The Early Learning Environment

It is the expectation of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) that the Preschool for All (PFA) program have a safe and healthy environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical spaces. An organized, properly equipped, and well-maintained program environment facilitates the learning, comfort, health, and safety of the children and adults who use the program. ISBE expects each PFA classroom to serve 20 children (excluding PFA/ Early Childhood Special Education and Head Start children), unless Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) guidelines restrict the number of children allowed in the PFA classroom due to square footage limitations. The staff-child ratio for each classroom must not exceed one adult to 10 children, and no more than 20 children can be served in a single classroom per session. Provisions are made for children with disabilities to participate in the program. No more than 30 percent of the children in a PFA classroom may have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), not including speech-only IEPs.

Physical Environment

- Ample indoor space to accommodate furniture and materials needed to run the classroom and allow enough space for free movement of children and adults
- Good lighting, ventilation, and temperature control
- The facility is designed so that staff can supervise all children by sight and sound
- Appropriate furnishings, such as sinks, child-size chairs and tables, learning equipment, and cots or sleeping pads
- A variety of materials and equipment appropriate for children’s ages and stages of development is available and kept clean, safe, and in good repair
- Materials are systematically arranged, labeled with word and picture, and easily accessible to children
- Materials reflect human diversity and the positive aspects of children's homes and community cultures
- Multicultural materials are integrated naturally into the classroom and daily routine
- Most of the displays in the room represent children’s work, relate to current activities, and are displayed at children’s eye level
- First-aid kits, fire extinguishers, fire alarms, and other safety equipment are installed and available
- A variety of interest centers including, but not limited to: art, music/movement, blocks, sand/water, and nature/science
- A cozy area with soft furnishings and quiet activities and a planned space for privacy

For more information, please refer to *All About the ECERS-R* and *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Program Standards.*

Interest Centers

The foundation of quality teaching and learning is engaging interactions that take place within an early learning environment with developmentally appropriate materials organized into interest centers. High-quality preschool classrooms include a well-organized and managed classroom with materials that stimulate children’s thinking skills and provide for various levels of difficulty.

Considerations for interest centers include:

- Available at least a substantial portion of the day (one-third of attendance time)
- Able to accommodate several children at one time
- Designed using low shelves and furniture, carpeted areas, and tile areas
- Labeled with names and pictures that are easily understood by children; the Illinois Early Learning and Developmental Standards (IELDS) that best describe what each center is addressing
- Compatible areas are near each other and non-compatible areas are kept apart (for example, Block Center is near Dramatic Play Center, whereas the Art Center is near a sink or bathroom, and the Reading Center or Cozy Center is placed away from Block Center)
The following chart includes centers and examples of materials, as well as examples of the IELDS that apply to each. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of materials or standards. Requirements for materials may be found in *All About the ECERS-R*.

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<th>Interest Centers</th>
<th>Examples of Materials</th>
<th>Examples of IELDS</th>
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| Fine motor/ manipulatives| Small building materials such as Lincoln Logs; bristle blocks and magnetic blocks, beads and strings in various sizes, colors, and shapes; lacing cards with strings; pegs and pegboards; snap blocks, nuts and bolts; puzzles; teddy bear counters | 1.A.ECa Follow simple one-, two- and three-step directions.  
8. A.ECa Sort, order, compare, and describe objects according to characteristics or attributes.  
8.A.ECb Recognize, duplicate, extend, and create simple patterns in various formats.  
8.B.ECa With adult assistance, represent a simple repeating pattern by verbally describing it or by modeling it with objects or actions. |
| Art                      | Crayons, markers, pens, pencils, chalk, finger paint, tempera paint, water-color paint, clay, pipe cleaners, collage materials (cotton balls, pom-poms, feathers, buttons), safe scissors, stapler, hole punch | 25.A.ECd Visual Arts: Investigate and participate in activities using visual arts materials.  
25.B.ECa Describe or respond to their creative work or the creative work of others.  
26.B.ECa Use creative arts as an avenue for self-expression. |
| Music & Movement         | Musical instruments, cassettes/CDs, music players, microphones                                             | 25.A.ECa Movement and Dance: Build awareness of, explore, and participate in dance and creative movement activities.  
25.A.ECb Drama: Begin to appreciate and participate in dramatic activities.  
25.A.ECc Music: Begin to appreciate and participate in music activities. |
| Blocks                   | Unit blocks, foam blocks, large hollow blocks, homemade blocks                                              | 7.A.ECc Use vocabulary that describes and compares length, height, weight, capacity, and size.  
9.A.ECb Sort collections of two- and three-dimensional shapes by type (e.g., triangles, rectangles, circles, cubes, spheres, pyramids).  
17.A.ECb Express beginning geographic thinking.  
25.B.ECa Describe and respond to their creative work or the creative work of others. |
| Sand & Water             | Measuring cups, unbreakable containers, funnels, shovels, scoops, trucks, plastic animals. Toys specific to water might include pumps, sponges, things that sink or float, turkey basters, and spray bottles  
Note: Examples of appropriate use of sand and water tables can be found in *All About the ECERS-R* | 7.B.ECa Practice estimating in everyday play and everyday measurement problems.  
7.C.ECa With teacher assistance, explore use of measuring tools that use standard units to measure objects and quantities that are meaningful to the child.  
12.E.ECa Observe and describe characteristics of earth, water, and air. |
| Dramatic Play (Role Play/ House Area) | Clothing (dresses, skirts, pants, jackets, ties, scarves, aprons, footwear, hats, accessories for both men and women), uniforms for various work roles, many types of hats for men and women Supplies/furniture (child-sized kitchen) | 1.A.ECd Identify emotions from facial expressions and body language.  
1.B.ECa Use language for a variety of purposes.  
15.A.ECa Describe some common jobs and what is needed to perform those jobs.  
15.A.ECb Discuss why people work. |
| Nature & Science | Magnets, magnifying glasses, plastic translucent color paddles; collections of natural objects such as leaves, seashells, rocks, bird nests, pine cones; living things such as butterfly hatching kit, worm farm or ant farm, class plant, class pet |
| Library/Book/Reading (Cozy Area) | Books organized by theme/topic; different types of books such as fiction, nonfiction, predictable, poems; books on CD/tape, props for retelling stories; book characters; soft chairs/beanbag chairs |
| Math & Number | Toys and games that require children to figure out “more and less,” cubes for stacking, height chart, foot size measurer, nesting cups, chart and graph activities, pattern or matching cards, magnetic shapes, geoboards, dice |

<p>| 15.D.ECa | Begin to understand the use of trade or money to obtain goods and services. |
| 18.B.ECa | Understand that each of us belongs to a family and recognize that families vary. |
| 11.A.ECc | Plan and carry out simple investigations. |
| 11.A.ECd | Collect, describe, compare, and record information from observations and investigations. |
| 12.A.ECa | Observe, investigate, describe, and categorize living things. |
| 12.B.ECa | Describe and compare basic needs of living things. |
| 12.B.ECb | Show respect for living things. |
| 12.C.ECa | Identify, describe, and compare the physical properties of objects. |
| 13.A.ECa | Begin to understand basic safety practices one must follow when exploring and engaging in science and engineering investigations. |
| 13.B.ECa | Use nonstandard and standard scientific tools for investigation. |
| 2.A.ECa | Engage in book-sharing experiences with purpose and understanding. |
| 2.A.ECb | Look at books independently, pretending to read. |
| 2.B.ECb | With teacher assistance, retell familiar stories with three or more key events. |
| 2.C.ECa | Interact with a variety of types of texts (e.g., storybooks, poems, rhymes, songs). |
| 2.C.ECb | Identify the front and back covers of books and display the correct orientation of books and page-turning skills. |
| 4.A.ECb | Begin to follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page. |
| 6.A.ECa | Count with understanding and recognize “how many” in small sets up to 5. |
| 6.A.ECb | Use subitizing (the rapid and accurate judgment of how many items there are without counting) to identify the number of objects in sets of 4 or less. |
| 6.A.ECd | Connect numbers to quantities they represent using physical models and informal representations. |
| 6.A.ECe | Differentiate numerals from letters and recognize some single digit written numerals. |
| 6.B.ECa | Recognize that numbers (or sets of objects) can be combined or separated to make another number. |
| 6.D.ECa | Compare two collections to see if they are equal or determine which is more, using a procedure of the child’s choice. |
| 6.D.ECb | Describe comparisons with appropriate vocabulary, such as “more,” “less,” “greater than,” “fewer,” “equal to,” or “same as.” |
| 9.A.ECa | Recognize and name common two- and three-dimensional shapes and describe some of their attributes (e.g., number of sides, straight or curved lines). |</p>
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<th>Writing</th>
<th>Pencils, pens, crayons, markers, chalk and boards, write and wipe boards and markers, children’s names on note cards, envelopes, mailbox, different types of paper (construction, tag board, colored, and white), alphabet and number stamps, alphabet and number stencils, a poster/display showing numbers and the alphabet (upper and lowercase)</th>
<th>9.A.ECd Combine two-dimensional shapes to create new shapes.</th>
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| Computer/ Technology (not a required center) | Desktop computer, child-size mouse or touchscreen, tablet, educational apps, developmentally appropriate computer games/activities | 4.A.ECa Recognize the differences between print and pictures.  
4.A.ECc Recognize the one-to-one relationship between spoken and written words.  
4.A.ECd Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.  
4.A.ECe Recognize that letters are grouped to form words.  
4.A.ECf Differentiate letters from numerals.  
4.B.ECb Recognize and name some upper/lowercase letters of the alphabet, especially those in own name.  
4.B.ECd With teacher assistance, begin to form some letters of the alphabet, especially those in own name.  
5.A.ECa Experiment with writing tools and materials.  
5.A.ECb Use scribbles, letter-like forms, or letters/words to represent written language.  
5.A.ECc With teacher assistance, write own first name using appropriate upper/lowercase letters. |

Sample Classroom Floor Plan

![Sample Classroom Floor Plan](image-url)
**Gross Motor Environment**

The gross motor environment should be created with intentionality and include an indoor alternative to accommodate these activities during inclement weather days. Gross motor skills can be enhanced through the use of stationary equipment as well as through simple materials such as balls, tricycles, bean bags, low balance beams, hula hoops, and parachutes. This environment can also be used to provide learning opportunities by creating spaces that promote learning experiences to support the IELDS. Materials and items such as a sand/water table, a blanket with a basket of books and props, a dollhouse with the play family, musical instruments, etc. may be made available to take outside or to the indoor gross motor area.

Considerations for Gross Motor Environment:

- Fences or natural barriers that prevent access to streets and other hazards
- Adequate space with different surfaces in order for children to participate in different types of active play
- Enough stationary and portable equipment and materials to support seven to nine large motor skills such as:
  - Running
  - Jumping
  - Hopping
  - Pushing and pulling
  - Swinging
  - Catching, tossing, throwing
  - Kicking
  - Jump rope and hula hoop
  - Pulling up by arms
  - Balancing
  - Pedaling and steering
  - Sliding
  - Climbing
- Areas that protect children from the elements of nature, such as shade trees or other types of covering, and windbreaks in the winter
- A storage space for equipment.
- Staff actively assist in the development of gross motor skills

**Additional Resources**

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
  - NAEYC Program Standards
- The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning