



POLICY BRIEF:

The Importance of Aligning Pre-K through 3rd Grade

A high-quality early education provides the foundation for children's success in school. Research shows that participation in a high-quality pre-k program can have a tremendous impact on a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Yet one education experience is not a silver bullet solution to the challenges that we face in public education. Child development is a continuous process that must be fed and nurtured along the way. Gains made in high-quality pre-k programs must be sustained by quality education throughout the K–3 years. Likewise, skills developed in first grade, must be reinforced and built upon in second grade.

The first eight years of life are instrumental in setting children on a path to success or conversely, in allowing achievement gaps to take root, forcing students, teachers and administrators to play a continuous game of catch up. Superintendents, principals, teachers, and state and local school board leaders agree that a comprehensive preschool-through-third-grade (P-3) approach is critical to ensuring that children develop a solid foundation in literacy, math, social-emotional skills, as well as strong engagement in learning.

The need to focus attention on children's early learning years is now more important than ever. Recent data shows that a third of our nation's 4th grade students are performing at *below basic* levels in reading. For low-income children it is much worse—49% are below basic.ⁱ This means students are unable to locate information, understand the meaning of words, and make simple inferences from a text. Without these essential skills, students are six times more likely to drop out of school.ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, our education system is structured to pay the least attention to children's progress during these critical years. Under current federal law, state and district accountability benchmarks focus primarily on student performance in grades three through eight. Intervention strategies and turn around models for schools "in need of improvement" target these grades as well.ⁱⁱⁱ The recent adoption by many states of Common Core Standards, which span from Kindergarten to grade 12, has begun to focus greater attention on a broader continuum of learning. Nonetheless, state K-12 systems may not connect with state early childhood education systems. As a result, we often miss a huge opportunity to influence student learning during the years when children have the greatest growth potential.

In order to make significant progress on our long-term educational challenges, we must use policy and school improvement tools to drive greater emphasis on what happens to children during their early years – using age and developmentally appropriate benchmarks. Providing a continuous and well-aligned set of early learning experiences from preschool through third grade (P-3) is imperative for improving student achievement and setting children on a sustainable path to success. This brief discusses the importance of this approach and highlights some of the best practices currently taking place in states and school districts across the country.

P-3 and Reading Achievement

Mastering the basic skill of reading is the gateway to further academic success. Students need to use reading skills to understand other subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, and to think critically about what they are learning. Students without a basic level of competency by third grade are more likely to struggle academically and have behavioral and social problems in subsequent grades, as well as higher rates of retention in grade.^{iv} According to the National Research Council, “academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone’s reading skill at the end of third grade. A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school.”^v Therefore, it is imperative that we think more systemically about the strategies and practices used across the early grades and their impact on child outcomes, particularly reading achievement by the end of third grade. This requires a fundamental shift in perspective to placing greater value on children’s earliest learning experiences—including those that occur before they ever enter formal schooling.

Decades of research show the impact of high quality pre-k on student achievement. Data from the national Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort as well as multiple state studies have documented significant cognitive gains for children who attend pre-k compared to their peers who do not.^{vi} The benefits of pre-k are particularly powerful among children from low-income and minority families who on average start Kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind their peers in pre-reading and language skills.^{vii}

While pre-k has documented tremendous results, it is not a “cure all” for getting all children to read proficiently by third grade. This takes a much more continuous and sustained effort over time. Studies show that children participating in educational programs that support their transition to school and continuity throughout the early years of school perform better than their peers who do not.^{viii} In fact, new research shows significantly better 3rd grade reading skills for children who attended both pre-k and half-day Kindergarten than those who one attended only one year of full-day Kindergarten.^{ix}

A comprehensive preschool-through-third-grade (P-3) approach is needed to ensure that children develop a solid foundation in literacy, math, social-emotional skills, as well as *strong* engagement in learning. When schools link pre-k education with the elementary grades, the gains that children make in high-quality pre-k are more likely to persist.^x One district that has adopted an integrated P-3 model in recent years—Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland—has seen significant growth in student achievement, a narrowing of the achievement gap, and benefits for English Language Learners.^{xi}

Since integrating high-quality early learning as part of a comprehensive district reform effort, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland has seen 90% of kindergartners enter first grade with key early literacy skills, and nearly 88 percent of third graders read proficiently. In addition, achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups have dropped by double digits. MCPS accomplished these impressive results by setting ambitious objectives for student achievement, providing more children with a critical early learning foundation and linking the skills gained in pre-k with the later grades. As former Superintendent Jerry Weast said, “Once we fixed the system, the kids were suddenly okay. Same kids, just a different system. And we started at the beginning of the education value-chain – early learning.”

Lessons in Early Learning: Building an Integrated Pre-K-12 System in Montgomery County Public Schools

A P-3 Framework

At its most basic level, a P-3 framework ensures that learning builds from one year to the next. Successful P-3 initiatives take a comprehensive approach designed to provide sustained high-quality learning experiences for children across the P-3 spectrum. The alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, family engagement and professional development efforts across pre-k-grade 3 classrooms creates a seamless and effective pathway of learning for all children. These efforts draw on child development and early education research as well as best practices from early childhood and elementary school practitioners to ensure that schools are ready for children, as much as students are ready for schools.

P-3 initiatives begin with the alignment of comprehensive Early Learning Standards with state K-3 content standards to promote children's healthy development, social & emotional skills, motivation and engagement in learning as well as progress in learning literacy, language, mathematics and science. Standards should be logically connected and build upon one another so as to guide the work of pre-k, kindergarten and primary grade educators in developing and selecting effective curricula, teaching strategies and assessment systems. A P-3 approach also means that "vertical teams" of teachers work together in studying assessment data to plan continuous improvement efforts. These teams engage in joint professional development to build a shared understanding of early childhood development and an intentional sequence of learning to facilitate more effective transitions between grades and programs.

In Nooksack Valley, Washington, pre-k instructors and elementary school teachers worked together on redefining the district's instructional core that guides classroom content and student-teacher interactions. As Superintendent Mark Johnson explains: "We went away from 'parallel play' to work on the instructional core together. There was a natural entry point to work on the language about questions like what do we mean by good teaching? How do we assess? What curriculum do we use?" The professional development partnership between the school district and early learning providers has evolved to a point where the two are nearly indistinguishable.

Pre-K – 3rd: How Superintendents Lead Change

Collaboration and Leadership

An effective P-3 program brings together early childhood educators' knowledge of child development, including social and emotional development, with elementary educators' knowledge about where students need to be by grade 3. It requires all partners—early childhood program managers, parents, administrators, and teachers—to work together to create a climate of high expectations and shared accountability for students. Successful collaborations are not developed overnight, however. They require strong state, district, and school leadership, a sustained commitment, and strategic actions to develop an integrated pathway of learning.

Collaboration can be challenging given the various programs, funding streams, regulations and attitudes that impact service delivery for children ages 3-8. This is especially apparent during the preschool and Kindergarten years when students often transition from a community-based setting to a school environment. For too long early education teachers and administrators and K-12 teachers and administrators have operated in largely separate worlds with their own processes, culture, and values. To foster collaboration, some districts have implemented joint professional development opportunities for community-based early educators and teachers to

come together to share experiences and align expectations. Other efforts may involve more formal program integration such as the sharing of program staff, space, or other resources between a public school and a Head Start provider.

Elementary school principals play a critical role in bringing together these often disconnected worlds. Principals can serve as a catalyst for P-3 alignment by facilitating and implementing program coordination between early childhood and early elementary grades, such as targeting services for students coming from high poverty and English language learner populations before they enter into the school building, and engaging in parental outreach that spans from activities with families in the early childhood care and education system to Title I programs. In communities where pre-kindergarten programs are not part of the school system, this type of collaboration is critical to help transition low-income children into school-based settings and to encourage a culture of shared accountability.

Developing a shared vision among all partners in the school community is essential to support a continuum of high quality early learning through the third grade.

Unfortunately, even teachers within the same school may not have always received the support or encouragement to collaborate with their fellow teachers on matters such as curriculum and instructional practice. To address this issue, some districts have instituted “vertical teams” of teachers that work together to develop a comprehensive understanding of early childhood development, review assessment data, and focus on continuous instructional improvement. Other schools have integrated shared planning time for educators within the school schedule. These opportunities allow educators to broaden their knowledge of student learning across age groups and to establish more developmentally appropriate strategies that provide students with a consistent set of experiences throughout their early years.

State and Local Best Practices

Many local school districts have begun to implement P-3 strategies as they learn more about the benefits of an integrated early learning approach. As this report shows, there are great examples happening all around the country—from Montgomery County, MD, to Nooksack Valley, WA, to Santa Maria, CA.

States have also begun to adopt a more aligned P-3 approach. For example:

- In Washington, the State Department of Early Learning Starting and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction host a two-day conference for teachers, early childhood educators, principals, superintendents, parents, and policymakers, which aims to create a shared understanding of the research and key elements of PreK-3 models.

As part of district-wide articulation program in Santa Maria Bonita, California, pre-k teachers meet with kindergarten teachers to exchange student information and align instructional practices to improve transitions for children to elementary school. Prior to implementing the initiative, there had been little interaction between preschool and kindergarten teachers—even for early childhood programs located at or near elementary schools. “These teachers may have shared a playground, but they didn’t know each other,” says Karin Dominguez, a school readiness coordinator who facilitates many of the district’s workshops. “It’s about building trust. You have to build relationships with people. By incorporating multiple views, all parties can buy into the goals.”

Pre-K Primer, 2010. No. 3

- New Jersey has created a P-3 teaching credential, which recognizes the unique aspects of early childhood teaching—including child development, early childhood curriculum, developmentally appropriate practice, and philosophical and theoretical foundations of early childhood education. The certification is required of all lead teachers in preschool settings in Abbott school districts, and is a valid certificate for teaching in preschool through third grade in non-Abbott districts.^{xii}
- In Virginia, the State Board of Education collaborated with the Governor’s office and many key agencies to focus on improving the state’s early education workforce. The effort has aligned P-3 teacher competencies with foundational documents and devised a Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool for early educators, which is being piloted in several preschools.
- Georgia has developed and implemented the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), a performance-based assessment intended to provide teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed for students entering Kindergarten and first grade. This strategy has promoted the internalization of standards, curriculum, and instruction by P-3 teachers as well as joint professional development opportunities to advance vertical teaming and transition children from pre-k into Kindergarten and first grade.

There are many more examples of effective P-3 strategies and systems building that are occurring throughout the country. It is the job of policymakers and practitioners to learn from these best practices to improve the quality of early learning in their states and communities.

The Federal Role

The federal government also has a role to play in supporting state and local alignment efforts, particularly in encouraging P-3 policies and reducing barriers to collaboration. Given what is known about the importance of early education and the challenges that we face as a nation, it is imperative that the federal government become a true partner with states and local communities to ensure that students receive a high quality start to learning.

Recent efforts such as The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, and the creation of an Office of Early Learning within the U.S. Department of Education, are steps in the right direction. Nevertheless, much more can be done to strengthen the early learning partnership between the federal government, states, and local districts. Specifically, the Pre-K Coalition recommends that federal policymakers take the following key steps:

- Make P-3 alignment a policy and funding priority across all U.S. Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education programs for young children, aged 3-8.
- Allow schools to adopt a comprehensive P-3 restructuring strategy as part of a possible model for school improvement.
- Encourage the development of P-3 credentialing for educators that recognizes the important learning needs of children from age 3-8.
- Support, as an allowable use of federal funds, joint planning and professional development between early childhood providers and P-3 teachers and elementary school principals.

- Provide information and technical assistance to states, local districts and schools to develop effective evaluative tools for ages 3-8, and data systems to track the progress of children across P-3 years.
- Reduce the burden of parallel sets of regulations and reporting requirements across federal funding streams, by using common definitions of terms and coordinating the timing of data collection from state and local agencies.
- Allow blending of federal and state early childhood education and care funding to help strengthen early learning system building efforts.

Federal leadership in these areas would help encourage states and school districts to more aggressively pursue P-3 strategies.

Conclusion

Ensuring that children receive a high-quality early education involves the creation of a comprehensive and sustained system of support for children from pre-k through third grade. Superintendents, principals, teachers, state and local school board leaders agree that a comprehensive P-3 approach is essential for addressing many of the long-term educational challenges that we face. By focusing more attention on these early years, we can improve student outcomes, in particular third grade reading achievement, which is an important benchmark for future academic success. Such an effort requires that we adopt a culture shared responsibility among all partners (local, state, and federal) in the learning community to encourage the connection to families, ensure appropriate early learning environments, and support instruction that aligns to a continuum of learning from pre-K to grade 3. The payoff for this hard work will be success for children, reduced costs of remediation and retention, and enhanced prospects for all students to graduate from high school.

Endnotes:

ⁱ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009 Reading Assessment.

ⁱⁱ Hernandez, et al., *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, April 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 required states set achievement benchmarks and test students in grades 3-8.

^{iv} Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, May 2010.

^v National Research Council. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Edited by C. Snow, S. Burns, and P. Griffin, Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

^{vi} W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, and Kwanghee Jung, "The Effects of State Prekindergarten Program on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States" (Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005).

^{vii} National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

^{viii} Foundation for Child Development, *The Case for Investing in Pre-K to 3rd Education*, p.

^{ix} Hull, Jim, *Starting Out Right: Pre-K and Kindergarten: at a Glance*, Center for Public Education, November 2011.

^x Foundation for Child Development, *The Case for Investing in Pre-K to 3rd Education*, p. 6

^{xi} Foundation for Child Development, *How Superintendents Lead Change*, p. 2.

^{xii} Abbott districts are school districts in New Jersey that are provided remedies to ensure that their students receive public education in accordance with New Jersey's state constitution. They were created in 1985 as a result of the first ruling of *Abbott v. Burke*, a case filed by the Education Law Center. The ruling asserted that public primary and secondary education in poor communities throughout the state was unconstitutionally substandard. There are currently thirty-one Abbott districts in New Jersey.