EARLY LEARNING PRIMER

INITIATIVES FROM PRESCHOOL TO THIRD GRADE

A POLICYMAKER'S GUIDE

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Education Commission of the States

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Author:
Sarah Daily, Ph.D., Sr. Research Scientist, Child Trends

Contributors:
Bruce Atchison, Executive Director of Policy and Operations, ECS

Emily Workman, Policy Analyst, ECS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nationally, policymakers' focus on early learning initiatives is receiving tremendous attention. Policymakers are recognizing how vital a child's earliest learning opportunities are to their long-term educational success. This recognition, however, does not always mean that policymakers know how to impact these early years or even where to start.

One of the most significant services the Education Commission of the States provides to its constituents is timely responses to requests for information. This Early Learning Primer serves as a reference guide for policymakers and their staffs on the most commonly requested topics from preschool to third grade. The brief is organized in response to the two types of questions policymakers most commonly ask ECS about P-3 approaches:

What are effective strategies to support children on their path to third-grade academic success?

Though a comprehensive P-3 agenda includes programs for children and their parents from birth to third grade, the primary programs and strategies policymakers have inquired about include:

1. ***Preschool.*** Access to high-quality preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds.
2. ***Transitions.*** Strategies to support children in their transition to kindergarten.
3. ***Full-day kindergarten.*** Full-day kindergarten programs for 5-year-olds.
4. ***Kindergarten entrance assessments.*** Using kindergarten entrance assessments to identify school readiness gaps.
5. ***Bolstering third-grade reading proficiency.*** Innovative policies designed to identify and support children who are not on track to meet third-grade reading goals.

What are the foundations of any effective P-3 approach?

Though the infrastructure needed to support a comprehensive P-3 agenda includes elements such as longitudinal data systems, professional development systems, family engagement strategies and systems designed to promote children's overall health and well-being, the primary elements policymakers have inquired about include:

1. ***High-quality P-3 programs.*** Characterized by exceptional educators and leaders who use ongoing data collection to inform instruction and practice.
2. ***Aligned standards, curricula and assessments.*** Ensuring state's learning standards, curricula and assessments are aligned to support children from preschool to third grade.
3. ***Efficient P-3 finance.*** Coordinating funding streams that support P-3 programs to maximize dollars and reduce inefficiencies.
4. ***Effective P-3 governance.*** Coordinating the range of P-3 programs, services, agencies and entities at the state level to ensure the delivery of seamless programs and services for children and families.

Each section of this brief provides an overview of each topic, a brief summary of the research rationale, a status of related initiatives across the nation, specific state examples, questions for critical decision points and links to further reading.

WHY DOES P-3 DESERVE THE ATTENTION OF POLICYMAKERS?

Achievement gap starts early, persists through school

While the high school dropout rate poses a significant risk to our nation, there are early warning signs that if acted upon can be used to chart a different path for children. Research demonstrates that the achievement gap can be identified long before children enter kindergarten. Disparities in children's learning are evident as early as nine months of age and persist as children continue through school.[1]

The achievement gap can not only be identified early, it can also be linked to socioeconomic factors. One national study documented that, before kindergarten entry, the average cognitive scores of affluent children were 60 percent higher than those of low-income children.[2]

The children who are most at-risk for school failure are more likely to attend lower-quality elementary schools, making the task of closing early gaps in learning even more challenging to address through schooling alone.[3]

Academic success and third-grade reading proficiency

The period between preschool and third grade is a tipping point in a child's journey toward lifelong learning. During this time, children have to make a critical transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."[4]

If children do not have proficient reading skills by third grade, their ability to progress through school and meet grade-level expectations diminishes significantly. While all areas of children's learning and development are critical for school success, the predictive power of a child's third-grade reading proficiency on high school graduation and dropout rates is startling:[5]

- Children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are ***four times less likely*** to graduate high school on time.
- Children who are not reading proficiently by third grade and also live in poverty are ***13 times less likely*** to graduate high school on time.
- ***More than half*** of all students (63 percent) who did not graduate from high school on time were not reading proficiently in third grade.

About 30 percent of all fourth-graders and 50 percent of African-American and Hispanic fourth-graders nationwide are reading below grade-level, and more than half of those students are likely to drop out or fail to graduate on time.

Society pays a high price for the nearly 1 million teenagers who drop out of high school every year through higher rates of unemployment, lower tax revenues and increased costs to the criminal justice, welfare and healthcare systems.

If policymakers are to make a significant impact on the college and career readiness of our nation's future workforce, interventions to address gaps in learning have to begin earlier than third grade.

A fragmented P-3 system

In most states, the programs that support children on their path to academic success from birth to third grade are disconnected, especially for low-income children who are most at-risk for school failure. P-3 programs may be fragmented in part because the funding streams and governance that oversee these programs are themselves disconnected. The lack of coordination between early care and education programs that serve children from birth to age 5 and the K-12 education system presents a missed opportunity for states. States need strong leadership to set a vision for program, governance and funding coordination in order to address early gaps in learning and set children on the path toward third-grade success and, ultimately, high school graduation.

1 PRESCHOOL FOR 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS

Over the past decade, states have increased the amount of publicly funded voluntary preschool programs available for 3- and 4-year-olds. These programs are typically offered in preschools located in a child care center or school-based setting that in most states are required to meet state preschool program standards.

Why does preschool matter?

Once considered a strategy just to support working parents with child care needs, the majority of states now view access to high-quality preschool programs as a critical long-term economic investment in the future workforce.[6] Rigorous long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were:[7]

- 25 percent less likely to drop out of school.
- 40 percent less likely to become a teen parent.
- 50 percent less likely to be placed in special education.
- 60 percent less likely to never attend college.
- 70 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

What is the status of preschool initiatives across the states?

In the 2013-14 fiscal year, 40 states and the District of Columbia allocated $5.6 billion dollars to enable 1.3 million 3- and 4-year-old children to enroll in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs.[8] However, 41 percent of these programs met five or fewer of 10 benchmarks of quality as defined by the National Institute for Early Education Research.[9]

In 2013, President Obama announced a Preschool for All proposal, which would require the U.S. Department of Education to allocate $75 billion over 10 years to states based on their share of 4-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families (those at or below 200 percent of the poverty line). The funding would be used to partner with school districts in delivering preschool programs that meet quality benchmarks. For example, programs that incorporate the state's learning standards, provide qualified teachers and continuously assess the effectiveness of instruction.

State examples

The **Georgia** Pre-K Program, established in 1995, serves more than 80,000 4-year-old children annually. A recent longitudinal study found participation in Georgia's pre-K program significantly improved children's school readiness skills (in kindergarten) across a wide range of language, literacy, math and general knowledge measures.[10]

The **District of Columbia** aims to provide high-quality universal prekindergarten programs through D.C. Public Schools, community-based organizations and charter schools by blending state funds with Head Start funding. In the 2012-13 school year, D.C. reported serving about 90 percent of all 4-year-olds and more than 75 percent of all 3-year-olds.

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program provides 540 hours of instruction during the school year and offers an additional 300 hours of preschool programming in the summer to approximately 80 percent of all Florida 4-year-olds. In the 2011-13 school year, nearly 80 percent of children who participated in the program were identified as "ready" for kindergarten, according to the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *What is the state's vision for preschool?*
- *What is the state's capacity to implement preschool for all (i.e., are there enough qualified staff and facilities available) or could a plan for scaling up capacity be developed?*
- *What is the availability of publicly funded preschool programs? Are they available for a full-day, full-year program?*
- *Are all children able to access preschool programs or are there family income requirements?*
- *Are there quality standards in place that state-funded preschools must follow?*

RESOURCES

State Pre-K Funding 2013-2014
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/34/11034.pdf

The State of Preschool Yearbook: 50 State Profiles 2013
http://nieer.org/publications/state-preschool-2013

Preschool for All Individual State Plans
http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/increasing-access/index.html

2 EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS BETWEEN PRESCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN

Between preschool and kindergarten, most children — and their parents — experience a significant transition from their early care and education setting to formal K-12 schooling. Kindergarten often includes new surroundings, peers, rules, expectations and ways of learning.[11]

To support parents and children in making a seamless transition to kindergarten, some states and school districts have adopted outreach strategies. For example:

- Providing opportunities for teachers and incoming kindergarten students to meet over the summer at the new school.
- Home visits by the kindergarten teacher to the incoming students' homes.
- Orientation sessions for parents and students.
- School-wide events for new families.

Program-level strategies are designed to reduce the disconnect between early care and education programs and the K-12 school system. For example, some districts support joint professional development for early education and K-3 teachers, data sharing, joint transition planning and the creation of transition teams to support communication across systems.[12]

Why do transitions matter?

Children who adjust quickly to kindergarten are more likely to enjoy school, show steady academic and social growth, and focus on new content and skill development. Conversely, when children experience a stressful transition, they are more likely to become disengaged, absent, have behavior problems and lack the ability to focus on meeting academic expectations.[13]

What is the status of transition initiatives across the states?

Examples of effective preschool to kindergarten transition models are most evident at the local level. Schools, school districts and counties within a state may all have different approaches to supporting children and families in their transition into kindergarten. Only a handful of states have adopted a statewide approach, and still many schools and districts across those states do not have a transition plan in place to support incoming kindergarteners.

State examples

South Carolina's First Steps to School Readiness is a public-private statewide effort that uses a variety of strategies to promote school readiness. One strategy is Countdown to Kindergarten, a home-visitation program that pairs the families of high-risk rising kindergartners with their future teachers during the summer before school entry. Teachers complete six visits with each family, centered upon classroom and content expectations.

In **Massachusetts,** the Boston Public School system has designed a citywide initiative to support families, educators and children in the transition to kindergarten. The Countdown to Kindergarten campaign works with 28 local organizations to coordinate events and activities that help children and their families register, visit, select and prepare for kindergarten. The program also supports children's parents to be active partners in their children's education at home and at school.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

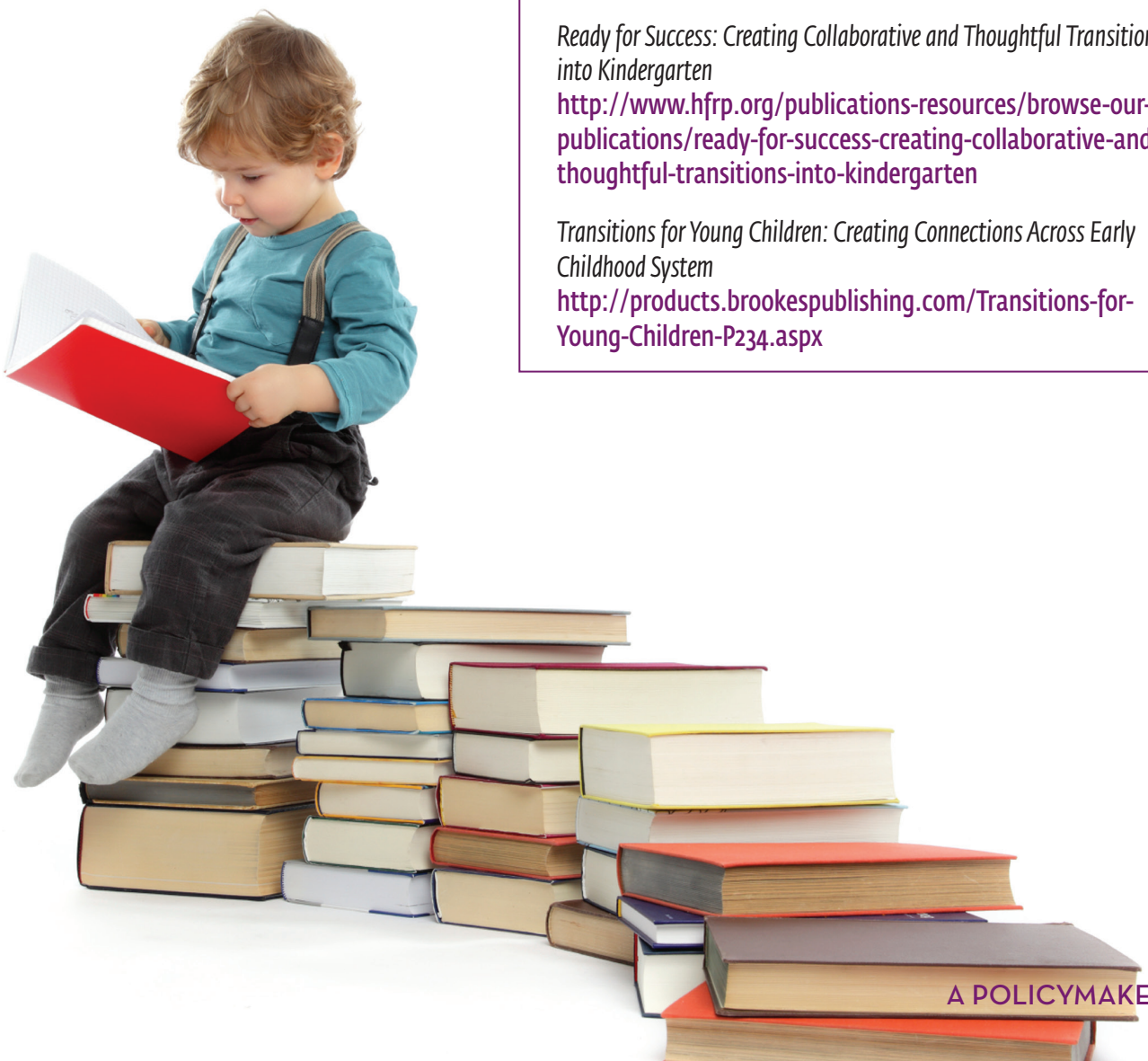
- *Is there a current statewide transition model in place?*
- *If a statewide model does not exist, what lessons can be learned from innovative district, community or school-level transition models?*
- *Are districts required to employ strategies for engaging families and establish two-way communication systems between the pre-K and K-3 programs (i.e. sharing of data and assessments, home visits and professional development opportunities specific to transitions)?*
- *Is there alignment of standards, curricula and assessments between pre-K and kindergarten?*

RESOURCES

Transition and Alignment: Two Keys to Assuring Student Success
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/84/07/8407.pdf

Ready for Success: Creating Collaborative and Thoughtful Transitions into Kindergarten
http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/ready-for-success-creating-collaborative-and-thoughtful-transitions-into-kindergarten

Transitions for Young Children: Creating Connections Across Early Childhood System
http://products.brookespublishing.com/Transitions-for-Young-Children-P234.aspx



3 FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN FOR 5-YEAR-OLDS

Full-day kindergarten refers to kindergarten programs that are funded for the length of a full school day (which ranges across states from four to seven hours a day) and a full school year. Most states only require or fund kindergarten for half of a typical school day (which ranges across states from two to three-and-a-half hours a day).[14]

Why does full-day kindergarten matter?

Full-day kindergarten programs, especially those that maintain small class sizes, are more effective than half-day programs in promoting children's success in reading and mathematics regardless of race or income.[15] Full-day kindergarten may be a particularly salient policy issue for states investing in high-quality preschool programs. In order to sustain the academic and developmental gains made in preschool, young children need the continued support of a high-quality full-day kindergarten program. Further, with Common Core State Standards, all students are expected to meet the same levels of proficiency at the end of kindergarten and third grade regardless of their participation in a full-day or half-day program, or no kindergarten program at all.[16]

What is the status of full-day kindergarten across the states?

Eleven states and the District of Columbia require full-day kindergarten, 34 states require half-day kindergarten and five states do not require kindergarten.[17] However, there is a great deal of disparity both within and across states on full-day kindergarten policies. For example, in the 34 states that require half-day kindergarten, some districts fund full-day kindergarten through parent fees, fundraising and redistribution of the district's per-pupil revenue. Other districts cannot, creating inequities in the educational opportunities of children within the state.[18]

State examples

Arkansas, **Delaware**, **Louisiana**, **Maryland**, **Oklahoma** and **South Carolina** are the only states in the nation that both require districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs and require students to attend kindergarten.

Texas is the only state that requires seven hours of instruction for full-day programs — an additional three hours compared to six states whose programs require a minimum of four hours.

North Carolina was the first state to require full-day kindergarten in statute, in 1984. It is part of the state-funding formula and funds kindergarten at the same level as grades 1-3.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *If statewide full-day kindergarten or funding are not in place, what is known about the districts that do provide full-day kindergarten and how is it funded?*
- *What are the barriers to expansion?*
- *What is the state's potential for funding or requiring statewide full-day programs?*
- *What is the state's capacity to implement full-day kindergarten (i.e., are there enough qualified staff and facilities available) or could a plan to scale up be developed?*

RESOURCES

Inequality at the Starting Line: State Kindergarten Policies
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/06/78/10678.pdf

Interactive Kindergarten Database
http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/EarlyLearning/KDB_intro.asp?50s=show

4 KINDERGARTEN ENTRANCE ASSESSMENTS

A kindergarten entrance assessment, sometimes referred to as KEAs, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education is an assessment that is:

- Administered to children in the first few months of the kindergarten school year.
- Covers a broad range of skills including literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional and physical development.
- Appropriate for kindergarten students.

Why do KEAs matter?

To ensure that children are on track to meeting third-grade learning goals, educators need baseline data at school entry to identify and address children's gaps in learning as early as possible. States often select KEA tools that can be used at the beginning, middle and end of the school year so that teachers can track children's progress over time and tailor their instruction accordingly. Many states are also moving toward using the same KEA tool in all kindergarten classrooms across the state. When KEA data are comparable at the state level, policymakers can use the data to quantify the "school readiness" gap and identify individual districts or counties that may need particular support in helping children achieve grade-level proficiency.

What is the status of KEA initiatives across the states?

In 2010 only seven states collected KEA data that could be analyzed at the state level to inform funding and policy decisions.[19] As of the spring of 2014, 16 states reported implementing a statewide KEA,[20] and 18 states have received federal Enhanced Assessment Grant funding to implement new KEA assessment systems. Of the 37 states that applied for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, 35 identified the development of a KEA as a top priority.

State examples

Over the past 12 years, **Maryland** has become adept at using its statewide KEA data to tailor instruction and support for children who are most at risk for school failure. In the 2013-14 school year, 83 percent of children were fully ready for kindergarten, up from 49 percent in 2001-02.[21]

In 2011, **Washington's** legislature passed Senate Bill 5427, which made their KEA mandatory for state-funded full-day kindergarten classrooms in the 2012-13 school year. After training all teachers, Washington's assessment is estimated to cost about $10 per student or a total of $1.5 million. Including additional teacher supports such as staff time for data entry and family outreach could increase the costs to $3.5 million.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *Does a statewide KEA exist to inform an understanding of school readiness across the state?*
- *What is the purpose of the KEA, or what would be the potential purpose of a KEA if one does not exist? For example, will the data be used to inform classroom instruction, to inform state policy actions, to inform parents or all of the above?*
- *If a KEA does exist, what is the current level of children's school readiness at kindergarten entry?*
- *Are the schools with high proportions of children not ready for school located in concentrated geographic areas that can be targeted for support or additional resources?*
- *If a KEA does not exist, what is the state's potential for developing a KEA?*

RESOURCES

Policy Analysis Topics, P-3 Kindergarten
http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/ECSStateNotes.asp?nIssueID=260

Kindergarten Assessment Position Paper
http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/CCSSO_K-Assessment_Final_7-12-11.pdf

Kindergarten Entry Assessments
http://www.elccollaborative.org/assessment/77-kindergarten-entry-assessment.html

5 POLICIES TO PROMOTE THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

Third-grade reading proficiency is defined by a child's ability to demonstrate the appropriate level of reading comprehension, use of vocabulary, reading fluency, logical writing, coherent speaking and interpretation of different types of texts (e.g., graphs, newspapers, poems). End-of-grade state literacy tests are designed to measure these skills in accordance with third-grade learning standards and expectations.

Why third-grade reading proficiency matters

The ability to read is a fundamental skill essential for learning. It is well documented that children who do not achieve reading proficiency by third grade are more likely to be retained, have behavior problems, low self-esteem and drop out of school.[22]

What is the status of third-grade reading policies across the states?

More than 30 states have passed legislation aimed at increasing the identification, intervention and/or retention of K-3 students who are not on track to meeting third-grade reading expectations.[23] States have also developed policies to increase school accountability, teacher expectations and expand early identification efforts to preschool programs.[24]

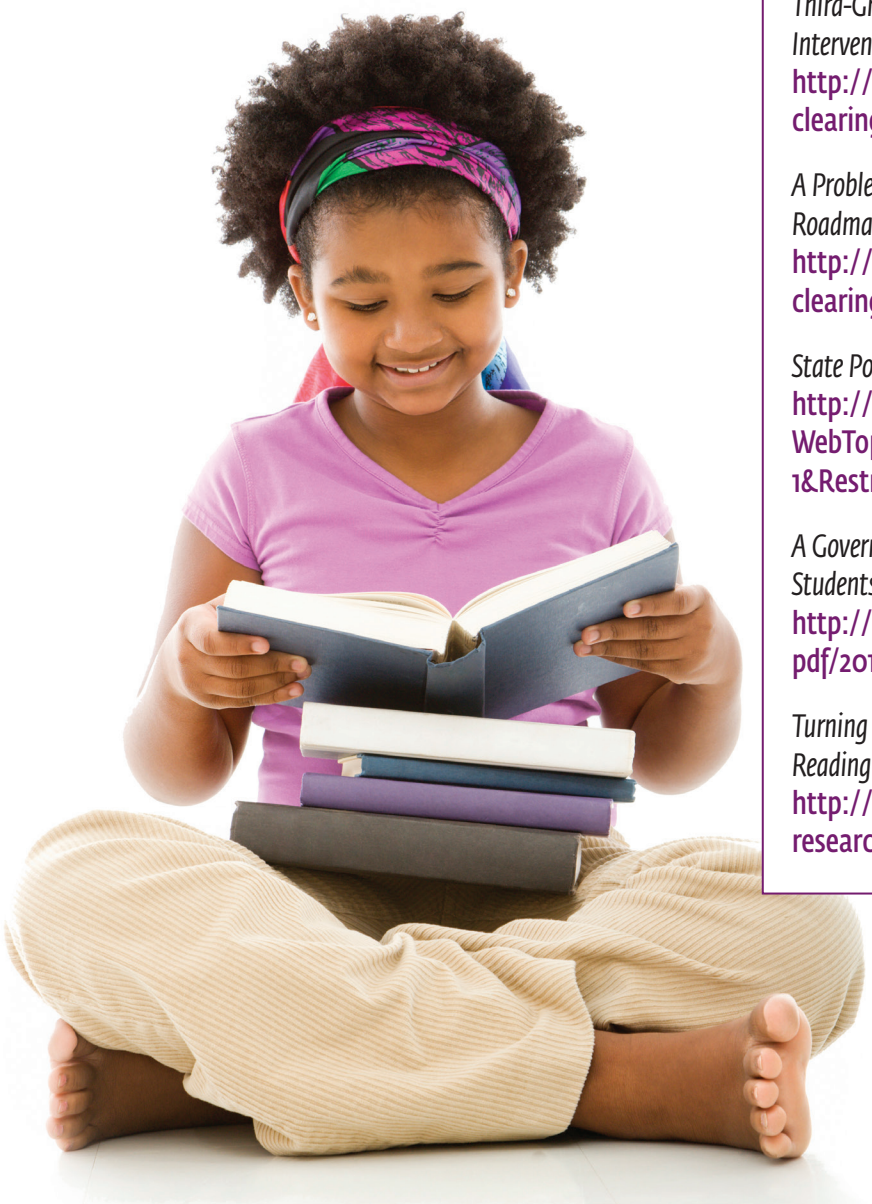
State examples

The **Colorado** READ Act, passed in 2012, requires school districts to screen and identify students in grades K–3 who are reading below grade level. Once identified, the school is charged with developing a strategy for providing extra reading support before the child reaches the fourth grade. The legislation also includes $4 million for an Early Literacy Grant Program that supports districts with literacy assessments, professional development, instructional support and appropriate interventions. It targets an additional $16 million for districts to use toward one of three literacy support programs: full-day kindergarten, tutoring services or summer school.

The **Virginia** Early Intervention Reading Initiative, established in 1997, requires school districts to provide early intervention services to all children who demonstrate deficiencies on diagnostic reading tests from preschool through third grade. The legislation provides incentive funds for school districts and requires a local match to fund support services.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *What is known about the children who are not reading proficiently in third grade? For example, are the schools they attend located in concentrated geographic areas that can be targeted for support or additional resources?*
- *What policies and systems are in place to identify and support children not on track for meeting grade-level reading goals?*
- *Is there a state agenda to ensure children are reading proficiently by third grade that involves cross-agency support, collaboration and leadership at the state and local level?*



RESOURCES

Third-Grade Reading Policies
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/03/47/10347.pdf

Third-Grade Literacy Policies: Identification, Intervention, Retention
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/01/54/10154.pdf

A Problem Still in Search of a Solution: A State Policy Roadmap for Improving Early Reading Proficiency
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/04/41/10441.pdf

State Policy Tracking Database: Reading and Literacy
http://www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicView?OpenView&count=-1&RestrictToCategory=Reading/Literacy

A Governor's Guide to Early Literacy: Getting All Students Reading By Third Grade
http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/1310NGAEarlyLiteracyReportWeb.pdf

Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success
http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/docs_research/10_TurningThePageReport.pdf

1 HIGH-QUALITY P-3 PROGRAMS

High-quality programs found to be effective in promoting positive outcomes for young children share several characteristics, including:[25]

- Highly skilled educators.
- Small class sizes and high adult-to-child ratios.
- Age-appropriate curricula and stimulating materials in a safe environment.
- An environment that is rich with language, books, print materials and conversation between and among children and adults.
- Respectful interactions between teachers and children.
- High and consistent levels of child attendance.

High-quality programs are also characterized by teachers who use observation and assessment data to inform curriculum and planning, and leaders who not only provide administrative support but also serve as strong instructional guides.[26]

Why does quality matter?

Children who have access to high-quality P-3 educational experiences demonstrate better academic outcomes and fewer behavioral problems than children who do not.[27] High-quality programs can reduce grade-level retention and special education placement while increasing children's school achievement and pro-social behavior.[28] For low-income young children, participation in high-quality programming has been found to mitigate early disparities in learning.[29] Though access to preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds has increased significantly over the past decade, the benefits of these programs (i.e., achieving success in third grade) are not likely to be realized if they do not meet critical benchmarks of quality.

What is the status of quality initiatives across the states?

Efforts to define and measure quality in P-3 settings generally fall into two categories: Systems that evaluate K-3 teacher quality and systems that evaluate early childhood (birth to 5) program quality. More than 40 states use teacher evaluation systems to examine the quality and effectiveness of teachers in the K-12 system.

Teacher evaluation systems typically include measures of student achievement and observations of teacher practice.[30] However, a national dialogue has emerged around the validity of these evaluation systems for measuring the quality of educators in the early grades since summative assessment data (that also narrowly focus on literacy and math) are not appropriate or effective measures of young children's growth and learning.[31] Instead, some states are beginning to explore the use of metrics that directly evaluate the quality of early-grade teachers, such as the K-3 Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and weigh those results more heavily in teacher evaluation systems than student outcome data.[32]

To evaluate the quality of early childhood and school-aged care settings (e.g., before/after school), 43 states have developed or are piloting a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Similar to star ratings used for restaurants and other services, a QRIS designates a quality rating based on criteria determined by the state. These criteria typically include measures of staff qualifications, training and professional development, ratios/group size, the quality of the learning environment and the involvement of parents and family members.[33]

State examples

In 2010, **Illinois** passed legislation to better prepare principals in their roles as both instructional leaders and leaders of schools that include preschool programs. Specifically, the law requires that principals obtain a new P-12 license, replacing the previous K-12 license. The law also requires institutions of higher education to be re-accredited to demonstrate that their principal licensure programs include curricula that will build capacity as instructional leaders and that it includes deeper coverage of early childhood development content.[34]

At least five states (**Colorado**, **Massachusetts**, **New Jersey**, **Pennsylvania** and **Rhode Island**) have included the CLASS as an approved measure districts can use as part of their K-12 teacher evaluation systems, which may be a more appropriate and informative measure of early-grade teacher quality than other measures.[35]

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *Does the state have a teacher evaluation system that includes performance evaluations for kindergarten through third-grade teachers?*
- *Does the state have a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to assess the quality of programs for children ages birth to 5?*
- *What percentage of programs serving children ages birth to 5 participate in the QRIS?*
- *What percent of low-income children are participating in high-quality programs?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the support systems in place to promote program and classroom quality? For example, professional development systems, the availability of P-3 degree and credential programs in institutes of higher education, and ongoing training or coaching for professionals already in the field.*

RESOURCES

How Are Early Childhood Teachers Faring in State Teacher Evaluation Systems?
http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/CEELO_policy_report_ece_teachereval_march_2014.pdf

Leading for Early Success: Building Principals' Capacity to Lead High-Quality Early Education
http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/1306LeadingForEarlySuccessPaper.pdf

QRIS and P-3: Creating Synergy Across Systems to Close Achievement Gaps and Improve Opportunities for Young Children
http://www.buildinitiative.org/portals/0/uploads/documents/resource-center/diversity-and-equity-toolkit/qris_p-3brief.pdf

Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Pre-K through Third Grade Approaches
http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd_Framework_Legal%20paper.pdf

2 ALIGNED P-3 STANDARDS, CURRICULA AND ASSESSMENTS

Learning standards define what children should know or be able to do at each grade or stage of development in areas such as language, reading, math, science, health and physical education/development. Curricula articulate an educational approach for teaching (pedagogy) and provide a framework for designing lessons and activities through interactions with materials, peers and adults. Assessments that are appropriate for young children primarily rely upon teacher observation instead of direct performance assessments (e.g., paper/pencil tests or verbal quizzes of rote knowledge). In addition, though the purpose of the assessment best dictates how the data are used, early-grade assessment data are typically best used in a formative way to guide instruction.

Why does alignment matter?

When children engage in a coherent set of high-quality P-3 learning experiences, the "fade out" effect (i.e., the notion that early gains in learning disappear later in school) is greatly diminished.[36] 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 are working toward building the set of skills and knowledge they will need as they move from a high-quality preschool to a high-quality full-day kindergarten and the early elementary grades.

What is the status of alignment initiatives across the states?

States are working to address alignment from two perspectives — horizontal and vertical. Horizontal alignment works to ensure that the standards, curriculum and assessment approaches used within a grade level are aligned. Vertical alignment works to ensure that standards, curricula and assessments are sequentially aligned as children move from grade to grade.[37] Though nearly all states have early learning standards for children ages birth to 5, not all states have aligned these standards to their K-12 standards. In some cases, they have aligned their early learning standards to the Common Core State Standards, which only include math and literacy.

State examples

Pennsylvania has developed a comprehensive set of learning standards that are aligned from birth to third grade. Pennsylvania also has taken steps to ensure that the standards, curricula and assessments used within P-3 grade levels are aligned. To support local choice, Pennsylvania provides a detailed list of approved curricula that align to the early learning standards and has produced a number of materials to help local programs and entities choose appropriate and aligned assessment instruments.

For several years, **New York** has had comprehensive early learning standards that include the major domains of development such as literacy, math, cognition, social-emotional and physical development. However, since adopting the Common Core State Standards, New York has created a new set of standards called the Pre-Kindergarten Foundation for the Common Core. The new standards include revised literacy and math standards to ensure alignment with the Common Core as well as standards related to domains of learning that are fundamental to young children's school success such as social-emotional development, physical development and approaches to learning (e.g., persistence and curiosity).

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *Are learning standards aligned for children ages birth through 8?*
- *Do the birth through third-grade learning standards cover the areas of learning and development that are critical for school success: language and literacy, math, cognition, physical development, socio-emotional development and approaches to learning (e.g., persistence, curiosity)?*
- *Are early-childhood assessments (preschool) aligned with kindergarten entrance assessments and third-grade testing?*

RESOURCES

Transition and Alignment: Two Keys to Assuring Student Success
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/84/07/8407.pdf

Building and Supporting an Aligned System: A Vision for Transforming Education Across the Pre-K-Grade Three Year
http://www.naesp.org/resources/1/NAESP_Prek-3_C_pages.pdf

Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing P-3 Alignment
http://www.newamerica.net/files/archive/Doc_File_2826_1.pdf

3 EFFICIENT P-3 FINANCING

Developing an efficient P-3 financing strategy can be challenging because no single state or federal funding stream covers the full range of programs and services for children from birth to third grade. In addition to state and local funds, there are more than 100 federal funding sources that could be used to support P-3 approaches.[38]

To further complicate the picture, most of the funding for children ages birth to 5 comes from a number of different federal funding streams, while funding for K-3 education comes primarily from state and local funds. As a result, it takes policymakers who are savvy about "blending" (i.e., combining) and "braiding" (i.e., coordinating) funds to maximize revenue, minimize inefficiencies, reduce duplication and ultimately reach more children.

To take full advantage of the funding that is available, state leadership is needed to:

- Identify the most significant and sustainable set of P-3 funds available.
- Cultivate the buy-in needed to work through the administrative challenges that come with blending and braiding funds.
- Keep multiple stakeholders dedicated to funding coordination despite inevitable changes in economic and political climate.[39]

Why efficient P-3 financing matters

The chances that children, especially low-income children, will meet third-grade learning goals is greatly improved when they have access to a consistent set of high-quality programs for a full-day/full-year from birth to age 8. Efficient P-3 financing can be used to increase program quality (e.g., training, professional development, materials, curricula), access (e.g., facilities, slots, new or expanded programs such as preschool, full-day/full-year programming) or, ideally, both.

The following list provides an initial set of funding sources policymakers might consider when developing a P-3 financing strategy.

Major federal P-3 funding sources

The Child Care and Development Block Fund (CCDF), also called child care subsidy or child care assistance, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grants administered by the U.S. Department of Education are the two major sources of funding for child care and after-school programs for low-income children. CCDF is a federal child care subsidy program (that requires a state match and a minimum 4 percent quality set aside) available to children birth to 13 living in families whose income is 85 percent below the state median income. CCLC is a $1 billion grant program for after-school, before-school and summer programming.

Head Start and Early Head Start are intensive programs that support the academic, social-emotional and health outcomes for low-income infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children. Though Head Start/Early Head Start funds flow directly from federal to local grantees, some states have found creative ways to blend Head Start funding with state general funds in order to extend programs and services to more children and families.

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA Part B and Part C) provides screening, intervention and special services to young children with disabilities from birth to age 2 (Part C) and from ages 3 to 5 (Part B).

Title I is available to school districts with high percentages of poor children and can be used to support preschool programming.

Major state P-3 funding sources

State-funded preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, most of which are in school-based settings, exist in 40 states and the District of Columbia as of early 2014.[40]

K-3 public education is typically a blend of state and local funds dictated by the state's school funding formula. Some states provide districts with funding for full-day kindergarten programs while, in other states, districts rely on a mix of state funds, local funding and even student tuition to provide these programs.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *Has a fiscal mapping of P-3 funding streams been conducted in the state and, if not, what resources could be devoted to conducting this type of assessment?*
- *If a P-3 fiscal map cannot be conducted, what information can be used to identify gaps and duplication of current funding?*
- *What are the P-3 funding priorities?*
- *What new or existing funding streams could be dedicated to these priorities?*
- *What coordination is needed at the state level to promote the "blending" and "braiding" of funding at the state or local level?*

RESOURCES

State Pre-K Funding 2013-2014
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/10/34/11034.pdf

Learning to Read: A Guide to Federal Funding for Grade-Level Proficiency
http://www.caqsap.net/uploads/reports/LearningToRead-AGuide_to_Fed_Funding_of_GLR_2011.pdf

Blending and Braiding Early Childhood Program Funding Streams Toolkit
http://www.ounceofprevention.org/national-policy/Blended-Funding-Toolkit-Nov2013.pdf

4 EFFECTIVE P-3 GOVERNANCE

Most states do not have an entity or coordinating agency that oversees the funding or programming for children from birth through third grade. While K-12 education is governed by state departments and boards of education, the programs and services for children ages birth to 5 are typically administered by multiple state agencies or entities. These entities oversee programs related to young children's health/mental health, education (Head Start/Early Head Start, child care, early intervention, pre-kindergarten and K-12) and social services (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, foster care, home visiting, family resource centers and parenting education).

As a result, state leadership is needed to designate a strategy or structure for coordinating P-3 programs and funding. To be effective, P-3 governance needs to maintain efficiency and to be established with vision and authority to accomplish short- and long-term outcomes. It is also important to note that coordinated governance does not mean all programs and services need to be co-located under the same "roof" but rather the governance entity has to have the authority needed to make decisions across multiple entities.

Why governance matters

Establishing a vision for P-3 governance sets the expectation that early care and education programs should be coordinating with K-12 systems. P-3 governance that works to support a focused agenda can also help to maximize limited resources by eliminating gaps in services and reducing duplication, increasing collaboration and potentially downsizing administrative bureaucracy.

What is the status of P-3 governance across the states?

Though no state has a P-3 governance structure, most states do have a P-16 or P-20 council, some of which have specific task forces or sub-committees focused on P-3 initiatives. In addition, a number of states such as **Arizona**, **Colorado**, **Georgia**, **Maryland**, **Massachusetts**, **Oregon**, **Pennsylvania** and **Washington** have established state- or department-level structures to coordinate early childhood programs and services. Many states also continue to convene their statewide Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC). In 2010, 45 states received $100 million in grant funding to support a statewide ECAC, which were charged with improving coordination across early care and education programs. Coordinating early care and education programs makes it easier for state departments of education to connect with the collection of birth-to-5 programs and services, making P-3 governance possible.

State examples

The **Pennsylvania** Office of Child Development and Early Learning oversees early childhood programs previously located in the departments of Education and Public Welfare, together in one office. Programs include Head Start, pre-kindergarten, early intervention (Part C programs and preschool early intervention programs), child care and family support.

Maryland consolidated a number of its early childhood programs into a single division within the State Department of Education, including state-funded preschool, the state's child care subsidy and licensing systems, the state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), kindergarten entry assessment system and early intervention services.

CRITICAL DECISION POINTS

- *Does the state have a coordinating body that either has purview over P-3 efforts or would be the logical entity to have oversight? For example, a P-16/P-20 Council, Early Learning Advisory Council, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Council or a public-private partnership.*
- *Are there duplicative coordinating entities working at cross purposes?*
- *Does the entity have the right level of authority to be effective in coordinating programs and promoting collaboration?*
- *Does the entity have the right composition of members who represent the P-3 programs and initiatives that need to be working together?*
- *Do the individuals who represent those efforts have the authority needed to implement the mission and vision of the entity?*
- *Is the entity sustainable?*

RESOURCES

A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System
http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Early%20Childhood%20Governance%20for%20Web.pdf

Governor's Role in Aligning Early Education and K–12 Reforms: Challenges, Opportunities, and Benefits for Children
http://www.nga.org/cms/home/nga-center-for-best-practices/center-publications/page-edu-publications/col2-content/main-content-list/governors-role-in-aligning-early.html

NEXT STEPS

Setting children on a path to academic success early in life is the most effective and cost-efficient way to prevent high school dropouts and secure the economic stability of our country and future workforce. Yet investments in individual programs for a single point in time cannot "inoculate" children, especially at-risk children, from school failure. Instead, a coordinated approach is needed to help young children develop and ***continue to build upon*** the fundamental skills they need to succeed in school. Public policy can play a critical role in ensuring that programs from birth to third grade are working together to prepare and sustain a child's success in school.

This brief has provided an initial list of questions that may be used as a starting point for policymakers to explore the feasibility of new initiatives or build upon current efforts. State policymakers interested in advancing one or more of these policy initiatives might start by seeking out support from ECS, an organization that can offer comprehensive services including 24-hour responses to requests for information, legislative testimony and convening the stakeholders currently involved in P-3 initiatives. Examining the status, success and challenges of existing efforts is the best way to build a coordinated agenda to increase third-grade reading efficiency, close the achievement gap and support children from birth to third grade.

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Education Commission of the States

Education Commission of the States
700 Broadway, Suite 810
Denver, Colorado 80203
www.ecs.org | ecs@ecs.org