

Results in Brief:

Case Studies of Schools Implementing Early Elementary Strategies: Preschool Through Third Grade Alignment and Differentiated Instruction

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Research shows that participation in a high-quality preschool can improve young children's readiness skills for elementary school, positively influencing behavioral, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes. However, some preschool program evaluations document that some initial benefits may not persist into early elementary school. To explore how educators might build on and sustain the positive effects of preschool, this study examined two types of strategies that preliminary literature searches revealed as promising practices to support children's learning in early elementary school: (1) aligning instruction from preschool through grade 3 (referred to as P–3 alignment) and (2) differentiated instruction. The P–3 alignment strategy emphasizes coordination among standards, curricula, instructional practices and environments, student assessment, and teacher professional development between the preschool years and the early elementary school years. The differentiated instruction strategy focuses on teachers varying their pedagogical practices to meet the diverse needs and skills of individual students.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What approaches did the five programs use to implement P–3 alignment?
2. In programs that implemented differentiated instruction, what approaches did staff use?
3. What were the goals of the five programs?
4. What changes in student and teacher outcomes did staff attribute to their programs?
5. What were the challenges of implementing these programs, and how did staff and leaders try to overcome these challenges?

DESIGN

The five programs included in the study were purposively selected based on their approaches to P–3 alignment and differentiated instruction and their geographic diversity. The programs were the Boston Public Schools (BPS), Chicago Child–Parent Centers (CPC), Early Works, FirstSchool, and Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) program. Data—collected between November 2015 and January 2016—included interviews with 93 program staff, observations of program activities selected by principals, and review of program documents at nine schools.

Findings are based largely on self-reports of staff interviewed and limited classroom and activity observations. While findings are not generalizable to other schools that use the two studied strategies, policymakers and administrators may use the findings to inform their own efforts to use P–3 alignment or differentiated instruction by considering how these five sites implemented these strategies, the challenges they faced, and the steps they took to overcome those challenges.

HIGHLIGHTS

- All five case study programs aligned instruction across grades by aligning or coordinating standards, curricula, instructional practices, and professional development; three sites also used aligned assessments.
- Common elements of P–3 programs included the use of professional learning communities (PLCs), coaches, parent engagement, and play-based or student-initiated learning.
- Although only one site was explicitly nominated for the study for its differentiated instruction approach, teachers in all five programs reported using strategies to accommodate students' different skill levels, including modifying assignments, adapting learning materials, providing different levels of support, or using small-group instruction.
- All five programs focused on increasing students' vocabulary, oral language, and social-emotional skills.
- Staff in four programs reported that they had observed improvement in students' vocabulary or oral language skills, social-emotional development, and engagement or attendance, as well as increased parent involvement after implementing their programs.
- Staff in all five programs reported that guiding teachers to change their practices in the context of P–3 alignment (e.g., incorporating student-initiated learning) was a challenge, and staff in all five programs reported concerns about funding sustainability.

COMMON APPROACHES TO P-3 ALIGNMENT

All five case study programs aligned instruction across grades by coordinating and aligning standards, curricula, instructional practices, and professional development; three sites also used aligned assessments. This finding is consistent with the elements that policy and theory articles—identified through the study’s literature review—suggested aligning between preschool and third grade.

Common elements of P–3 programs included the use of PLCs, coaches, parent engagement, and play-based or student-initiated learning.

- Teachers reported that PLCs support consistent instructional practices and aligned curricula across preschool through grade 3 by providing teachers the opportunity to coordinate lessons and strategies.
- All programs used instructional coaches to help teachers understand standards, align the curriculum with earlier or later grades, align instructional practices across and within grades, and adjust instructional practices to match the program model.
- To provide additional continuity for children’s learning across grades P–3, all five programs took a proactive approach to engaging parents by creating a welcoming environment, conducting home visits, providing resources for families, or involving parents in children’s education at home.
- Building on practices used in their preschool programs, kindergarten through third grade teachers in four programs reported focusing on student-initiated and play-based learning.

COMMON APPROACHES TO DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Although only BPS was nominated for its differentiated instruction approach, teachers in all five programs reported differentiating instruction. Teachers frequently implemented differentiation by starting a lesson with whole-group instruction and later using small-group instruction (during which students are divided into small groups of about two to six students). Staff described implementing center-based activities during small-group instruction in which students worked on similar activities.

Teachers in all five programs used homogenous groupings and teachers in four programs used heterogeneous groupings when differentiating instruction. For an example of homogenous grouping, a FirstSchool first grade teacher described that she groups her students by their academic level and that the groups of students with a higher level of comprehension will receive more challenging critical-thinking questions.

For an example of heterogeneous grouping, a SEAL elementary teacher explained that she pairs students with a high level of English proficiency with students who have a low level of English proficiency, to help the students with a low English proficiency level complete their work in English.

Staff in all five programs reported that having extra adult support staff in the classroom enabled them to provide differentiated instruction to more students. Baldwin Early Learning Academy in BPS—the program that was nominated for differentiated instruction—employs teaching aides that receive training similar to the training that full-time teachers receive on the curriculum. At least two personnel are in every classroom throughout the day.

Instructional coaches trained teachers in all five programs to differentiate instruction and group students. This finding is consistent with the literature review’s findings that differentiated instruction requires careful planning, which may be facilitated by coaches.

GOALS OF PROGRAMS

All five programs focused on increasing students’ vocabulary, oral language, and social-emotional skills. In addition to these common goals, BPS focused on increasing students’ math skills and SEAL focused on increasing social studies and science knowledge.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND SUCCESSSES

Staff in four programs reported that they had observed improvement in students’ vocabulary or oral language skills, social-emotional development, and engagement or attendance, as well as improvement in parent involvement after implementing their program. Initial evaluations or outcome studies from CPC, Early Works, and SEAL support many of these perceived changes.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Staff in all five programs reported that guiding teachers to change their practices (e.g., incorporating student-initiated learning) can be difficult. Teachers and principals suggested addressing this challenge through in-depth teacher training, staff voice in choosing to implement new practices, additional classroom resources, and effective leadership.

Staff in all five programs reported concerns that sustaining staffing levels required for faithful implementation of the program design after external funding support ends would be a challenge. BPS and CPC staff reported investigating other federal grants or Social Impact Bonds to continue funding portions of the program. Earl Boyles braided existing funding sources for Oregon’s public preschool to support their preschool program.