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K-3 Policymakers' Guide to Action: Making the early years count

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Of the 2.5 million students who dropped out of high school in 2015, 1.6 million were firmly set on that trajectory when they were just 8 years old.^{1,2} What did those 8-year-old students have in common? They received the lowest reading scores on the third-grade literacy exam.³ A student's ability to meet grade-level expectations in third grade plays a significant role in the likelihood of them graduating high school. A third-grade student who reads proficiently is four times more likely to graduate from high school than a third grader reading below grade level.⁴

The preschool through third-grade years are foundational in a child's journey towards lifelong learning. Developmentally, these early elementary years are when children best acquire the academic and non-academic skills on which long-lasting educational success depends. As a result, experts argue that meaningful improvements in student academic outcomes, increases in graduation rates and the success of students later in life depend on improving the quality of the educational foundation provided by a quality kindergarten through third-grade (K-3) continuum.

IN JULY 2016, EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES AND ITS NATIONAL PARTNERS CONVENED A GROUP OF THE NATION'S TOP EXPERTS ON K-3 EDUCATION FOR A THINKERS MEETING TO REFLECT ON RESEARCH AND PRACTICE AND THEN DEFINE STATE POLICY LEVERS WITH THE GREATEST POTENTIAL TO IMPACT STUDENT OUTCOMES. THIS K-3 POLICYMAKERS' GUIDE TO ACTION SUMMARIZES THE TOP POLICY COMPONENTS THE EXPERTS PRIORITIZED AS ESSENTIAL TO BUILDING A HIGH-QUALITY STATE K-3 SYSTEM.

An Opportunity for All

High-quality early elementary years offer a critical opportunity for child development and academic learning for all children, regardless of their race, family-income level or culture and home language. All students deserve access to high-quality teachers and leaders trained in how to effectively support their learning. They deserve to attend schools that follow meaningful standards, quality curricula and that assess and intervene appropriately. Following a high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) experience, the K-3 years set the foundation upon which future learning builds and it must be emphasized that strengthening these years creates opportunities for all.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is yet another reminder that the intention of making investments in children's education should be to address equity and reduce achievement gaps, from pre-K through the early elementary grades.

Spotlight on K-3



Education leaders and state policymakers have begun to recognize the immense impact a high-quality early learning experience can have on a student's college and career trajectory. Research findings show that many 2 year olds from low-income families are six months behind in language development, and that as much as a 30 million-word gap exists between 3 year olds from high- and low-income families.⁵ Research on early brain development and the science behind how children learn has spurred state and federal policy action focused on improving access to, and quality of, pre-K programs. Similarly, major research reports reveal the link between third-grade reading and high school graduation. In the past four years, 44 states have increased investments in pre-K by \$1.9 billion⁶ and more than half of the 50 states have passed legislation geared towards improving third-grade reading.⁷ While these are all laudable and essential steps towards improving early childhood education, they are also just that - first steps, in a long line of work that can be done to ensure that the foundational years of public schooling (K-3) sets students on a path to success.

While research suggests that fostering pre-K programs through policy is vital, state policies and school and district leadership play a critical role in simultaneously addressing the task of improving the quality of K-3 classrooms. Properly addressing the overwhelming importance of early elementary education requires a well-crafted, comprehensive plan that addresses the learning continuum throughout the early childhood years, providing students with the fundamental skills they need to succeed in the later years.

In July 2016, Education Commission of the States released a detailed resource, [50-State Comparison: K-3 Quality](#), focused on state policy in the early elementary years. This resource also provides guidance to policymakers on how to begin moving the needle in their states.⁸

Policy Investments in K-3

The experts that participated in the K-3 Thinkers Meeting identified more than 25 specific policy levers that would improve the quality of K-3 education. They agreed on six key areas as essential for student success:



These experts discussed equity, innovation and continuous quality improvement as lenses that should always be taken into consideration when developing any policy change. Equity in the early grades means that well-prepared and profession-ready teachers and leaders provide instruction in a developmentally-appropriate environment, with resources and services sufficient to meet the needs of our nation's youngest learners.

ESSA Creates an Opportunity for Early Learning

With the passage of ESSA, education leaders have unprecedented freedom and flexibility to re-craft state plans to best ensure all children have the opportunity to attain educational success. ESSA includes several provisions related to early learning, including the use of Title I funds to support the early grades, greater alignment of and smoother student transitions between pre-K and kindergarten, increasing the knowledge base of teachers and leaders on instruction in the early grades and on strategies to measure whether young children are progressing.⁹

Given the sheer number of policy areas that can affect the quality of a K-3 system, policymakers, particularly those with seriously limited funds and/or little information about high-quality K-3 systems, can be easily overwhelmed. In spite of challenges, focusing on K-3 quality through state policy also presents great opportunities. While the number of policy levers can make decisions difficult, they also allow for great flexibility in setting policy priorities in a given state.

To develop a high-quality K-3 system, the experts suggested that policymakers undertake the essential first step of conducting a policy audit using Education Commission of the States' **50-State Comparison: K-3 Quality** as a guide to examine current K-3 policies and determine the starting point for each state.

With a thorough understanding of their state's current K-3 policy landscape, policymakers can then refer to the six policy levers identified in this report and consider subsequent state actions that will impact K-3 student success.



Funding: Strategic, blended, equitable

When the issue of funding arises, people frequently look for new funding streams before evaluating ways to make the current system more efficient. K-3 policy experts emphasized the value in considering the many opportunities to re-distribute funds. For example, both **California** and **New York** have changed their funding formulas to provide districts with greater flexibility in how state funds are used. States can use this kind of flexibility to allocate more funds to K-3 programs.

Funding streams change significantly at the start of traditional schooling in kindergarten. Funding that supports young children (birth through preschool) comes from a wide range of sources, including federal funding programs, state dollars from multiple departments, local funds, private giving and parent fees. In the K-3 years, however, funding comes primarily from local and state funds used to support the K-12 public school system. As a result, state policymakers can be creative in how those funds are used in order to re-distribute allocated funds in ways to better support K-3 quality improvement initiatives.

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Re-examine the state funding formula to ensure it effectively targets high-quality K-3 programs, including funding kindergarten at the same level as first-12th grade.
- ✓ Evaluate and adjust facility capacity and funding, particularly if modifying cut-off ages or adding full-day kindergarten programs.
- ✓ Utilize Title II, as well as other federal and state funds, designated professional development dollars to build principal skills and knowledge on an ongoing basis about what is age – and developmentally appropriate in K-3, such as providing collaborative opportunities for principals, teachers and early childhood center directors and educators.
- ✓ Establish ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers along the K-3 continuum.
- ✓ Incentivize data systems that effectively incorporate data specifically needed by K-3 teachers and leaders, such as student performance on assessments, chronic absenteeism and quality of a student's pre-K experience.
- ✓ Link adequate and equitable dollars to K-3 goals:
 - ➔ Resources go where they are most needed (ex: incentives to recruit effective teachers in high-need schools).
 - ➔ Funding is targeted to key skills, such as supports for early interventions, kindergarten entry assessments, evaluation of interventions, leadership development, etc.
 - ➔ Fund (and evaluate) extended day and year programs aimed at K-3 students.



Quality Full-Day Kindergarten and Mandatory Attendance-Age Requirements

As state leaders have implemented new academic standards with higher expectations for students, kindergarten has become more demanding. Kindergarten must take a balanced approach to meeting the developmental and academic needs of children. Now more than ever, children are in kindergarten to learn content knowledge, build on early literacy and numeracy skills needed to meet the growing academic



expectations of primary education, and get on a clear path of social and emotional development. Yet, even in the face of more rigorous curricula and higher standards, just 13 states plus the District of Columbia (D.C.) require districts to offer full-day kindergarten and 27 states specifically require that full-day kindergarten programs have the same length of day as first-third grade. In fact, kindergarten length-of-day requirements vary from 360 hours per year up to 1,080 hours per year.¹⁰ This data is complicated by how effectively teachers use the time they have to drive the quality of and opportunity for student learning.

Just 10 states require 5 year olds to attend public schooling at all and 15 states do not require students to begin public schooling until they are 7-8 years old.¹¹ Quality full-day kindergarten programs may be a particularly salient policy issue for states that have invested in high-quality pre-K programs in order to sustain the academic and developmental gains made in pre-K.

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Fund kindergarten through the school funding formula and assign kindergarten students enrolled in full-day kindergarten a weight equal to a first-grade student.
- ✓ Require districts to offer full-day kindergarten.
- ✓ Set full-day kindergarten hours to equal the length of first-grade hours.
- ✓ Require compulsory kindergarten attendance.
- ✓ Review additional state policies that have influence over the quality of kindergarten, including learning environment, curricula, assessment of children, family engagement and pre-K to kindergarten transition supports.¹²
- ✓ Lower the statewide threshold for Title I school-wide participation and use funds to pay for school-based kindergarten programs.



Workforce Development: Teachers and leaders

The expectations of elementary teachers differ significantly from expectations of teachers in later grades. While a 10th-grade teacher requires content expertise and general pedagogical skills, experts argue that early grade teachers should be trained in child development, prepared in the science of reading, math, early brain development, cognitive function and social emotional skills and also equipped with strategies for conducting age-appropriate lessons through play. Further, given the increasing diversity of young children and growing number of English language



learners, teachers also need to be prepared to work effectively with diverse groups of learners and their families. Teacher preparation and professional development must be designed to meet the unique needs of this K-3 teacher workforce. Further, in order to place well-trained teachers in every K-3 classroom, teacher licensure requirements should be aligned to these expectations.

Teachers also benefit from support of elementary school principals and local superintendents who have received similar training through preparation programs, and who have met rigorous expectations through licensure requirements. To date, the preparation and professional development of principals has not been a key focus of the K-3 continuum, yet we know from studies completed in the Chicago Public Schools that principal leadership and competencies are key to a teacher and child's success in the K-3 years.

Elementary principals have the ability to influence the important developmental milestones that children must reach during this early stage in life. It is a key instructional leadership responsibility to ensure that the vision and culture of every school reinforces developmentally-appropriate practices, including that of teachers. It is also a key leadership responsibility that principals help to create the conditions within a school for family support in student academic, social and emotional development, particularly in the K-3 years when parents are amenable to positive relationships with the school. Principals without such training may find it difficult to recognize and support appropriate practices in these early grades.

In 2010, Illinois became the first state to expand their principal certification to pre-K-12 and require integration of early childhood education into their training.¹³

Currently, 13 states require that kindergarten teachers have an early childhood education license and just four states require elementary school principals to have preparation in early language and literacy development.¹⁴

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Create a pre-K-3 or K-3 teacher preparation program and licensure requirements.
- ✓ Ensure teacher and leader preparation programs provide instruction in early childhood education and child development including embedded practical experiences and culturally relevant training.
- ✓ Conduct meaningful teaching evaluations that examine implementation of age-appropriate practices

and incorporate opportunities for ongoing professional development, including job-embedded training, mentoring and coaching.

- ✓ Require training for K-3 teachers in the science of literacy, early brain development¹⁵, math, science, social-emotional development and the arts.
- ✓ Ensure that school leaders and teachers have formal job-embedded training in how to work productively with families so they are engaged and trusting allies with the schools in support of K-3 student success.

South Carolina, a state exemplar for high-quality K-3 policies, included “the number of professional development days devoted exclusively to knowledge and skills needed to work with children that are less than 8 years old” in its 2015 primary school report card.



Alignment Across the Continuum: Governance and standards, resources and program quality

In the majority of states, authority and oversight of state early childhood systems is spread across various agencies, thereby creating an inefficient and uncoordinated system of services. Conversely, state departments of education and state and local boards of education govern K-12. It is rare to find a P-3 governance system that emphasizes the importance of K-3. Some states have created an office or even a department of early education with funding, policy and programmatic oversight. The K-3 years are unique in what is required to ensure quality and would benefit significantly from targeted oversight and support working in conjunction with the state board of education. Systemic and governance infrastructure is significant and needs to maintain efficiency, accountability and be established with a vision and authority to accomplish short- and long-term outcomes for children in the P-3 continuum.

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Create a dedicated office in the state department of education to focus on K-3 quality improvements and supports, including coordination with early learning providers and fourth-12th-grade programs.
- ✓ Encourage districts to dedicate a position to support K-3 leadership and innovation to align standards, curriculum and instruction, as well as adoption of teacher and leader competencies.
- ✓ Determine if there are multiple entities working simultaneously towards support and improvement of a quality K-3 or P-3 system, for example, state board of education, early childhood advisory council, state board for the department of human services, legislative committees, etc. and consider ways to streamline efforts by, for example, creating an office within a department that oversees pre-K through third grade.



Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

In the current standards-driven era, states have made great strides in creating early learning developmental guidelines that set standards for what young children should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. Forty-eight states plus D.C. have comprehensive early learning guidelines that include pre-K and many states have made efforts to align those standards to state K-12 standards.¹⁶ The extent to which the two sets of standards truly align – for example, one standard building off of the other – is unclear and cause for concern for many of the experts convened for the K-3 Thinkers Meeting.



Early learning guidelines look beyond traditional academic measures, consisting of domains that include social-emotional development, physical development and health, and approaches to learning. By expanding the standards children must meet in K-3, it may ensure they receive an education that emphasizes social, behavioral and physical skills and are taught in a manner that provides significant opportunity for student-centered learning, exploration through play and family engagement.

When children engage in coherent high-quality K-3 learning experiences, the fade-out effect - where learning gains are lost over time - greatly diminishes. Aligning standards, curricula and assessments ensures that young children engage in the right sequence of learning experiences at the right time. Alignment also ensures children work toward building the set of skills and knowledge they need as they move from a high-quality preschool to a high-quality kindergarten and onto early elementary grades.

Finally, age and culturally-appropriate assessments can be used to evaluate whether students are meeting the standards and if teachers are utilizing student-centered teaching in a meaningful way.

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Ensure state early learning guidelines have been adopted by the state board of education, state legislature or are embedded in state rules.
- ✓ Conduct assessment of alignment of early learning guidelines to the state's K-12 standards.
- ✓ Adopt statewide social and emotional standards.
- ✓ Encourage use of curricula that emphasizes student-centered learning through developmentally appropriate play and exploration that is sensitive to students' age, individuality, culture and home language.
- ✓ Ensure that literacy development is recognized and supported statewide as a unique gateway to academic success in all content areas.
- ✓ Utilize age and culturally-appropriate formative assessments that measure student growth and intentionally inform leaders and teachers in a timely manner.
- ✓ Ensure individual assessments are utilized to guide instruction and for diagnostic purposes.



Accountability Metrics (not student-based)

The metrics included in a state accountability system have an enormous impact on the improvement efforts and new investments states make in the K-12 system. It comes as no surprise that third-grade reading proficiency is the only portion of the K-3 continuum that has received ample attention from policymakers.

With the recent passage of ESSA, states have an opportunity to redesign their accountability systems and incorporate additional metrics that can impact the quality of a K-3 system, including alternative ways to evaluate student learning, quality of professional practice and family engagement.¹⁷ ESSA requires that state accountability plans include a fifth indicator that is a valid, reliable and comparable measure of school quality or student success (SQSS) and includes student engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, and school climate and safety. ESSA permits different SQSS measures for different grade spans and allows states to define those spans. As a result, states can assign unique, age-appropriate accountability measures.¹⁸

Additionally, ESSA provides greater flexibility in how states turn around low-performing schools. By adopting metrics that include quality of instruction and leadership or child outcome metrics other than test scores, states can use the same metrics to measure school turnaround success.¹⁹ By focusing on turnaround efforts in these early grades, state policymakers and education leaders have the unique opportunity to see direct effects investments can make in K-3. Further, as a result of expanding beyond traditional metrics of measuring school success, the total number of schools classified as in need of support and improvement will decline.²⁰

State Actions to Consider

- ✓ Identify a K-3 specific fifth indicator as defined in ESSA.
- ✓ Include K-3 data in state report cards.
- ✓ Employ K-3 strategies for school improvement.
- ✓ Encourage and support the increased use of formative assessments and formative data for continuous improvement of instruction.

Final Thoughts

In the face of overwhelming evidence on the impact investments in early learning have on student achievement and success, state lawmakers across the country have shown remarkable dedication to early learning over the past 10 years. Countless policies are being enacted that support young children and their families from birth through third grade. Yet, these efforts to support the nation's youngest learners tend to be disjointed. Current policy efforts already underway across the states, coupled with the new flexibility under ESSA, provide a unique opportunity to strengthen policy changes focused on K-3. This report is a call to state policymakers to consider the early elementary years when looking for new opportunities to increase students' academic success. Using the six policy levers identified in this report, policymakers are encouraged to conduct a policy audit and identify opportunities to improve the quality of their state's K-3 system.



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