FEB **2018**

Initiatives From Preschool to Third Grade

A POLICYMAKER'S GUIDE

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

Your education policy team.

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The period between preschool and third grade is a tipping point in a child's journey toward lifelong learning — from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."[1] 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.[2] Consider:

- Children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time.
- If they live in poverty, they are 13 times less likely to graduate on time.
- In 2016, they comprised more than half of all students (63 percent) who did not graduate on time.

Pair that with the knowledge that about 30 percent of all fourth-graders and 50 percent of African-American and Hispanic fourth-graders nationwide are reading below grade-level. Over half are likely to drop out or will not graduate on time.

If policymakers are to make a significant impact on the readiness of our nation's future workforce, interventions and strategies to address gaps in learning must begin much earlier than third grade. Research demonstrates that disparities in children's learning are evident as early as nine months of age. Policymakers have the authority to make equity-focused policy decisions that not only ensure all students receive equal access to the same educational pathways, but also provide them with the unique supports they need to succeed.

However, 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 — in part, because the funding streams and governance that oversee these programs are themselves fragmented. The lack of coordination between education programs that serve children until age 5 and the K-12 education system is becoming apparent to education policymakers. States will need to employ strong leadership to set a vision for programs, transitions, governance and funding coordination to address gaps in early learning — setting children on a path toward third-grade success and ultimately, high school graduation.

Of the 2.5 million students who dropped out of high school last year, about 1.6 million were firmly set on that trajectory when they were 8 years old.

In 2016-17, 30 states increased funding for pre-K, demonstrating overall support for expanding access.

Disparities in children's learning are evident as early as 9 months of age and persist as children continue through school.

This primer is meant to serve as a reference for policymakers and their staffs on the most common requests that Education Commission of the States receives on vital P-3 issues. Though the infrastructure needed to support a comprehensive P-3 agenda also includes elements such as longitudinal data systems, professional development systems, family engagement strategies, leadership and equitable systems designed to promote children's overall health and well-being, the primary elements policymakers inquire 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. **Kindergarten through third grade.** Quality teachers, curricula and developmentally appropriate practices.
4. **Full-day kindergarten.** Full-day kindergarten programs for 5-year-olds.
5. **Third-grade reading and math.** Innovative policies designed to identify and support children to meet third-grade reading and math goals.
6. **High-quality programs.** Characterized by exceptional educators and leaders who use ongoing data collection to inform instruction and practice.
7. **Aligned standards, curricula and assessments.** Ensuring state's learning standards, curricula and assessments are aligned to support children in P-3.
8. **Funding.** Coordinating funding streams that support P-3 programs to maximize dollars and reduce inefficiencies.
9. **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.
10. **Workforce.** Recruiting, preparing and supporting highly effective professionals who have the competencies needed to work in P-3.
11. **Dual-language learners.** Ensuring dual-language learners are prepared for school and do well once they enter public schools.
12. **Special education.** Leveraging early learning structures to support special education students in achieving academic and social success.

Each section of this guide provides an overview of the topic, a brief summary of the research rationale, a status of related initiatives across the nation, specific state examples, questions for critical decisions and links to additional resources.

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PRESCHOOL

In recent years, policymakers and practitioners have worked together to expand access to high-quality preschool opportunities, recognizing the long-lasting impact these programs have for the youngest learners. These programs are typically offered in preschools located in child care centers or school-based settings, and in most states, require the programs to meet state standards if they are receiving state funding.

Why it matters

Once considered a strategy to support working parents with child care needs, most states now view access to high-quality preschool programs as a critical long-term economic investment in the future workforce and a precursor to school success. Pre-K funding demonstrates a significant return on investment, as every $1 invested in early learning has a 13 percent-per-year return.[3] In 2016-17, all but six states provided funds for pre-K and 30 states increased funding, demonstrating overall support for expanding pre-K access. Rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participate in high-quality preschool programs are 40 percent less likely to drop out of school and 50 percent less likely to be placed in special education.[4]

Statewide initiatives

Funding for preschool access and supports for quality continues to grow in most states. In 2016, 43 percent of 4-year-olds and 16 percent of 3-year-olds were served through a combination of public pre-K programs, special education, and federally and state-funded Head Start. In 14 states, more than 50 percent of 4-year-olds utilize publicly funded programs. Additionally, state funding to support pre-K has increased by $480 million, or 6.8 percent, since 2015-16 fiscal year, demonstrating an ongoing focus across the states.[5]

State examples

The **District of Columbia** aims to provide high-quality, universal pre-K programs through D.C. Public Schools, community-based organizations and charter schools by blending state money with Head Start funding. In 2016, D.C. Public Schools served 70 percent of 3-year-olds and 81 percent of 4-year-olds.[6]

New York served 50 percent of the state's 4-year-olds through its Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program in 2016.[7] New York City has since expanded its services to 3-year-olds.

Georgia's Pre-K Program, established in 1995, served close to 60 percent of the state's 4-year-olds in 2016. A longitudinal study found participation significantly improved children's school readiness skills.[8]

Mississippi began to fund state, voluntary pre-K through the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013. The program meets all 10 current quality benchmarks established by the National Institute for Early Education Research, and will include assessments to identify students in need of interventions.

Questions to consider

- What percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds utilize state-funded pre-K?
- What is the state's capacity to implement preschool for all (that is, are there enough qualified staff and facilities available); or could a plan for scaling up capacity be developed?
- What quality standards and improvement plans are in place for state-funded programs?
- What structures are in place to support pre-K teachers and providers in accessing professional development?
- Does your state's ESSA plan support the use of Title I funding for early learning programs?

Resources

- *Indispensable Policies and Practices for High Quality Pre-K*, New America
- *50 State Review of State Pre-K Funding 2016-17 Fiscal Year: Trends and Opportunities*, Education Commission of the States
- *The State of Preschool 2016*, National Institute for Early Education Research

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TRANSITIONS

The transition to kindergarten can be challenging as it represents a shift on many fronts, from children's early care and education setting to formal K-12 schooling. Kindergarten often includes new surroundings, peers, rules, expectations and methods of learning.[9]

To support parents and children making a seamless transition to kindergarten, some states have adopted outreach strategies and developed policies to provide:

- Opportunities for teachers and incoming kindergarten students to meet over the summer at their new schools.
- Home visits by the kindergarten teacher sometimes done with the pre-K teacher, and orientation sessions for parents and students.
- Schoolwide events for new families.

Why it matters

Transitions are key to a student's academic success as they provide the opportunity for alignment across a child's early learning experiences. Transitions allow for data and other relevant information to be shared, ensuring that any gains or revelations made in the pre-K space can be transferred to the kindergarten teacher. Additionally, transition processes allow for parents to share information about their children, become part of their child's kindergarten experience and engage in the early elementary school experience.

Statewide initiatives

Examples of effective preschool-to-kindergarten transition models are most evident at local levels. However, 19 states plus the District of Columbia provide guidance, including written transition plans, family engagement, teacher/provider meetings and assessment data linkages.[10]

State examples

Maine public preschool programs must have a process in place to provide transitions to kindergarten, and that process must include family engagement. Targeted funds are available to support K-2 education and facilitate these transitions, including family outreach.

Washington passed the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, legislation aimed at improving the kindergarten transition process. Implementation of WaKIDs consists of three components designed to help ensure a smooth transition process: family connection, whole-child assessment and early learning collaboration. The family connection component requires schools to invite families to individual meetings to discuss goals and expectations for the kindergarten year.

West Virginia Board of Education Policy 2525 outlines criteria for approving and operating programs as part of the state's universal pre-K program. A section of this policy mandates that certain activities take place at the county level to aid children in transitioning out of pre-K and into kindergarten. As part of this policy, pre-K students and their families must have the opportunity to visit their prospective kindergarten setting, and counties are required to provide written information to parents about the kindergarten registration process. Additionally, county collaborative teams are required to provide an opportunity for pre-K providers to meet on an annual basis with kindergarten teachers to discuss how to best prepare students to be successful in their transition. County collaborative teams also must establish a system for transferring assessment documentation as a part of each child's transition report, which goes to the child's future kindergarten teacher.

Questions to consider

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

Resources

- *Connecting the Steps: State Strategies to Ease the Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten*, New America
- *50-State Comparison of K-3 Quality: Transitions*, Education Commission of the States
- *Transition and Alignment: Two Keys to Assuring Student Success*, Education Commission of the States

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KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE

Developmentally, the early elementary years are when children best acquire the academic and non-academic skills on which long-lasting educational success depends. A student's ability to meet grade-level expectations by the end of third grade plays a significant role in the likelihood of them graduating from high school.

Why it matters

Of the 2.5 million students who dropped out of high school last year, approximately 1.6 million were firmly set on that trajectory when they were 8 years old.[11] These are the students who were not proficient in reading and received the lowest reading scores on the third-grade literacy exam. Following a high-quality 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. Properly addressing the overwhelming importance of early elementary education requires a well-crafted, comprehensive plan that addresses the learning continuum throughout early childhood, providing students with the fundamental skills they need to succeed later. Equity in these early years is critical and means that well-prepared teachers and leaders provide instruction in a developmentally appropriate environment, with resources and services sufficient to meet the needs of all the nation's youngest learners in all settings.

Statewide initiatives

There are 13,588 school districts across the country and approximately 90,000 elementary schools, and many are making K-3 a priority: In the past four years, more than half of the states passed legislation geared toward improving third-grade reading proficiency. Additionally, 13 states require that kindergarten teachers have an early childhood education license, and four states require elementary school principals to have preparation in early language and literacy development. While these are essential steps toward improving K-3 quality, 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 set students on a path to becoming lifelong learners who experience academic and social success.

State examples

Colorado's S.B. 103 (2017) updates school improvement and turnaround plans to include early learning strategies as part of the department of education's technical assistance to these schools. This requires schools under these plans to perform a needs assessment of their early childhood landscape, in addition to a general needs assessment.

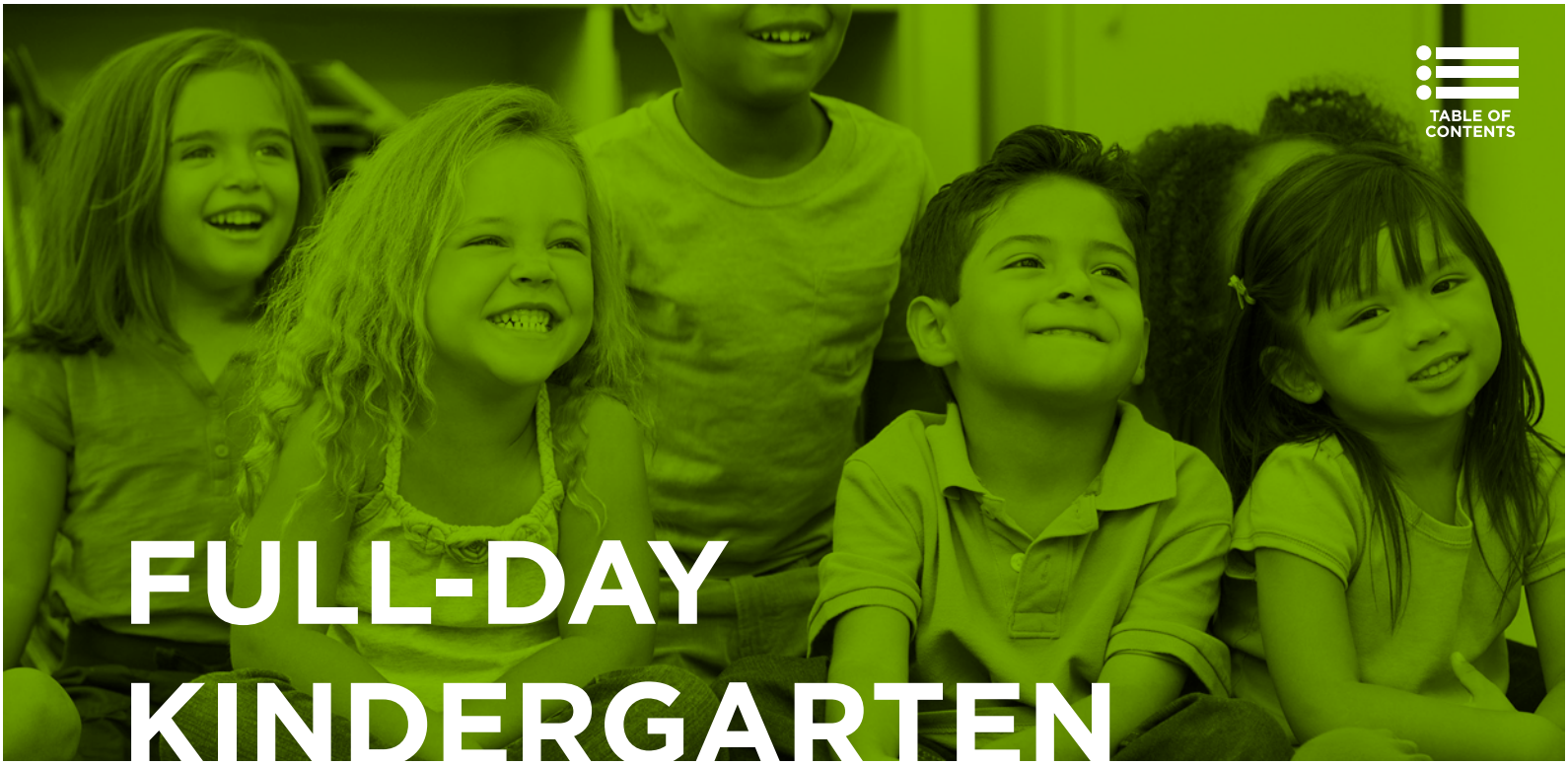
Rhode Island's governor released a plan to use school readiness, school success, safety net services and community engagement to help 75 percent of third-graders read proficiently by 2025.[12]

Questions to consider

- Does the state employ K-3 strategies for school improvement?
- Has a policy audit been completed to identify opportunities for improving the quality of the state K-3 system?
- Are there specific licensing requirements, certifications and endorsements in place for K-3 teachers that address developmentally appropriate practices?
- Are there requirements that school leader and principal preparation includes training in early childhood education and child development (such as embedded practical experiences and culturally relevant trainings)?
- Does the state education agency have a dedicated office focused on K-3 quality improvements and supports, including coordination with early learning providers and fourth-to-12th–grade programs?

Resources

- *K-3 Policymakers' Guide to Action: Making the early years count*, Education Commission of the States
- *2013 Legislative Session: P-3 Policies,* Education Commission of the States



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FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

This refers to the accessibility, affordability and length of full-day kindergarten. Thirteen states plus the District of Columbia require that districts offer full-day kindergarten programs, yet tuition and length of day varies.

Why it matters

As states look to strengthen their investments and quality in early learning, full-day kindergarten is a key component in creating a seamless early learning continuum. In 28 states, the length of full-day kindergarten is equal to that of first grade, whereas in some states program length is shorter.[13] Expanding full-day kindergarten increases the opportunity to develop the foundational skills necessary to set up students for early academic success and to be proficient readers by third grade.

Research indicates that students in full-day kindergarten make stronger academic gains in reading and math over the course of the kindergarten year than students in half-day kindergarten programs. Additionally, more time in the classroom gives children the opportunity to have a greater number of early learning experiences and child-teacher interactions that help prepare them for their academic and developmental growth. Thus, some states are looking to improve the quality of full-day kindergarten to support the gains made in the pre-K space, setting students up for success throughout their formal education. When considering kindergarten components, states are examining such issues as student-to-teacher ratios, kindergarten entrance assessments and compulsory kindergarten attendance.

Statewide initiatives

There is a great deal of disparity both within and across states on full-day kindergarten policies. For example, in states that only require half-day kindergarten, some districts fund full-day kindergarten through parent fees, fundraising and redistribution of the district's per-pupil revenue — giving some students access that others do not have. Other districts cannot, based on state policy, creating potential inequities.[14]

State examples

Nebraska offers permissive half-day kindergarten. Districts must offer half-day kindergarten options, and they receive half of the per-pupil funding for these students; however, they can also choose to offer full-day kindergarten and receive funding at the same level as other students, first through 12th grade, which financially incentivizes districts to do so.[15]

Rhode Island's S.B. 2022 (2016) changed its compulsory school age from 6 to 5 years old, making kindergarten attendance mandatory.[16]

Questions to consider

- What percentage of kindergarten students attend full-day programs?
- What is the length of day for kindergarten programs?
- Is there a ban on charging tuition to parents?
- Does your state have student-to-teacher ratios for kindergarten, and do they differ from other elementary grades?

Resources

- *Inequalities at the Starting Line: State Kindergarten Policies*, Education Commission of the States
- *50-State Review on Full Day Kindergarten: A look across the states*, Education Commission of the States
- 50-State Comparison on K-3 Quality: Kindergarten, Education Commission of the States

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THIRD-GRADE READING AND MATH

While third-grade retention policies are one reactive option for achieving third-grade proficiency, many states are now looking at structures and supports to put in place before a child is retained in third grade. Additionally, as states address early literacy, research indicates that math is equally as important as literacy skills in a child's P-3 experience. Additionally, research shows that doing more math increases oral language abilities — including vocabulary, inference, independence and grammatical complexity — even when measured during the following school year. Given the importance of math to academic success in all subjects, all children need to develop robust knowledge in the earliest years.[17]

Why it matters

Research shows that children who are not proficient readers at the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.[18] Yet nationally, 2 in 3 fourth-graders are not proficient in reading, according to the most recent data available.[19] To tackle this problem, states have responded by implementing retention policies that hold students in the third grade until they are proficient. But this can be costly and negatively affect a student's long-term academic success.

Many policymakers are now examining more preventative approaches to supporting students in becoming proficient readers, including early interventions and professional development opportunities for teachers. Some of these intervention systems include summer reading courses; reading intervention plans; additional, direct reading instruction; and coordination with a student's family.

States have also increased the value placed on proficient math skills as another key indicator of later academic success. In doing so, strategies and policies utilized to strengthen third grade reading proficiency are being implemented to bolster math achievement in the early elementary years.

Statewide initiatives

Thirty-nine states plus the District of Columbia require assessments in any or all K-3 grades, and 36 states provide guidance around what those assessment results should inform. Forty states plus the District of Columbia provide guidance around a system of interventions for struggling students. These supports help to address third-grade proficiency before reactive measures are implemented. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia require third-grade retention, and 14 of those offer conditional promotion options. All states that require retention also require a system of intervention.[20]

State examples

Arizona's H.B. 2190 (2016) revises the state's third-grade reading retention program and allows third-grade students — who are reading below grade level and receive intervention and remedial services during the summer — to be promoted from third grade.

Iowa's H.F. 2413 (2016) requires intensive reading instruction provided by the school district for K-3 students who are not reading proficiently and are persistently at risk in reading. Additionally, it requires that these students are reassessed for reading proficiency using locally determined or statewide assessments — including periodic universal screening and annual standards-based assessments — before the child is retained in third grade.

Texas' S.B 934 (2015) directs the commissioner of education to develop mathematics achievement academies for teachers who provide math instruction to K-3 students.

In **Mississippi**, interventions include supplemental instruction, K-3 transition classes, family engagement with home reading strategies, summer programs and extended day/year programs. Students who are retained in third grade must be provided supplemental instruction, progress monitoring, high-performing teachers and family engagement through home reading strategies.

Questions to consider

- What intervention systems are in place to support the early elementary years?
- Is third-grade retention required?
- Is math equally supported in the early elementary years and through professional development or teacher preparation programs?

Resources

- *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters,* Annie E. Casey Foundation
- *Math in the Early Years: A Strong Predictor for Later School Success*, Education Commission of the States
- *Unlocking Young Children's Potential: Governors' Role in Strengthening Early Mathematics Learning,* National Governors Association

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HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMS

Programs found to be effective in promoting positive outcomes for young children share several characteristics, including:

- 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 children and adults.
- Respectful interactions between teachers and children.
- High and consistent attendance rates.

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

Why it matters

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

Statewide initiatives

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 age five) 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. However, a national dialogue has emerged around the validity of these evaluation systems 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. Instead, some states are beginning to explore the use of metrics that directly evaluate the quality of early-grade teachers, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and weigh those results more heavily in teacher evaluation systems than student outcome data.

To evaluate the quality of early childhood and school-aged settings (that is, before/after school), more than 40 states developed or are piloting a Quality Rating and Improvement System. 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 parent/family involvement.

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 the capacity of instructional leaders and include deeper coverage of early childhood development content.

At least five states (**Colorado**, **Massachusetts**, **New Jersey**, **Pennsylvania** and **Rhode Island**) include CLASS as an approved measure districts can use as part of their teacher evaluation systems.

Questions to consider

- Does the state have a teacher evaluation system that includes performance evaluations for K-3 teachers?
- Does the state have a QRIS to assess the quality of programs for children from birth to age five?
- What percentage of programs serving children up to age five participate in the QRIS?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the support systems in place (for example, professional development systems, the availability of P-3 degree and credential programs in institutions of higher education and ongoing training or coaching for professionals already in the field) to promote program and classroom quality?

Resources

- *How Are Early Childhood Teachers Faring in State Teacher Evaluation Systems?* Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
- *Leading for Early Success: Building School Principals' Capacity to Lead High-Quality Early Education*, National Governors Association
- Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches, National P-3 Center

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ALIGNED STANDARDS, CURRICULA AND ASSESSMENTS

Learning standards define what children should know or be able to do in each grade or stage of development in areas such as language, reading, math, science, health and physical education. *Curricula* articulate an educational approach for teaching 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 on teacher observation, instead of direct performance. In addition, though the purpose of the assessment best dictates how the data are used, early-grade assessment data are typically used in a formative way to guide instruction.

Why it matters

When children engage in a coherent set of high-quality, P-3 learning experiences, the "fade out" effect (the notion that early gains in learning disappear later in school) is greatly diminished.[21] 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.

Statewide initiatives

States are working to address alignment from two perspectives: Horizontal alignment works to ensure alignment of the standards, curricula and assessment approaches used within a grade level, and vertical alignment works to ensure that standards, curricula and assessments are sequential as children move from grade to grade.[22] Though nearly all states have early learning standards for children up to age five, not all states have aligned these to their K-12 standards. Systemic and aligned infrastructure is significant for states 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. Because of multiple governance structures within states, few have accomplished this alignment.

State examples

Pennsylvania developed a comprehensive set of aligned P-3 learning standards, curricula and assessments. To support local choice, Pennsylvania provides a detailed list of approved curricula that align to the early learning standards, and materials to help local programs and entities choose appropriate assessment instruments.

In 2015, **Vermont** revised its standards up to third grade to create an aligned set of goals for the early learning continuum. The goals include three components: developing self, communication and expression, and learning about the world. To support these components, age and developmentally appropriate milestones are included as the standards are described.

Questions to consider

- Are learning standards aligned for children up to age eight?
- Do P-3 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 (for example, persistence and curiosity)?
- Are preschool assessments aligned with kindergarten entrance assessments and third-grade testing?
- Do districts, or does the state, have a dedicated office to support P-3 leadership and innovation to align standards, curricula and instruction, as well as adoption of teacher and leader competencies?

Resources

- *Building and Supporting an Aligned System: A Vision for Transforming Education Across the Pre-K-Grade Three Years,* National Association of Elementary School Principals
- *Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment*, New America

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FUNDING

Developing an efficient 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. To further complicate the picture, most of the funding for children up to age five comes from many different sources, while funding for K-3 education comes primarily from state and local funds. As a result, it takes policymakers who are savvy about blending (combining) and braiding (coordinating) funds to maximize revenue, minimize inefficiencies, reduce duplication and ultimately reach more children.

Why it matters

The landscape of P-3 funding varies from state to state and is scattered between various levels of government, state agencies and programs within a state. Obtaining the complete picture of how students are funded involves an in-depth analysis across many different pieces of the funding puzzle. However complicated funding systems might be, it is imperative that policymakers ensure that students have access to consistently funded, high-quality programs. Funding streams that are subject to shifting political wills or tumultuous economic cycles result in inconsistent and inefficient funding, but with planning and foresight, policymakers can develop sound financing strategies.

Statewide initiatives and state examples

Under current policy, most states have a separate funding system for pre-K than for K-3, which can include dedicated revenue streams. In **Maine**, **Oklahoma**, and **West Virginia**, funding for pre-K is allocated in the same way that it is allocated for the K-12 system, including having the same base per-pupil amount.

Pre-K Funding

There are three distinct buckets for how states fund pre-K:

- Through the K-12 funding formula.
- By program.
- No state-funded program

In 2016-17, six states (**Idaho**, **Montana**, **New Hampshire**, **North Dakota**, **South Dakota** and **Wyoming**) did not provide funding for pre-K.[23] In contrast, nine states plus the District of Columbia include pre-K programs in their education funding formulas.[24] The majority of states, however, provide funding for specific pre-K programs. For example, **Minnesota** funds three separate pre-K programs (School Readiness Program, Head Start Supplemental and Early Learning Scholarships). In addition, some states have passed statewide ballot initiatives to fund pre-K, some have utilized tobacco settlement dollars and others have passed local taxing districts.

K-3 Funding

All 50 states and the District of Columbia fund kindergarten, first, second and third grade through the same funding mechanism, commonly called a school funding formula. This dedicated funding stream is generally based on the number of students enrolled in a district, with additional weights applied for certain demographic criteria (English-language learners, small districts, etc.). K-3 funding is generally a blend of state and local revenue sources, and the funding levels vary from state to state — and even from district to district within a state. Some states provide districts with funding for full-day kindergarten, while others rely on local funds, tuition, or might not offer full-day kindergarten at all.

Questions to consider

- What are the most significant and sustainable sources of P-3 funds?
- Is there a gap or drop-off in funding between pre-K and kindergarten?
- How could the state blend funding streams together to ensure a smooth transition for students?
- Are policymakers aware of the various sources and funding streams for P-3 education? If not, could resources be dedicated to a landscape analysis to evaluate the current policy situation for P-3 funding?

Resources

- *50-State Review of State Pre-K Funding 2016-17 Fiscal Year: Trends and opportunities*, Education Commission of the States
- *The State of Preschool 2016,* National Institute for Early Education Research
- *Blending and Braiding Early Childhood Program Funding Streams Toolkit,* The Ounce of Prevention

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GOVERNANCE

Education governance is a strategy for coordinating multiple institutions at various levels of state and local government to deliver education to students. Governance helps address issues by providing structure in the form of authority and accountability to entities charged with providing programs, services and a coherent strategy for achieving goals.[25]

Although K-12 education has centralized most of the governing functions in state departments of education, the American school system is unique in its fragmented approach to education governance as it ambiguously divides key administrative functions between state government and local school districts. Early childhood programs and services are administered by multiple state agencies that handle programs relating to mental health, education (Head Start/ Early Head Start, child care, early intervention, pre-K, K-3, etc.), and social services (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, foster care, home visits, family resource centers and parenting education) — in addition to local school districts that, in many cases, directly administer early childhood programs. The complexity of P-3 administration creates numerous challenges for state and local officials — including an array of intergovernmental cooperation issues like fragmentation challenges and quality monitoring, as well as ongoing political volatility — which makes policy alignment difficult.

Why it matters

Because of the fragmentation between early learning and K-12, it is necessary for state leaders to designate a strategy or structure for coordinating P-3 programs and funding. To ensure effectiveness, P-3 governance needs to maintain efficiency and 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 should have the authority needed to make decisions across multiple entities.

States need coordinating bodies to ensure various state agencies and local governance are harmonized in their work. This is especially true in cases where responsibilities are distributed to multiple entities at different levels of government. Convoluted administrative structures create natural limits to addressing policy issues in an efficient manner and require clear institutional connections to facilitate cooperation.[26] It is important for states to demonstrate leadership by developing a coherent strategy and vision for early childhood education and working to align the mandates and goals guiding state agency action to enable effective intergovernmental cooperation that ensures the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and services.

Statewide initiatives

States have experimented with the best ways to coordinate early childhood activities across state and local government entities, and several states have made progress on key areas relating to P-3 governance improvement. In general, states have two governance strategies for early childhood education: early childhood advisory councils and state-level coordinating structures.

Early childhood advisory councils were created through federal grant incentives in 2009 to develop a high-quality, comprehensive system of early childhood development and care.[27] Since the funds were made available, 45 states have utilized them to create State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care that coordinate and promote early childhood programs. SACs seek to build infrastructure for high-quality programs, identify areas for collaboration and develop data-gathering and quality-measuring procedures. Additionally, SACs provide the framework to develop permanent early childhood governance structures. A number of states, including **Maryland**, **Massachusetts** and **New York**, passed legislation making their SACs permanent, while others have put the SACs into statute with a sunset date (when the statute will expire if not renewed).

State examples

Research shows that, as of 2013, 35 states included public pre-K oversight in the same governance structure that oversees K-12 systems.[28] Several states have passed legislation clarifying early childhood education authority and consolidating governance functions. For example, **Connecticut** created an office of early childhood, and **Oregon** established an early learning division within its state department of education. **Colorado** has similarly consolidated and aligned early childhood programs within its state department of human services and created the office of early childhood.

At least one state has begun to address early childhood issues by using a consolidated governance structure that comprehensively addresses multiple aspects of early childhood: **Washington** passed H.B. 1661 during the 2017 legislative session, creating the department of children, youth, and families, and beginning a yearlong transition to consolidate several services previously overseen by the state department of social and health services and the department of early learning.

Questions to consider

- Are there entities that are duplicating services that could be consolidated?
- Have leaders or authoritative institutions on P-3 issues been clearly identified, and are there defined duties and responsibilities assigned to those leaders and institutions?
- Are agencies' mandates and authority aligned to provide an environment for effective intergovernmental cooperation?
- What structures are in place to monitor program quality and share data across relevant agencies?

Resources

- *A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System*, Build Initiative
- State Advisory Councils, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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WORKFORCE

It is critical that early childhood educators secure the competencies necessary to develop strong relationships with their students, to provide lessons and experiences that support their development and learning, and to equitably serve children from diverse backgrounds. As research supports the importance of quality early elementary years for students both socially and emotionally, policymakers are turning more attention toward supporting teacher and leader workforce development. Since principals coach and evaluate elementary teachers, it is key that they understand developmentally appropriate practices and curricula needed in the early years. Currently, four states require that elementary school principals have preparation in early language and literacy development, demonstrating a gap in the preparation and ongoing professional development of the early learning workforce.[29]

Why it matters

High-quality early childhood programs advance young children's early development, helping to build a range of critical skills necessary for success in school and beyond. Elementary school principals and teachers have the unique opportunity to continue to set the foundation on which later academic success is dependent. To do so, it is important to have a solid understanding of academic — as well as cognitive and developmental — milestones necessary during each grade, and for states to ensure that licensing structures align with developmental science. Thirty-eight states require some form of teacher preparation or professional development in reading for K-3 educators.[30] Many of these requirements include training on reading instruction, using reading assessment results and providing interventions.

Statewide initiatives

States sometimes look at encouraging professional development opportunities between early childhood educators and early elementary teachers, recognizing that funding and school structures often alienate the two groups from providing a seamless early learning experience for students. Additionally, there are issues of broader licensing to create a more flexible workforce, and adequate preparation for teaching to the developmentally appropriate needs of the age/grade.

State examples

To build a stronger pre-K workforce that understands the needs of early learners, **Pennsylvania** created a PK-4 grade license and a (grade) 4-8 license. State policies also allow holders of either the PK-4 or the 4-8 licenses to take a test for dual certification.

South Carolina is the only state with a (grade) 2-6 license. Teachers interested in teaching in the early elementary years earn a PK-3 license, and if interested in the later elementary grades, a 2-6 license.

Questions to consider

- Do early learning teachers and K-12 teachers receive professional development sessions together?
- What licensing structures exist for both teachers and principals to receive training in developmentally appropriate practices, early literacy and math instruction?
- Is there an early childhood license offered — pre-K-3 or some variation?

Resources

- *K-3 Policymakers' Guide to Action: Making the early years count,* Education Commission of the States
- *One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Need for Specialized Teacher Licenses in the Early Grades,* New America
- *Workforce of Today, Workforce of Tomorrow: The Business Case for High-Quality Childcare,* U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

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DUAL-LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Language acquisition begins in infancy and is one of the most important developmental accomplishments in early childhood. Defined in the broadest sense, children who are dual-language learners are those who are learning two (or more) languages at the same time, or learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. These students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. As many as 22 percent of children ages 5-17 in the United States speak a language other than English at home, and their academic achievement typically lags behind that of their monolingual English-speaking peers. While these young learners stand to benefit disproportionately from high-quality early childhood programs, they are less likely than their peers to be enrolled in such programs. Given the growing number of dual-language learners, ensuring they are prepared for school and do well once they enter is an economic imperative that will directly impact their potential for later success, and our nation's future workforce.

Why it matters

The U.S. Census Bureau projects the number of dual-language learners will continue to rise in the coming decades. And estimates suggest that the number may be even higher for children under age 5, as nearly 1 in 3 Head Start participants speaks another language. On average, children who are dual-language learners and come from families of low socioeconomic status enter kindergarten behind their peers in language, literacy and math; and they experience a higher dropout rate. The good news is that dual-language learners who are proficient in English by the end of kindergarten do better academically over time.

There are many federal laws that apply to serving dual-language learners and their families, and most reflect important underlying principles of equal opportunity for all children — including the Head Start Act, Child Care and Development Block Grant, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and its implementing regulations, Equal Educational Opportunities Act, Native American Languages Act and Every Student Succeeds Act (requiring that states test annually in English language arts in grades 3-8).

Statewide initiatives

There is variability in how states track their English-language and academic progress because of differences in assessments, cut scores and data reporting. This leads to a lack of clarity on how these students perform over time and across state lines. Some states and communities have made significant strides, while others are lagging in their efforts to support the development of dual-language learners. Currently, 15 states require public preschool programs to screen dual-language students. Some states created pilot programs, task forces or committees to study best practices; others crafted legislation intended to increase funding for the support of dual-language learners; and others aligned teacher preparation standards to match this growing population.

State examples

Virginia's H.B. 241 (2016) requires the board of education to consider assessments aligned to state standards that are specific to students who are English-language learners as alternatives to state end-of-course English reading assessments.

Colorado's H.B. 1160 (2017) specifies that a K-3 student who is identified as an English-language learner can take reading assessments in English or an approved assessment in their native language. The school district or charter school must determine the student's level of English proficiency and communicate this to the student's parent.

Questions to consider

- Is there a systematic process at program enrollment for identifying children who are dual-language learners?
- Is information provided to families in their primary language?
- Is professional development for staff in culturally and linguistically responsive practice required?

Resources

- *Dual Language Learners: A National Demographic and Policy Profile*, Migration Policy Institute
- *Educating Young Dual- and English-Language Learners*, National Conference of State Legislatures
- Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

As states work to strengthen their early learning continuum, it is important they also consider supports for young students with disabilities. In 2014-15, 6.6 million students — or 13 percent of all public school students ages 3-21 — received special education services.[31] Support services for many of these students begin prior to entering kindergarten through early diagnostics and interventions, and typically continue throughout the duration of the school year. They are imperative for supporting special education students with their academic, social and emotional needs. In best practice, a quality early learning continuum supports all students in the early childhood years and beyond.

Why it matters

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensures states offer appropriate education services to students with disabilities, and requires the federal government to provide some funding to support states in this work. Though federal IDEA standards remain high, much of the funding comes from state and local governments.[32]

Each year, states must submit IDEA compliance reports indicating (1) the percentage of infants, toddlers and preschool children with disabilities receiving early intervention or early childhood programming and (2) the percentage demonstrating improved social-emotional and intellectual functioning. These required evaluations may help states identify gaps in the services provided to their youngest students with disabilities, and consider how other systems align and support special education students before academic gaps begin.[33]

For example, QRIS can be strengthened to clearly identify programs with strong inclusionary practices. At the same time, professional development can help bolster the instructional strategies and supports for all students, such as the inclusion of special education students into general education environments, when appropriate.

States have the unique opportunity to further support and often mitigate students qualifying for special education services in the early years. Purposeful interventions, smaller class sizes, increased focus on social-emotional learning and additional supports help to build off of the federal supports for students with disabilities and narrow the achievement gap between special education students and their general education peers. With transitions out of special education decreasing greatly after the third grade, the early childhood years are key.[34]

Statewide initiatives

Florida's H.B. 7053 (2016) directs the department of health to develop and implement a comprehensive information clearinghouse to educate health care providers, inform parents, and increase public awareness on brain development, developmental disabilities and delays, and all available early intervention services and resources. It also directs the clearinghouse to provide several specified services.

Connecticut's H.B. 7254 (2017) establishes additional requirements for applicants seeking a comprehensive special education or integrated early childhood and special education endorsement, whether they are already certified or applying to be certified as teachers. It also requires them to complete a reading and language diagnosis and remediation program that includes supervised practicum hours and instruction in the detection of, and evidence-based structured literacy interventions for, dyslexic students.

Questions to consider

- What teaching models (for example, co-teaching, push-in, pull-out, etc.) exist to best support special education students?
- How can intervention systems in place for all elementary students also support special education students?
- Are there supports in place for suspension and expulsions in the early years? Do these supports consider students with disabilities?
- How are QRIS and other early learning data systems incorporated with K-12 data?
- What state funding mechanisms support special education students?

Resources

- *50-State Comparison: State funding for students with disabilities*, Education Commission of the States
- *QRIS and Inclusion: Do state QRIS standards support the learning needs of all children?* Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes

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