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SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM
GOVERNOR

June 1, 2020

MEMORANDUM

TO: Public School Superintendents, Charter School Administrators, and REC Directors

FROM: Ryan Stewart, Ed.L.D. Secretary of Education

RE: New Mexico's *FOCUS Essential Elements of Quality* for Public School Preschool Programs

In 2012, New Mexico's Public Education Department (PED), along with the Children, Youth and Families Department, and the Department of Health, were proud recipients of the federal *Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant*. This \$37.5-million-dollar grant has supported the expansion of the state's coordinated systems of early learning and development for children birth through kindergarten entry. These systems are designed to ensure many more children have equitable access to high quality early learning programs, and that they enter schools with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they need to be successful.

Although the federal support for the Race to the Top initiative has ended, the PED remains committed to the objectives outlined in the grant including the full implementation of *FOCUS* Essential Elements of Quality, New Mexico's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in all public preschool programs statewide, including New Mexico PreK, Title I, and special education (IDEA, Part B) preschool classrooms. Participation in *FOCUS* is a pre-requisite for PreK awards. All PreK Program Standards are imbedded in the *FOCUS* criteria.

FOCUS includes common requirements for these programs and the criteria by which preschool programs will be measured, along with a structured process for program improvement. *FOCUS* was designed with stakeholders from school districts across New Mexico to ensure that many more children have access to dramatically improved early learning programs so that they enter kindergarten ready for success. Through the use of the QRIS, public school preschool programs will increase their ability to focus on children's learning, improve their practice, and—as a result of that improvement in practice—improve each child's growth, development, and potential with kindergarten readiness in mind.

FOCUS: Essential Elements of Quality can be accessed at <https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FOCUS-Revised-June-2019-Criteria-web.pdf/>, and addresses the following:

- The Full Participation of Each Child:
 - Family Engagement
 - Inclusive Practices for Children with Diverse Abilities
 - Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Instruction, including the Support of Multi-lingual Learners
 - Promoting Social-emotional Development
- Intentional Teaching, Lesson Planning, and Assessment using the *New Mexico Early Learning Guidelines*, the PED Preschool Lesson Plan, and the Early Childhood Observation Tool (ECOT).
- Required Hours for Classroom Instruction
- Adult-child Ratios and Group Size
- Health, Safety, Nutrition
- Developmental Screening
- Staff Qualifications and Training Requirements
- Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Participation in New Mexico's *FOCUS* provides early childhood program personnel with the criteria, tools, resources, and support necessary to improve program quality to ensure that children are ready for success in kindergarten and beyond. All PED preschool programs will receive technical assistance and training to support achievement of a *FOCUS* Five Star rating. Preschool programs will be monitored for fidelity to the *FOCUS* Criteria beginning in their second year of participation in a public school preschool program. Many classrooms and programs have been verified as achieving the *FOCUS* 5-Star rating. The PED recognizes 5-Star programs with certificates for staff and banners for the school. Designation as a 5-Star program will positively impact future funding opportunities.

For more information on the PED *FOCUS*, please contact Brenda Kofahl, Director of the Early Childhood Bureau, at 505-827-6627 or Deborah Dominguez-Clark, Director of Special Education at 505-827-1457.

GW/bk