

Illinois K-2 Workgroup Indicator Discussion Guide Well-Rounded Curriculum

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Indicator Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes that all students should receive a “well-rounded education,” many times throughout the act.ⁱ By doing so, lawmakers signaled the importance of a wide range of academic subjects, and responded to criticism that the federal law’s previous emphasis on reading and math assessments narrowed the curricular focus for students.ⁱⁱ There is evidence that elementary schools have increased emphasis on reading and math to the detriment of other subjects, a troubling trend that may have decreased students’ access to important knowledge- and skill-building opportunities.ⁱⁱⁱ Young children learn and grow best when they have access to a well-rounded and developmentally appropriate curriculum, integrated across subject areas and developmental domains.^{iv,v} As a result, curricula in the early grades should be judged not only on academic outcomes, but on a wide range of outcomes including social-emotional development, behavior, and physical health.^{vi} For school and district leaders, choosing and evaluating early learning curricula is complicated and the state could play an important role in helping them make better choices for students.^{vii}

Illinois gives local school districts control over most curricular decisions, while setting expectations for what children need to learn in each grade via state standards. The Illinois Learning Standards address reading, arts, foreign language, math, physical education and health, science, and social studies starting from kindergarten, as well as English language learners and preschool early learning and development.^{viii} The Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards for children up to kindergarten entry emphasize that “early learning and development are multidimensional” and “highly interrelated.” The Common Core State Standards, which Illinois adopted, also emphasize that strong content knowledge across a wide range of subjects is a key component of strong reading. Despite what the standards encourage, research shows that too many schools do not have strong, well-rounded, evidence-based curricula in early grades, or in any grades, and that curriculum improvement can be a strong mechanism for improving student achievement.^{ix}

Measurement Options and ESSA Alignment

While educators, researchers, and policymakers generally agree that a well-rounded curriculum is critical to learning and development for young children, defining and measuring well-roundedness is difficult and subjective. The research base on specific dimensions of curricular quality is still developing.^x Generally, assessment results are used as the primary outcome measure for curriculum quality, but the Illinois K-2 working group has already discussed and ruled out assessments. Additionally, well-roundedness is not the only important factor in curriculum quality—there are also rigor, cultural and linguistic competency, inclusion, alignment across grades and with standards, evidence, and developmental appropriateness, just to name a few.

There are three key options for measuring well-roundedness in K-2 grades:

1. Curriculum quality surveys of teachers and/or principals,
2. Curriculum audits conducted by trained, independent observers,
3. Counting some selected subjects or staff members as key markers of well-roundedness, such as art or physical education teachers.

Curriculum Quality Surveys of Teacher and/or Principals: A survey or self-completed rubric could ask teachers and/or principals how time is allocated across domains of learning, whether classes cover the full range of Illinois Learning Standards, and/or to rate their own degree of well-roundedness. The results could be aggregated and compared to state or national benchmarks.

- **Valid and Reliable:** Likely Not.
 - Illinois would likely have to design its own survey of these measures, aligned to the breadth of the Illinois Learning Standards and that survey will have not initially been validated for its relationship to student outcomes. Additionally, a self-reported survey with stakes for school ratings could be unreliable.
- **Meaningfully Differentiated:** Likely Not.
 - It is very likely that most or all principals and teachers would rate themselves highly on well-roundedness and teaching to standards.
- **Comparable:** Likely Not.
 - Survey results could be benchmarked and compared, but the reliability of that comparison is unknown.
- **Reportable Annually and by Subgroup:** Maybe.
 - These metrics can be reported annually; disaggregation by subgroup and grade level would be difficult, but theoretically possible (e.g. percentage of black students with access to a well-rounded curriculum).
- **Additional Considerations:** Developing, validating, piloting, and administering a survey would have significant costs. Also, because good teaching in early grades is integrated across and between subjects, measuring time spent on certain topics or developmental domains is difficult. Requiring schools to report on each aspect of a well-rounded curriculum could also encourage schools and teachers to think of these domains as unconnected, which is the exact opposite of best practice.

Curriculum Audits: Trained auditors could visit schools, interview teachers and leaders, observe classrooms, and rate against a rubric or expectations for curriculum quality and well-roundedness.

- **Valid and Reliable:** Maybe.
 - If designed well and implemented with well-trained, independent observers, this could meet validity and reliability standards.
- **Meaningfully Differentiated:** Maybe.
 - More data are needed, and the observation tool is unknown, but curriculum and quality differences in Illinois could be sufficiently differentiated.

- **Comparable:** Maybe.
 - Comparability would have to be tested, and would depend on the training and tools used by auditors.
- **Reportable Annually and by Subgroup:** Maybe.
 - Audit results can be reported annually; disaggregation by subgroup and grade level would be difficult, but theoretically possible (e.g. the percentage of black students with access to a well-rounded curriculum).
- **Additional Considerations:** This would be a costly and time-consuming approach if implemented in every school on an annual basis rigorously to ensure validity, reliability, differentiation, and comparability.

Curriculum Quality Markers: Schools could be rated based on more easily available data that could indicate a well-rounded curriculum, such as staffing an art teacher, a physical education teacher, a librarian, and a counselor.

- **Valid and Reliable:** Maybe.
 - These are not indicators of quality or well-roundedness in and of themselves, as they do not show the quality of instruction or supports K-2 students receive from educators or how much. Lack of these staff members could also indicate small school size, alternative staffing structures, or be correlated with district wealth, rather than curriculum well-roundedness.
- **Meaningfully Differentiated:** Likely not.
 - It is likely that most, if not all, Illinois elementary schools include these staff members, and those that do not are more likely to be high-poverty districts or districts with very small schools.
- **Comparable:** Yes.
- **Reportable Annually and by Subgroup:** No.
 - Audit results can be reported annually; disaggregation by subgroup and grade level would not be possible at the school level assuming an arts or physical education teacher serves all students at the school for an equal amount of time.
- **Additional Considerations:** Measures like these could be correlated with a well-rounded educational approach, but they are not causal (i.e. a school could hire a dedicated art teacher, but not use her time well, or a school could effectively encourage and support all general teachers to integrate arts into their classrooms without a separate teacher).

Examples from Other States

Several states have incorporated some measures of well-roundedness or curriculum broadness into their ESSA state plans. However, most measures are not appropriate for K-2, and focus on high school course enrollment in subjects like art and CTE, or assessments in subjects such as social studies, science, and health. Kentucky's current draft plan is one exception—they proposed "measures of opportunity and access" including "a rich curriculum." Measures are not yet final and the U.S. Department of Education has not approved them, but Kentucky's current draft asks schools to certify access to the breadth of the state standards, and access to comprehensive supports including a counselor, health services, a librarian, and instructors for arts, physical education, and health with a specialized certification.^{xi} Kentucky also asks schools to complete a comprehensive K-3 program review and submit it annually to the state.^{xii}

Other states interested in curriculum quality and well-roundedness have taken an incentives-based approach, rather than incorporating measures in quality ratings. For example:^{xiii}

- Louisiana convenes teachers and experts to rate curricula, then encourages schools to use a “Tier 1” model that meets their quality and evidence standards;
- New York created the open access and voluntary EngageNY curriculum to help educators teach Common Core State Standards well;
- Massachusetts created curriculum frameworks as the foundation for local decision-making.

For in-person audits, quality inspections have long been used in England as a school quality and improvement approach, and some have recommended the US follow a similar course of action, especially for low performing schools.^{xiv}

Pros/Cons of Using This Indicator in K-2 Accountability Ratings

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus that young children should have access to high-quality learning experiences via an integrated, well-rounded curriculum across domains of learning and development • Evidence that current practice in K-2 grades may not reflect developmental and academic best practices • Explicitly mentioned in ESSA as important and necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not well-defined in research • Available measures in K-2 grades are either unreliable (asking schools to self-report), unrealistic (annual audits at every school), or limited in scope (e.g. presence of an arts teacher) and may not meet ESSA validity and differentiation standards • Could potentially be better addressed via incentives such as guidance, resources, and technical assistance • Well-roundedness is not the only measure of curriculum quality. A curriculum can be well-rounded but low quality. • Depending on metrics, may have unintended consequences for small or underfunded schools less likely to have specialized instructors

ⁱ Scott D. Jones and Emily Workman, “ESSA’s Well-Rounded Education,” Education Commission of the States Special Report, June 2016.

ⁱⁱ Stephen Sawchuk, “Under ESSA, an End to the Narrowing of the Curriculum?” Education Week, June 23, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Beth Morton and Ben Dalton, “Changes in Instructional Hours in Four Subjects by Public School Teachers of Grades 1 through 4,” Institute for Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics States in Brief, May 2007, and Center of Education Policy, “NCLB Policy Brief 3: Narrowing the Curriculum,” George Washington University, 2005.

^{iv} Craig H. Hart, Diane C. Burts, and Rosalind Charlesworth (Eds.), *Integrated Curriculum and Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Birth to Age Eight*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1997).

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- v National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS), “Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation,” NAEYC/NAESP Joint Position Statement, 2003. Statement
- vi Gregory Camilli, Sadako Vargas, Sharon Ryan, and W. Steven Barnett, “Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Early Education Interventions on Cognitive and Social Development,” *Teachers College Record*, v112, number 3, 2010.
- vii Ellen Frede and Debra Ackerman, “Policy Brief: Preschool Curriculum Decision Making: Dimensions to Consider.” *NIEER*, 2007.
- viii Illinois State Board of Education “Illinois Learning Standards.”
- ix Chiefs for Change, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Leveraging Curriculum to Improve Student Learning,” Chiefs for Change, 2017.
- x Chiefs for Change, 2017
- xi Kentucky Department of Education, “Draft Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds,” August 16, 2017
- xii Kentucky Department of Education, “Kentucky K-3 Program Assurances”, 2017
- xiii Chiefs for Change, 2017
- xiv Chad Aldeman, “Grading Schools: How States Should Define School Quality Under the Every Student Succeeds Act,” Bellwether Education Partners, 2016.