

Early Care and Education

► Aligning the early years and the early grades

“Too often government officials design programs for children as if they lived their lives in silos, as if each stage of a child’s life were independent of the other, unconnected to what came before or what lies ahead.”¹

This issue of The Progress of Education Reform addresses the policies and practices associated with sustaining school readiness and boosting achievement for young children throughout the early elementary years. All three studies support the notion that an aligned and coordinated set of policies and practices linking early learning with the early elementary grades will maximize a return on investments and help ensure later academic success.

Policymakers and educators continue to grapple with issues of persistent achievement gaps in student performance at grade 3 and beyond. As they do, they are looking for ways to create a more “seamless” system of education that “assures young people’s education is connected from one stage to the next — reducing the chances that students will be lost along the way or require remedial programs to acquire skills or knowledge they could have learned right from the start.”²

State policymakers are beginning now to look for ways to fill the gap in education policy and practice that links school readiness efforts and school improvement efforts. Policymakers face three key questions:

1. Where does an expanded education continuum begin — at birth, at age 3 or at some other critical point in a child’s development?
2. How do we effectively create linkages between and across early education and early elementary school programs?
3. What characteristics of an elementary school have the capacity to sustain and increase children’s learning in the early grades?

Each of the following works reviewed addresses one or more of these questions. While there is no “right” answer, each paper provides readers with options and opportunities that may help focus their own unique education policy and practice priorities.

What’s Inside

- The disconnect between systems of early care and education and K-12
- Two solutions for aligning early years and early grades
- Key components of a “ready school”



2020
FEBRUARY
Vol. 9, No. 1

THE PROGRESS OF
Education Reform



Education Commission
of the States

Pre-Kindergarten to 3rd Grade (PK-3) School-Based Resources and 3rd-Grade Outcomes

(Brett V. Brown, Child Trends and Kimber Bogard, Foundation for Child Development, August 2007, <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/PDF/PKtoThree.pdf>)

The potential for preschool influences to fade over time ... highlights the necessity to also provide high-quality kindergarten and primary school programs.³

Beginning with the research-based premise that a coordinated system of teaching and learning pre-K through 3rd grade (PK-3) holds greatest promise for academic success, this briefing paper examines two important conditions impacting student achievement and schools' efforts to close the achievement gap at grade 3:

1. Elements of school culture that impact children's academic and behavioral performance at grade 3.
2. Degree to which children influenced by risk factors have access to high-quality early elementary schools.

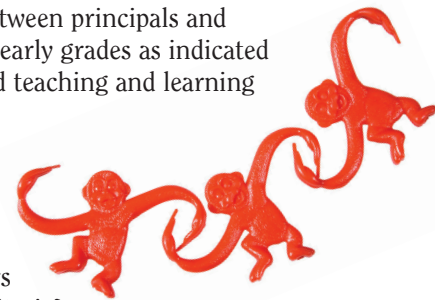
Findings are based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study — Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) — a nationally representative longitudinal study of more than 20,000 children who began kindergarten in 1998-1999.

According to the findings, the most educationally at-risk children were the least likely to have access to high resource elementary schools.

Assumptions: Research indicates that a strong “PK-3 continuum” is based on: high standards and expectations, shared vision and leadership between principals and teachers, and continuity in learning experiences across the early grades as indicated by low teacher turnover, collaborative planning, and aligned teaching and learning across grade levels.

Research Questions:

- ▶ What is the impact of these variables on children's academic and behavioral achievement at 3rd grade?
- ▶ By 3rd grade, do children with associated risk factors benefit from attending programs that meet these criteria?
- ▶ Do children influenced by risk factors experience lower-quality schooling environments?



Findings: The Good News

The majority of children — both those with risk factors and those without — go to grade schools that report high levels of administrative leadership and a strong emphasis on alignment where academic standards are not perceived as low, regular curriculum development takes place, teacher absenteeism and turnover are not perceived as a problem, and with high levels of self-efficacy among the teachers.

Findings: The Bad News

1. Low-income kindergarten children were twice as likely as children living over 200% of the poverty line to attend schools where academic standards were reported by teachers to be a potential problem.
2. Children whose parents lacked a high school diploma were nearly three times as likely as children whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher to be in schools where teachers consider academic standards to be too low.
3. Black (non-Hispanic) children were also more likely than White or Asian children to attend schools where academic standards were reported to be too low.
4. The most educationally at-risk children were the least likely groups of children to access high-resource elementary schools.

Key Influences on Academic and Behavior Skills Necessary for Future Success and Well-Being

The analyses found that strong principal leadership, high academic standards and teachers working collaboratively impacted reading and math scores. Teacher turnover was related to lower rates of student self-control and school engagement. Key elements of the school environment are related to later positive intellectual and behavioral outcomes for children. Reducing the inequality of access to strong school environments would help improve outcomes for children from high-risk backgrounds.



Making the Case for P-3

(Kristie Kauerz, Education Commission of the States, July 2007)

Just as P-16 reformers look to improve the high school to college transition by ensuring multiple pathways for students — including vocational and two- or four-year college options — the P-3 perspective supports the notion that children will enter the public school system from different pathways.

This issue brief takes the position that the education continuum begins at birth and that a P-3 approach encompasses all of the voluntary services and programs that children experience anytime before their entry into the formal K-12 school system.

What is P-3?

P-3 begins with early learning programs, policies and priorities for children starting at birth and integrates and aligns them with those of the early elementary grades (K-3.) From a policy standpoint, the P-3 agenda:

- ▶ Expands access to programs not currently available universally
- ▶ Improves children's transitions between programs
- ▶ Establishes standards across preschool programs and the primary grades
- ▶ Ensures alignment of these standards.

Why P-3? Why not K-3? Or P-6?

This paper proposes that beginning to reform the education system in the years immediately preceding kindergarten is not beginning early enough and beginning in 3rd grade is too late.

- ▶ The rationale for including the earliest years from birth in this continuum is based on the large body of research and scientific studies finding that 90% of a child's brain development occurs during the first three years of life.
- ▶ Extending the age range to grade 3, or age 8, is based on a second body of literature that indicates that by that age, children have acquired a range of academic and social competencies that form the foundation for later learning and development.

Why the Emphasis on P-3 Now?

To support that position, the author outlines the benefits of a P-3 approach for children, for families and for policymakers. A P-3 framework benefits:

- ▶ **Infants and toddlers:** P-3 brings “explicit attention” to the needs of young children including infant/toddler child care, home visiting, parent support and education, health protection and early intervention services.
- ▶ **3-5-year-olds:** P-3 emphasizes the importance of “high-quality” early learning programs in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. This emphasis is based on research supporting short-term benefits of high academic achievement and long-term benefits of fewer grade retentions and increased graduation rates.
- ▶ **Children in grades 1-3:** P-3 ensures children enter high-quality elementary schools and focuses on the classroom experience and on the overall school environment.
- ▶ **Parents and teachers:** P-3 recognizes the role parents and teachers play in child development emphasizing multiple avenues for families' participation and setting expectations for teacher preparation and professional development.
- ▶ **Education reform efforts:** P-3 makes education reform more child-friendly. It bridges the gap between two education movements — school readiness and school improvement by positioning alignment across systems as the central linking concept.
- ▶ **Policymakers:** P-3 gives clarity to currently “fragmented, unaligned and uncoordinated” school readiness efforts calling for a policy framework that defines coherent standards that “transcend disparate programs, departments and funding streams.”

This paper concludes by pointing out that there is no single solution to raising student achievement and calls instead for a multi-dimensional approach that includes high standards that are aligned and emphasize learning across the birth to 3rd grade continuum.

Other Resources

Lisbeth Schorr and Vicky Marchand, [Pathway to Children Ready for School and Succeeding at Third Grade](#), June, 2007. This “toolkit” provides guidance for communities as well as state level policymakers for creating a system of supports and programs from birth through 3rd grade.

Kristie Kauerz, [Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment](#), 2006. This brief makes a case for aligning programs and practices from preschool through grade 3, defines three key components of alignment; horizontal, vertical, and temporal, and provides recommendations for federal policies to support PK-3 alignment.

National Governors Association, [Building the Foundation for Bright Futures: A Governor's Guide to School Readiness](#), 2005. This guide is a companion to the NGA Center for Best Practices publication, *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures: Final report of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness*. It ties state policy recommendations made by the Task Force to concrete examples of state initiatives to promote school readiness — including what states can do to promote Ready Schools.

Danielle Ewen and Hannah Matthews, [Title I and Early Childhood programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era](#), 2007. This paper outlines the range of ways in which school districts are using Title I funds for early education through kindergarten and how the implementation of NCLB has impacted those investments. The study also makes recommendations for LEAs wishing to implement practices spanning early education through the early grades.

Jennifer Doctors, Barbara Gebhard, Lynn Jones and Albert Watt, [Common Vision, Different Paths: Five States' Journeys toward Prenatal-to-Five Systems](#), 2007. This brief builds on the work of the Early Childhood Systems Working Group to create a model for a cohesive, comprehensive service delivery system for children and families that includes physical and mental health services, family support and early care and education. This paper call for the creation of an infrastructure that supports the system and includes: governance, standards, monitoring, research and development, access mechanisms, professional development, financing and communications.

PK-3: An Aligned and Coordinated Approach to Education for Children 3 to 8 Years Old

(Kimber Bogard and Ruby Takamishi, *The Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. XIX, Number III, 2005)

This issue brief takes the position that an expanded education continuum begins at age 3 and that the traditional K-12 system of education should be restructured to create a “PK-3” approach integrating “the learning experiences of children 3 to 8 years old.” Evidence supporting this position and guidance on what it takes to implement a PK-3 approach are presented in this study.

What is PK-3?

PK-3 integrates early education experiences for 3- and 4-year-olds with kindergarten and elementary education through grade 3. Schools should be structured so all children have learning experiences that build on those in previous years and connect closely with those to come. This approach to educating children proposes:

- ▶ Voluntary, universal access to PK for all 3- and 4-year-olds
- ▶ Mandatory full-day kindergarten
- ▶ Aligning standards, curriculum and assessment practices across all levels
- ▶ Developing a “coherent” teaching and learning plan that considers the developmental characteristics and abilities of children across this age span
- ▶ Aligning teacher preparation and professional development with children’s capacities at each level
- ▶ Establishing appropriate expectations for children’s social and academic progress.

Why PK-3?

Drawing from developmental, educational and evaluation research, this study reviews the evidence for what children need to succeed in school and why an aligned system age 3 to grade 3 is important. Research studies cited have found the following to be reasons for implementing a PK-3 framework:

- ▶ Children’s development from ages 3 to 8 is a critical time for building fundamental learning skills that will be necessary for later school success.
- ▶ Children need aligned teaching and learning experiences within and across grade levels.
- ▶ Key structural and process components improve classroom quality and have demonstrated impacts on students’ achievement at grade 3 and beyond.

What is still needed?

While new research supporting the creation of aligned education systems ranging from age 3 to grade 3 is limited, the research findings cited in this report provide a sound argument for such an approach based on what is currently known about children’s learning and development. In conclusion, the authors call for additional efforts focused on:

- ▶ Expanding research from a single grade level focus to research that examines how learning experiences are systematically organized across grade levels and their impact on child outcomes
- ▶ Examining the extent to which state and district policies that support alignment are actually implemented in schools
- ▶ Increasing research and policy that will focus attention on how schools can best be organized to achieve maximum gains from public investments in early education.

{ Endnotes }

¹James Heckman, “Beyond Pre-K: Rethinking the Conventional Wisdom on Educational Intervention”, *Education Week*, March 19, 2007. (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/03/19/28heckman.h26.html?print=1>) accessed November 2007.

²“From Cradle to Career: Connecting American Education from Birth through Adulthood”, *Education Week*, Quality Counts 2007, Executive Summary.

³Elena Bodovra and Jean Williams, “Benefits of Early Education Many,” *Denver Post*, January 26, 2008.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. It was written by Mimi Howard, director, ECS Early Learning Institute. If you have any questions regarding this or other early learning issues, please contact Mimi at mhoward@ecs.org or 303.299.3662.



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