that lay the foundation for children to maintain the curiosity and capacity to learn.

The top half of the list above includes the positive signs of that capacity. The bottom half of the list includes indicators of disruption that might impair that capacity. For success, both need to be carefully monitored and interventions need to be structured to accelerate improvements.
Tools for Child Assessment

It is important that the tools used in Nashville’s early childcare settings be utilized to effectively support professionals in achieving their classroom objectives. These tools should serve as the basis of child specific progress tracking to advise appropriate interventions for development. They should be the source of the aggregated data that allows us to understand the overall progress of children at the classroom, school, district, and citywide level.

The source of the highest level outcome — Kindergarten readiness — is the Tennessee State assessment system DRDP – Desired Results Developmental Profiles. It is a multidimensional assessment of children’s capabilities at the start of the Kindergarten school year. The DRDP is undergoing revisions itself to upgrade components along the very same lines discussed by the Working Group. As such, the tool will work in close alignment with the city’s overall goals and reflect the benefits of the collaboration of city and state partners when it is implemented in Fall 2017.

The additional positive child outcomes will be collected during the Pre-K year from the GOLD rating system in use in Head Start, MNPS, and some child care settings. It will be important to move toward a uniform standard in using this tool to assess children’s development during the year. This will be harder to attain in the child care setting, and there are other tools in use in some places. This will need to be a topic of ongoing effort.

The indicators of disruption that impair development of capabilities will be sourced from administrative data at the program or school level.

Program Evaluation

Beyond looking at the ultimate outcomes, it will be necessary to evaluate the innovations in classroom approaches that will be tested in Nashville. Carefully structuring theory of change and accompanying metrics for each innovation will be necessary to effectively monitor implementation and track impact. A strong commitment to evidence based practice in the classroom will be demonstrated by the rigor of the evaluation and by the willingness to adapt where results are not strong and eliminate where they fail.

Tools for Program Evaluation

The independent evaluator discussed above will provide the basis for collaboration in program evaluation. It will be important to collaborate with Nashville universities that can bring skilled researchers to the table with an interest in expanding knowledge on what works.

Using Data for Decision Making

The implementation data, child outcome data, and program evaluation data all need to be widely disseminated and discussed with teachers and school administrators, and need to be monitored by the governing committee and partners. This data sharing is the core of the approach outlined in this report. Each governing committee meeting should begin with a data update to remind all involved of the status of activities and outcomes, and apprise them of progress or the lack of progress.
Investing in the Future of Nashville

Ensuring that all 4-year-olds have access to high quality Pre-K in Nashville will not be easy. As the work outlined in this report occurs over the coming years, challenges will arise and adjustments will be needed to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. However, there is no better investment that can be made in Nashville.

With the shared commitment of goals and guidelines highlighted in this report, the engagement of public and private partners moving forward, and the leadership and support of Mayor Barry, Nashville is poised to become a model in Pre-K and early childhood education.

Investing in early childhood education will prepare the city’s youngest residents for a more diverse and dynamic city. This work will not only benefit many parents and young children. It will also benefit the entire community for generations to come.

Two children read a Dr. Seuss book together in a United Way of Metropolitan Nashville Read to Succeed classroom.
Appendix

28  24 Strategies for High-quality in Nashville
34  Defining Quality in Early Education –
    Tennessee Department of Education
45  Magic 8
47  References
24 Strategies for High-quality in Nashville

Legend:
- Family Outreach, Engagement, and Support
- Quality Tracking, Monitoring, and Improvement
- Staffing and Professional Development
- Quality Expansion

Year 0 — 2017 and 2018

1. Coordinated Enrollment System/Attendance
Families in Davidson County who are interested in enrolling their children in Pre-K face a fragmented and uncoordinated system. This means they must interface individually with MNPS, Head Start, and any number of the more than 400 community providers, each of which has its own enrollment system with disparate processes, from initial outreach and deadlines for application to notice of acceptance.

In 2017 and 2018, Nashville will work to create an online tool that integrates all channels for enrollment in all Pre-K services. The system will serve not only for enrollment, but will also provide basic information regarding compliance of service providers with New Quality Standards and a database of attendance.

The design of this integrated system is already under development and the governance committee will continue working on securing financial support to have it executed by the end of 2018.

2. Independent Evaluator
To create a neutral environment of access and trust for sharing data, the Mayor’s Office will create a shared platform for inputting and receiving data that will be governed by an agreed upon set of principles for system accountability. In 2017, the Mayor’s Office will hire an independent evaluator to support the work of building the platform and creating the rules for access to the data. The goal is to create a routine of evaluation and data sharing that will equip the Mayor’s Office and the members of the governance committee to review their strategies and services and improve them accordingly.

Year 1 — 2018 and 2019

3. Citywide Communications Campaign
“It takes a village to raise a child.” This very famous African proverb is key for explaining why a citywide communications campaign is necessary. At a young age, children develop their socio-emotional and motor skills by interacting with adults, with other children and with the environment. Positive interactions will lead to better-prepared children, adolescents, and future adults.
Nashville will develop a campaign to instruct parents about the importance of enrolling their children in Pre-K, how to do it, and about availability of programs throughout the city. Nashville will also look for practices that maximize enrollment and attendance at the school level. As part of this work, an effort will be made not only to identify empty seats, but also to map areas where there is higher demand for Pre-K. But this campaign will not only be for parents and caretakers, but also parents’ employers and other partner agencies in the city responsible for parks and public spaces, health, social services, transportation, among other organizations that have a daily impact on children’s lives or the lives of those who take care of them. We want all Nashvillians to be aware of the importance of taking good care of young children.

4. Family Education on Standards
Early childhood education is only effective when efforts are combined by Pre-K service providers, parents and other caretakers at home, and in the community. Children’s education must be consistent at school and at home. Therefore, Nashville will develop a continuing campaign to educate parents on the new standards. They will also receive instructions on developmental steps of their children and recommendations of simple activities that can be done at home to make the most of the exercises being executed in school.
Initial resources for parents may already be found at iTRAILS, a website created by Alignment Nashville, which provides videos and instructions for home exercises that complement activities done in MNPS classrooms. iTRAILS http://www.mnps.org/countdowntokindergarten/

5. Formalize the pipeline of teachers
Ensuring that Nashville has a pipeline of early childhood educators is crucial to enhancing the access all our children have to a high-quality education. One strategy to support the production of a steady supply of Pre-K teachers and teacher assistants will be to work closely with educator preparation programs to help promote the benefits of working in early childhood education to increase the number of their students entering the profession. It will also be important to work with them to align their training with the instructional quality standards identified by the Working Group, which are based in local and national research on what is necessary to accelerate cognitive and academic gains in young children. Lastly, working with educator preparation programs to create more opportunities for extended student teaching, practicum, and residency experiences for their students with MNPS, Head Start, and community providers will be crucial to preparing them for what best practices look like in classrooms.

In addition to educator preparation programs, it will be crucial to identify additional pathways into the teacher pipeline. One way to do this will be to provide scholarships for obtaining a Child Development Associate certification (CDA). The CDA is a basic requirement for working with young children in Tennessee and many other states. CDA certification provides specialized knowledge and hands-on experience that increases teacher competencies in their work with young children. Teaching staff with CDAs are linked to improved basic skills development.

MNPS currently provides CDA scholarships for assistant teachers. Under this program, assistant teachers in Nashville public school Pre-K programs can get their CDA tuition expenses covered and once credentialed, move to a Pre-K teacher position. Nashville will expand this strategy as one way to create a pipeline of qualified educators. Head Start Parent Advocates wishing to move up the career ladder into assistant teacher positions will be able to pursue a CDA certification tuition-free. Similarly, student teachers will be able to pursue no-
cost CDA certification to enable them to move into teacher positions. Scholarships to cover CDA course work, licensing fees and book costs will be offered to Parent Advocates and student teachers to prepare them to be Head Start or MNPS Pre-K teachers.

The need for qualified teachers will become even more urgent as the quality initiatives roll out and Pre-K expansion to move to universal availability is implemented in years 3-5 of this plan.

6. Leadership Professional Development

Leaders are key to the overall success of programs and the individual development of children. They are responsible for structuring the day, providing needed supports to teachers, fostering partnerships that fill academic and non-academic gaps, and leading the work to make meaning of data for continuous improvement among other crucial responsibilities. In order to enhance quality of Pre-K programs, it is critical that program leaders be well versed and supported in best practices of child development and early childhood education. Nashville will increase Leadership Professional Development opportunities for Pre-K principals and Directors, beginning with leaders in MNPS and Head Start settings in Year 1 and incorporating leaders from community settings beginning in Year 2. This development will include training, coaching, and learning opportunities for MNPS Principals and Head Start Directors and a core set of Central MNPS Pre-K Administrators and Head Start Pre-K Administrators for three half-day sessions focusing on supporting classroom management and instruction using the Magic 8 approach described in the Appendix of this report.

7. Peer Learning Opportunities

Many best practices exist in classrooms across the City, but few opportunities are available to share those practices with peers. This deprives Nashville of easily accessible and replicable improvement opportunities that can be fostered and expanded locally. Nashville will develop robust Peer Learning Opportunities for Pre-K teachers, regardless of setting and begin rolling it out in Year 1, recognizing the strength of the talent in the Nashville environment.

The work will begin by establishing a Teaching Fellows Program beginning with a designated teacher from each program. They will be paired with coaches for four half-day sessions. They will both receive practice based coaching during these periods, and will contribute personal knowledge of best practices as teachers who have recognized advanced skills. These teachers will return to their school environments with new strategies to spread to other classrooms in their schools, and with a network of peers to connect with and rely upon as they advance in their careers.

8. Kindergarten Inventory

Nashville will use the Desired Results Development Profile (DRDP) to assess proficiency for all children in Kindergarten. This Tennessee State tool will be administered early in the school year and will be used citywide to establish a baseline for tracking student growth and proficiency in Nashville. It is thought that child development and proficiency data from the Kindergarten Inventory could be captured, analyzed, and reported back to Pre-K providers who would then use the data to improve program quality and better prepare 4-year-olds for Kindergarten.
It will soon be possible to accomplish this same goal by using the GOLD assessment since MNPS, Head Start, and some community providers have already adopted the assessment tool.

9. Mobile Classroom Observation and Assessment Portals

Starting in 2018-2019, Dr. Dale Farran and her colleagues at Vanderbilt University will begin developing a platform to capture child and classroom assessments based on the Magic 8. The idea is to make assessments easier to complete and use, more accurate, and less time-consuming for instructional coaches and teachers. The early stages of development will start with a small cohort of coaches and teachers who will pilot the approach and develop the content that will be prototyped and built out as a training and coaching platform. This work will also inform the development of a training curriculum and materials that can be adopted and used in all Nashville Pre-K programs.

10. Planning for Expansion

The first step toward implementation will be to identify the number and location of needed seats and map out a strategy for adding capacity to meet that need, taking into account steps necessary to fully integrate the quality components of this strategy into that expansion.

Year 2 — 2019 and 2020

11. Assess and Track Family Engagement

There are currently some efforts to engage families such as parent-teacher meetings, however, a comprehensive evaluation of whether such engagement is of meaningful or yields positive results in children’s development is lacking across the system.

One task of the independent evaluator will be to identify the most successful strategies in engaging families and improving child outcomes in order to spread successful practices throughout the county.

12. Community Hubs

The challenges of creating a nurturing and supportive learning environment are exacerbated in high-need communities where children may face multiple stressors, such as poverty and violence, and come to school having already experienced many adverse childhood experiences (ACES). Addressing these conditions in the classroom is critical, but often beyond the ability of the teacher and school administrator alone.

Leveraging resources outside the classroom is critical to this task. Nashville will create intentional neighborhood partnerships to work in collaboration around the needs of children in the whole community. These networks will be provided data to inform their efforts at the local level. Where neighborhood institutions are not yet strong enough to support the community, citywide organizations will be engaged to work with them to support and grow local capacity.
13. Specialized Program and Transportation
In addition to community-wide needs, some children will struggle with individual challenges to age-appropriate development. Nashville will develop a rigorous system for screening and referral when such needs exist, and will identify gaps and strategies to fill those gaps when community levels of services are inadequate to meet need.

In addition, the lack of transportation to early child care services presents an insurmountable barrier for many families, particularly those who are low income. Nashville will develop a transportation strategy to ensure no child is deprived of high-quality early learning due to inability to reach services.

14. Integrated Referral System
Juggling the needs of children and the multiple social service providers in the city is a big challenge. Nashville will take the re-inventing of the wheel out of this calculation for teachers, administrators, community providers, and parents themselves by creating an online information and referral system that better tracks child and family needs, streamlines access to services, and helps coordinate hand-offs from school to other social services and resources.

15. Salary Parity
Nashville will achieve salary parity for Head Start and MNPS Pre-K teachers by Year 2. The salary differential contributes to turnover and difficulty recruiting and retaining teaching staff. There is a salary differential between MNPS and Head Start teachers of $3,720 with Head Start Pre-K teachers starting with a salary of $38,362 and MNPS Pre-K teachers starting at $42,082. Compensation parity is linked to a well-qualified and stable workforce.

16. Training on Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards (TN-ELDS)
Nashville will provide early learning teachers, Assistant Teachers, Principals, and Directors with training on the new TN-ELDS standards beginning in Year 2. We will also use the annual Pre-K Summit and Head Start trainings to reinforce this learning.

17. Rewrite / Adapt lessons plans
All Pre-K teachers, regardless of program setting, will have an opportunity for initial and ongoing training in the use of the TN-ELDS standards and other newly developed standards with a special focus on adapting and revising lesson plans beginning in Year 2. We will use the annual Pre-K summit and Head Start trainings to reinforce this learning.

18. Appropriate Daily Schedule Training
Nashville will provide Pre-K teachers with an opportunity for initial and annual training in the use of the TN-ELDS standards and other newly developed standards with a special focus on developing and using appropriate daily schedules beginning in Year 2. We will use the annual Pre-K Summit and Head Start trainings to reinforce this learning for district, Head Start, and community partners.
19. **Tracking teacher evaluations**
To ensure training efforts are being effective, the governance committee will keep track of teacher’s evaluations. As part of the state’s new quality legislation, Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers in MNPS will now be assessed using a portfolio model that highlights their students’ development throughout the year. Existing tools being used for these portfolios are not easy to implement and may result in significant variation based on subjective approaches by teachers. The governance committee will ensure that teachers have the support to correctly use the assessment tools, and that data collected is valid and useful for Pre-K evaluation citywide.

**Year 3-5 — 2020 to 2023**

20. **Professional Development on Instructional Quality Standards** *(Staffing and Professional Development)*
All Pre-K teachers, coaches, Principals, and Directors will have Professional Development opportunities with a focus on instructional quality, child learning, and developmental outcomes beginning in Year 2.

21. **Citywide list for effective strategies for centers** *(Staffing and Professional Development)*
Nashville will develop and disseminate a citywide list of effective teaching, classroom management, and child behavior and learning outcome strategies for centers in Year 3.

22. **Training and development of materials for platform**
Once the Mobile Classroom and Assessment Portals are ready, Vanderbilt University will develop materials and training programs for instructing teachers and coaches.

23. **Building Operational Capacity for Expansion**
Specifically, Nashville will work to ensure a pipeline of trained and able teachers and school leaders to support the expanded capacity, using the recruitment and retention strategies outlined above.

24. **Expansion**
A critical component of success will be to find sufficient and appropriate space for additional classrooms. Taking a broad view and valuing the diversity of providers, Nashville will increase seats in neighborhoods with the greatest need, and citywide by expanding Pre-K seats in schools, Head Start programs, and high-quality community based child care settings.
Defining quality in early education

The department of education’s office of early learning recently developed a definition of pre-k quality that includes three categories: structural quality, program quality and instructional quality. What we want to see in every pre-k program is a strong, healthy intersection of all three categories. **We believe that if programs meet the standards included in the three categories, then child outcomes will improve, and more of our children will thrive and succeed in school.**

The structural and program quality standards presented in this document refer specifically to pre-k programs, but have been written with applicability to 0-5 programs. The instructional quality standards presented in this document refer specifically to pre-k programs, but have been written with applicability to programs and elementary schools that serve children pre-k to 3rd grade. They constitute a research-based instructional blueprint that can be expanded and extended to all of early learning (0-8).

The standards included in the three quality categories are based on a synthesis of national quality benchmark indicators provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), the Bank Street College of Education’s definition of the developmental-interaction approach to early education; multiple longitudinal research studies in early childhood education, including the Abecedarian Early Intervention Project, the Perry Preschool Project, and the Chicago Longitudinal Study; quality indicators included in the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS); results and data analysis from Peabody Research Institute’s (PRI’s) study of Tennessee’s voluntary pre-k programs; results and data analysis from PRI’s study of Preschool Development Grant classrooms and child outcomes; and results and analysis from PRI’s study correlating teaching practices with child outcomes in Metro Nashville Public School’s Early Learning Centers. It is important to note that the quality definitions presented in this document were created based on a synthesis of the above-mentioned resources, and other than the structural quality definition, they do not attempt to reflect any one specific rating system or one evaluation study’s findings. This definition is a proprietary creation by the office of early learning, at the Tennessee department of education.
Structural quality

Structural quality refers to ten structural elements that have long defined quality in the field of early education, particularly at the policy level. For the purposes of our definition, we are including the ten quality indicators for preschool programs defined by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER), and used widely as a benchmark for program certifications and federal grants. It is important to note that we do not have a current, strong evidence base that these structural elements of quality lead directly to improved child outcomes, but because they are the agreed-upon benchmarks in early education regulations, they are a starting point.

Structural quality requirements include the following:

1. **Comprehensive early learning standards** – The Tennessee state board of education approved the adoption of the revised Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards (TN-ELDS) for children ages 0-48 months, including specific standards for 4-year-olds in 2012. It is the department’s expectation that all teachers and programs use the standards to guide practice and measure student learning and growth. The TN-ELDS will be revised to align with new K-12 standards in 2017-18.
2. **Teacher degree** – Pre-k teachers are required to have a BA degree from an accredited university.
3. **Teacher specialization** – Pre-k teachers must be licensed to teach pre-k, with an early childhood education endorsement.
4. **Assistant teacher degree** – Tennessee requires assistant teachers to have a high school degree, or equivalent, and recommends a CDA or equivalent. Options currently under consideration for the future include micro-credentialing and expanding opportunities for endorsements.
5. **Teacher training** – Pre-k teachers have an in-service requirement of at least 15 hours per year in training directly related to early childhood education.
6. **Class size** – Pre-k class sizes are capped at a maximum of 20 students, with waiver exceptions for mixed-age groupings.
7. **Ratios** – Pre-k classrooms must have a teacher-student ration of 1:10.
8. **Services** – Pre-k programs should offer screening & services for children including vision, hearing, health & at least 1 support service.
9. **Meals** – Pre-k programs should offer at least one healthy, balanced meal to all children per day, and more depending on the length of the school day.
10. **Monitoring** – Site visits must be conducted at least 2x per year by monitoring staff for certification and/or licensing.

Structural quality is ensured through the adoption of state law, early childhood policy, and rules and regulations that outline in detail specific health and safety standards, and requirements for pre-k programs, exceeding what is included in this list. The office of early learning’s school-based support service team has the primary responsibility to monitor compliance of school-administered programs with these benchmarks, and others specific to Tennessee rules and regulations, during annual announced and unannounced visits.

| Lisa Wiltshire, Executive Director, Office of Early Learning
Program quality

Program quality refers to ten standards that are required for sustainable success. Research has shown that these program quality standards are necessary to achieve long-term benefits for children and sustainability for programs. They ensure funds are allocated to maximize benefits for children; that the program meets quality baseline standards for the education of young children; and that the people most critical to children’s success in school – teachers and families – are well supported to do the important work they need to do for children to succeed.

Program quality standards include the following:

1. **Strategic allocation of funds to maximize benefits** – Funding for pre-k programs should be targeted to serve children who will benefit most from the program, as well as ensuring equity and quality for all children, irrespective of socioeconomic status, learning abilities, home language and culture, and community and family contexts. If state programs do not provide universal access, it is imperative to target funds to the most economically disadvantaged children, in addition to children with special needs, English learners, and children facing other significant at risk factors. If pre-k programs meet community needs with a multiple delivery model, it is important to layer (also called blending and braiding) funds to ensure the highest quality programs are sustained and transitions are minimized for families. As well, layering multiple sources of funds can help to ensure diversity in classrooms and programs, which we know from research maximizes benefits for all children.

2. **Focus on access & attendance** – Children who benefit most from high quality pre-k programs come from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds; therefore, it is essential that programs actively recruit income eligible families through coordinated outreach efforts, and prioritize daily attendance. High quality programs require adherence to attendance policies for all families and offer support to families struggling to meet attendance requirements. Children need to attend school regularly and consistently to maximize benefits from the program.

3. **The use of data for continuous improvement** – Quality programs use multiple methods of data to improve student outcomes. Data refers to any quantitative or qualitative measure used to assess program quality and/or learning. Data has the greatest impact if it has a defined purpose (for example, to track the number of families attending workshops or to assess children’s writing development), if it is used to set goals (in the same examples, to set a goal for increasing parent attendance at workshops or to increase the number of children mastering TN-ELDS writing standards), and if it is used to improve outcomes (again in the same examples, to better coordinate outreach to recruit families to workshops, or to guide instructional practices, such as incorporating writing experiences in multiple learning centers, giving children more opportunities to practice writing skills). Programs should minimize multiple assessments that have the potential to disrupt teaching and learning, and should instead focus on specific program priority assessments.
4. **Quality curriculum aligned to early learning standards** – A quality curriculum is a tool that, when used well, results in increased student engagement and learning. *Any curriculum adopted by a program should be evidence-based, aligned to the TN-ELDS, and inclusive of the instructional quality standards outlined in this document. Any curriculum adopted by a district or program must include curriculum materials and resources, as well as upfront and ongoing teacher training and support.* The use of any curriculum should be balanced to allow for teachers to adapt the curriculum to the needs of students, and augment the curriculum with teacher-generated activities and experiences based on children’s interests and teachers’ knowledge of child development, content and pedagogy.

5. **Developmentally-appropriate daily schedule** - Programs and schools must be intentional with pre-k daily schedules, adhering to rules and regulations, and also to best practices in early education. This is especially important for elementary schools with pre-k programs because traditional school buildings, schedules and environments are not designed to support the healthy growth and development of young children. *Pre-k schedules should provide ample time for gross motor movement, cooperative peer interactions, experiential, inquiry-based learning, unstructured play, and a balance of teacher and child directed activities.* Transitions should be minimized so teachers can focus on instruction. This is best accomplished when pre-k classrooms have bathrooms and child-sized sinks in the classroom, or as close as possible to the classroom; when classrooms are located adjacent to playgrounds and areas for gross motor play; when children eat meals in the classroom, rather than traveling to a cafeteria; and when enrichments activities (often called “specials”) are provided in classrooms or in locations adjacent to the pre-k classroom. Children should not spend significant time traveling from place to place (some traveling may be beneficial if it is necessary and intentional – such as with field trips), and being required to sit or stand still and be silent for extended periods of time (such as in hallways, extended whole group, waiting for new activities, in cafeteria lines, etc.) Programs should encourage children’s use of language and inquiry, and designing schedules and environments that promote best practices.

6. **Responsive teacher-student interactions** – The more nurturing and responsive teachers are with young children, the better the children’s academic gains, short and long term. *Teachers should focus on listening to children, being responsive to their needs, and modeling and teaching how to care for others and the learning environment. Teacher tone, affect, and language have a significant impact on children’s learning.* Teachers should practice using an approving tone, affirming language, and should take every opportunity possible to encourage positive behavior from children. Four-year-old children are especially susceptible to the influence of adults due to their developmental stage, and because of this, a positive relationship can create a ripple effect in positive outcomes for children. Teachers should spend significant time talking with children, answering their questions, and asking new questions to stretch children’s thinking. Children’s innate intellectual curiosity can be encouraged or diminished during the early years of school, which is why teacher-student interactions are critical to academic success.
7. **Leadership committed to early education** – Program directors, school leaders, and district leaders must be committed to the success of early childhood programs. Leaders need to be knowledgeable about child development, pre-k curriculum, and the developmental-interaction approach to learning so that they can effectively support pre-k teachers to improve their practice. Leaders and districts should be held accountable for the success of pre-k programs through a rigorous program approval process, as well as continuous monitoring and evaluation for results.

8. **Culture of continuous improvement** – Teachers, leaders and staff should be supported through multiple means of professional development to consistently improve their practice and service to young children and families. Teachers should be supported through personalized, job-embedded professional learning and coaching. School leaders, program leaders, and coaches should visit pre-k classrooms frequently, providing feedback to teachers regarding their strengths and areas for improvement. A culture of learning is an essential indicator of program quality and is best accomplished through frequent classroom observations and feedback, frequent school/program walk-throughs to assess program quality, and time devoted to teacher collaboration.

9. **Focus on family engagement** – The most effective pre-k programs provide multiple ways for families to engage in the life of the school and provide resources to parents to support children’s learning outside of the school day. Programs should be welcoming and encouraging to families, inviting participation through multiple means including teacher conferences, classroom activities, advisory councils, volunteer work, and resource donation. Programs should provide resources, tools and workshops for parents to support children’s learning, as well as consistently inform parents of their child’s progress at school. Parent-teacher conferences should occur at least two times a year and should be focused on goal setting, sharing student work, and sharing information related to children’s progress, strengths and challenges. Families should be provided opportunities for input and feedback on school culture and practices through surveys, interviews and other methods of formal and informal communication. Families in need of health, social or other services should be connected to agencies for assistance or offered co-located services on site (see community partnerships).

10. **Focus on community partnerships** – Schools and programs serving at risk children should not carry the full responsibility for meeting the needs of children and families, though we know family support services are crucial for student success. Programs, schools and districts should establish partnerships with community organizations to provide support services for children and families. These include health screenings, health care, mental health counseling, support services, legal services, financial counseling, and job training/placement for parents. Partnerships are essential and necessary for a dual generation approach to early childhood, which we know from research results in long-term benefits for children. As well, community organizations, both public and private, can provide valuable resources for programs including funding, materials, furniture, equipment, teacher training, and volunteer support.
Instructional quality

Structural quality indicators are required and program quality indicators are critical, but they alone do not result in improved cognitive outcomes for young children. That is why we have included a definition of instructional quality. Tennessee has the benefit of a collaborative partnership with Vanderbilt University’s Peabody Research Institute (PRI), which has conducted multiple evaluations of district and state programs, and partnered with the state to examine the intersection of classroom practices with child outcomes. It is through this partnership, research examining practices and outcomes in early education, and program data that we have an evidence base informing us of what constitutes high quality teaching and learning in early childhood programs. This evidence base revealed specific standards of instructional practice that should be the focus for improvement efforts to ensure accelerated cognitive and academic gains for children.

The standards for best practices in early learning instruction include the following:

1. **Environment, curriculum and pedagogy guided by the developmental-interaction approach to learning** – The developmental-interaction approach to learning ensures that education is designed and delivered based on knowledge of child development and the importance of interactive learning. Learning environments and activities must be designed to scaffold children’s learning based on their developmental stage and abilities in order to support children’s intellectual curiosities and motivation to inquire, as well as to maximize long-term academic gains. Children forced to comprehend abstract symbols and associated constructs (such as letters/words and numbers) before they have had an opportunity to develop an understanding of underlying concepts through concrete experiences will not retain those quick gains, and will not be able to apply new knowledge to multiple contexts and increasingly complex applications. There is a sequence to learning in the early years (ages 0-8), paralleled by brain development, which must be well understood by teachers and administrators. **Young children must actively engage and interact with materials, ideas and people to develop the cognitive frameworks that lead to sustained academic benefits.** Children should engage in multiple types of learning experiences, from a young age, and be provided opportunities to plan for, reflect on, inquire about, and recreate those experiences. Teachers should design environments and guide children through increasingly complex forms of thinking, discovering and creating with engaging educational materials. Teachers should focus on scaffolding children through increasingly complex forms of interactions with peers, including the multiple stages
of play, with the goal of supporting learning objectives across developmental domains including language, self-regulation, and social studies.

2. **Engaging, child-centered learning environments** – The learning environment plays a critical role in early childhood instruction, and is often thought of as the primary teacher in the room. School, program and classroom environments must reflect an understanding for how children think, work, and learn at critical developmental stages. **Learning environments should enable and invite experiential learning and interactive experiences, as well as promote the skills and competencies that support academic success.** If we expect children to focus and engage in school, environments should enable those skills. When classrooms are filled with wall-to-wall bulletin boards, posters, and charts, with supplies spilling off shelves, the environment does not support focus and encourage productive engagement. Paint colors, room design, furniture arrangement, storage, labeling, lighting, and displays are just some of the considerations that should go into the creation of a quality classroom environment. Every aspect of an early learning environment should be intentional and rooted in knowledge of child development and early learning standards. A variety of materials should be selected for learning centers (or interest areas) in classrooms, and rotated frequently, with a particular focus on autodidactic and open-ended materials. When materials are developmentally appropriate and related to children’s interests and natural curiosities, they invite higher levels of engagement, which is necessary for cognitive development and academic learning.
3. **Maximum instructional time with focused, targeted activities and lessons** – Instructional time should be maximized by **reducing time spent in transitions**, and using transition time to embed learning. Whole group activities should typically be no longer than 20 minutes in length, and implemented with a clear, targeted objective for learning. Effective whole group activities include interactive read-alouds, standards-aligned lessons with teachers modeling how to work with classroom materials, morning meeting to prepare for the days’ work, and afternoon circle time to reflect on the day. Teachers should be careful not to pack whole group time with frequently-changing mixed content, and should instead focus on specific learning objectives. **Time spent in student-directed learning centers (also called work stations, work cycle and interest areas) should be maximized**, with small group instruction embedded and targeted to specific learning objectives, aligned to content standards. Children ages 0-8 should be provided with **sufficient time for gross motor play** because of the critical link between motor movement and brain development.

4. **Effective use of learning centers** – It is one thing to design a classroom with learning centers, and it is another to accelerate learning while children are engaged in centers. What we know is that learning centers are critical in the early years, but the presence of learning centers in classrooms does not equate to quality instruction. **During learning centers teachers must be actively observing children, assessing and recording children’s skills and abilities (aligned to objectives and standards) and engaging with children to scaffold their learning.** Scaffolding takes many forms in a pre-k classroom and is primarily accomplished through multiple turn-taking conversations between the teacher and student(s). Teachers should ask children questions about their work and ideas, intentionally extending children’s thinking through open-ended questions. Teachers should be intentionally introducing new vocabulary into conversations, related to children’s ideas and curriculum content. Teachers should facilitate interactions between children, prompting them to use increasingly complex language and share ideas with each other. Teachers should encourage the exploration of materials and model use of materials, which can include books and other printed materials, writing activities, math games, and science tools. Learning centers provide an optimal opportunity for teachers to observe, record, assess and teach young children in myriad ways.

5. **Intentional focus on work skills, social skills and personal competencies** – How children approach learning and acquire social skills and competencies is directly related to cognitive development and school readiness. **There are essential social and personal competencies that result in greater academic gains for young children.** These include skills referred to in early education literature as “self-regulation,” “executive function,” and “social-emotional development.” Teachers must facilitate the development of skills and competencies connected to learning such as **the ability to persevere, resolve conflicts, focus, engage, and understand and regulate the emotions of self and others.** It is through these skills that children develop the habits of mind that facilitate increasingly accelerated learning and long-term academic gains.
6. **Intentional focus on oral language and literacy development** - *Conversation is the number one instructional strategy in the years between 0-6 when children are acquiring language at a rapid pace*. Deficits in receptive and expressive language abilities result in lower rates of reading proficiency and comprehension in later elementary grades, which is why *oral language must be a priority in the early years, particularly for disadvantaged students who may not have had as much exposure to multiple modes of language and vocabulary*. Teachers should spend significant time each day listening to children, reading stories with children, and asking questions that prompt children’s critical and inferential thinking. Oral language development is something that can be integrated into multiple parts of the instructional day. Centers such as dramatic play and block building offer ample opportunities for children to converse with peers, negotiate play, and resolve conflicts, all contributing to receptive and expressive language development. Early reading and writing skills should be integrated throughout the day as well by offering children multiple opportunities to explore printed materials and write with purpose. Two of the most effective instructional methods to help children gain oral language abilities, as well as critical reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, are dictation and interactive read-alouds.

Young children are full of stories and are typically eager to share them. **Dictation** offers an opportunity for teachers to write (verbatim) what children say, representing their stories with symbols (letters and words) that can be read back to children and embellished with children’s drawings. Dictation and documentation of meaningful experiences, like field trips, can be assembled into classroom books, motivating children to practice reading foundational and alphabet skills.

**Interactive read-alouds** offer children an opportunity to hear diverse types of prose, poetry, fiction and non-fiction, in addition to offering rich content for teacher-student conversations. The literature selected for read-alouds should be just at or beyond children’s zone of proximal development and should include content relevant and meaningful to children’s lives, interests and cultures to maximize instructional impact.

7. **Intentional focus on vocabulary acquisition** – Vocabulary is directly connected to literacy and reading, and is the cornerstone of language acquisition and reading comprehension. **Oral language development plays an important role in vocabulary acquisition, but teachers must also intentionally teach vocabulary, starting with the youngest students**. Effective methods for introducing new vocabulary and facilitating vocabulary acquisition include teacher-student conversations about curriculum content and student work, read-alouds, experiential activities that introduce new materials and invite experimentation, and curricular content focused on science concepts, social studies, creative arts, music, and gardening. Young children learn by imitating and repeating, which is why it is important for teachers to introduce new words into meaningful activities, and provide opportunities for children to hear and use the words in multiple contexts.
8. **Intentional focus on mathematics** – We have learned from multiple research studies that an intentional focus on math in the early years yields long-term academic benefits, including increased reading proficiency in the elementary grades. *Teachers should incorporate math activities throughout the day using the developmental-interaction approach.* For example, during meals and snack times, teachers can assign children jobs such as setting the table, which embeds practice with counting, number sense and one-to-one correspondence. Any activity that involves sorting, counting, stacking, organizing or categorizing requires mathematical thinking. Math games, puzzles, and manipulatives are effective ways to engage young children in mathematical thinking and learning about patterns and relationships. Small group activities such as cooking with recipes, measuring the characteristics of plants and other natural materials, and graphing preferences and observations on a chart are effective methods to teach and assess children’s mathematical comprehension and understanding, aligned to multiple early learning standards. Learning centers with sophisticated mathematical learning embedded include block building with an ample supply of wooden unit blocks, Montessori beads, rods and unit blocks, and table activities with rotated manipulatives such as geo-boards, cubes, and board games.

9. **Facilitated sequential activities** – Sequential activities occur most frequently during learning centers, and are best facilitated through teacher interactions, peer interactions, and work with autodidactic materials. *Sequential activities refer to learning experiences that progress through series of steps or levels of complexity.* Children must reflect on the work to be done and plan the actions or steps to accomplish the task. Children must also master each step in a sequential activity as they progress to the next. Examples of sequential activities include block building, dramatic play, writing a message, and putting together a puzzle. Sequential activities follow a logical order, or sequence, and foster problem-solving skills, self-regulation, and the early foundations of metacognition.
10. **Interdisciplinary content, based on units of study** – Between the ages of 0 and 8, children are actively creating knowledge-based constructs to make sense of the world, and are acquiring relevant skills and competencies for each content area: language, literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, creative arts, music and inter and intra-personal dynamics. *Children need foundational knowledge across content areas and developmental domains before they move into stages of learning based on abstract symbols and constructs, in order for academic gains to be long-term and applicable to increasingly complex contexts.*

To accomplish this, *preschool curriculum should be based on units of study that extend several weeks (or longer) and provide opportunities for children to explore and learn about content at deeper levels of cognitive complexity.* For example, instead of focusing on pumpkins one week and apples the next, a unit of study could be focused on, “How do plants grow and why are they important?” Within that study, occurring over several weeks, the teacher can introduce different types of food and plants, and children can explore properties of plants, touch and examine plants, plant seeds in gardens, observe the life cycle of plants, journal their discoveries, and create connections between their lives and the unit of study (“We grew a pumpkin and I’ve eaten pumpkin pie!”). This allows for increased cognitive complexity that fosters the development of skills, competencies and knowledge across multiple standards.

*As well, instruction and activities should integrate multiple disciplines, or areas of content, to ensure children make connections between experiences and understand the relevance of content-related skills.* Focused lessons and activities should be targeted to specific content standards and objectives but daily schedules should not be segmented into content-specific blocks that extend for long periods of time. Teachers should instead create stimulating and engaging activities, using autodidactic and open-ended materials, as well as experiences, that weave in multiple content areas throughout the day. Math, science, social studies and language are a part of everything people do. They are embedded in life. Teachers have an essential task to help young children see and understand these content areas in ways that will enable those children to attain, retain and create new knowledge that will remain with them through their elementary years.
Magic 8

The list of eight classroom practices found to be most closely associated with children’s academic and self-regulation outcomes based on data from MNPS Early Learning Center classrooms:

1. Reducing time spent in transition

   Transition is when the break in activity lasts longer than 1 minute and involves at least 75% of the children, for example, times that children spend moving to a new location (restroom breaks).

   If a large part of the day is spent in transitions, there’s less time for other important classroom activities.

   Intentional planning of these transitions between the education assistant and the teacher allows the creation of strategies to accommodate the classroom schedule and the needs of children.

2. Improving level of instruction

   Analyses from the Metro Nashville Public Schools-Peabody Research Institute (MNPS-PRI) Partnership project have demonstrated significant associations between higher levels of instruction throughout the day and children’s gains in knowledge of letters and sight words, early writing, math, and self-regulation. These associations are even stronger for children entering with lower skills, meaning that higher levels of instruction are particularly important for more vulnerable children.

   Strategies for improving level of instruction include asking inferential questions, which have more than one possible answer, and using cognitive demands, such as making children make predictions and reflect.

3. Creating a positive climate

   Positive classrooms are marked by responsive teachers who manage behavior and attention challenges, as well as social and emotional needs for individual children. Key aspects of responsive teaching include using specific reinforcing language, using behavior approving language more frequently than disapproving, and maintaining a pleasant affect and tone in teacher-child interactions.

4. Increasing teacher listening to children

   Data analyses from the Metro Nashville Public Schools-Peabody Research Institute (MNPS-PRI) Partnership project have demonstrated significant associations between how often teachers were observed listening to children and children’s gains in math knowledge, and knowledge of letters and sight words. Further, children who were observed talking more frequently had stronger gains in both self-regulation and vocabulary skills – and this was particularly evident for children who entered Pre-K scoring lower than their peers in these areas.

   Teachers can facilitate child talk by asking open-ended questions, and encouraging associative and cooperative interactions among students. Of course, employing these strategies in classrooms requires a degree of
5. **Planning sequential activities**

Sequential activities are those that afford children the opportunity to follow a logical order or sequence, or to have a working plan. When setting up the classroom and choosing materials, teachers should consider ways to create opportunities to promote higher levels of cognition throughout the day, and especially during center time. These opportunities are best promoted by physical materials and shared scenarios or themes. Sequential activities typically follow a logical order or sequence and involve steps in a working plan.

Common activities include writing a message, drawing a recognizable picture, and putting together a puzzle. When children participate in sequential activities, they have the chance to engage in higher-level thinking—reflecting on their chosen activity and planning what to do next. This also promotes greater self-regulation and problem-solving skills.

6. **Promoting associative and cooperative interactions**

Associative and Cooperative interactions require children to communicate and work with peers, to monitor their own behavior and to adapt to the needs and expectations of others to accomplish a certain task. Thus, associative and cooperative play can have positive effects on children's language development, self-regulation development, and their level of involvement in classroom activities.

7. **Fostering high levels of involvement**

Data analyses from the first two years of the MNPS-PRI Partnership have demonstrated significant associations between higher levels of involvement and children's gains in narrative text comprehension, vocabulary, and math.

Some learning settings afford greater opportunities for children to be involved in the activities than others. Intentional planning of classroom activities allows teachers to use a variety of learning settings, and minimize the settings that tend to be less engaging for children.

8. **Providing math opportunities**

Studies indicate that early math knowledge is a strong predictor of late elementary school achievement, including reading achievement. There is also evidence suggesting that early math skills and executive functioning skills (like attention, working memory, and inhibitory control) may be closely linked as well.

Meaningful math activities in Pre-K are sequential in nature, encourage associative and cooperative learning among children, and can involve demanding instructions, such as discussing math concepts by asking highly inferential questions and waiting for their responses.

For more detailed information about the Magic 8 and recommendations on how to adopt them, please refer to: [https://my.vanderbilt.edu/mnpspartnership/teaching-resources/providing-math-opportunities/](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/mnpspartnership/teaching-resources/providing-math-opportunities/)
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Children pose for a picture in one of Nashville’s Head Start centers.
High-quality Start for All: A Roadmap for strengthening Pre-K and early learning opportunities for all Nashvillians

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