

A different way of doing business: Examples of pre-k to third grade alignment in practice ^[1]

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Introduction

The years spanning pre-kindergarten to third grade are particularly important ones: During this time, children develop crucial social-emotional and cognitive skills that build the foundation for later success inside and outside the classroom. High-quality early learning programs have a significant positive impact on 4-year-olds' academic achievement and social-emotional skills over the course of their pre-K year. Children who attend preschool gain four additional months of learning, on average, compared with their peers who do not attend. Many studies show that cognitive gains for children who attended high-quality preschool last into early elementary school and adolescence, while others have identified a convergence of achievement scores between children who attended high-quality pre-K and those who did not by third grade. Long-term benefits, particularly gains in social-emotional learning, generally persist.

There is growing recognition among early childhood experts that high-quality early learning opportunities are necessary but not sufficient to ensure long-term success for all children. Children's experiences in early elementary school can have similarly significant and lasting effects on development, but—like for pre-K—the quality of elementary school classroom environments is highly variable. Consistent access to high-quality classrooms and schools from preschool to third grade provides opportunities for all children to build continuously upon the foundational skills developed during the first four years of life.

Early childhood is widely recognized as the most flexible developmental period for influencing children's future trajectories, and this critical period of development is not limited to the years before children enter formal schooling. Recognizing this, states and school districts across the country are making an effort to align the policy and practice in early care and education with subsequent K-12 systems. This issue brief provides an overview of some of the key components and challenges of pre-K to third grade, or P-3, alignment initiatives identified by implementers at the state and local levels. (see Appendix for full list of interviewees)

Early learning and K-12 education systems have traditionally been disjointed in the United States. Administrative oversight for early learning initiatives at the state level is often scattered and typically not housed in the same agency as elementary and secondary schools. Consequently, preschool and elementary administrators and educators are subject to vastly different policies and standards for practice. These systematic differences, coupled with divergent and sometimes competing philosophies around education and development, pose significant challenges for implementers looking to align early learning and K-12 systems.

Successful alignment from preschool to third grade requires implementers at all levels—from agency directors to superintendents to classroom teachers—to embrace policies and practices that support a consistent approach to children's education beginning in pre-K. During interviews conducted by the authors for this brief, implementers described a number of strategies and initiatives that have been and continue to be critical to their alignment efforts, namely:

- Creating a unified vision or goal for all children and identifying how P-3 alignment helps achieve that goal
- Establishing a coherent, collaborative system for the programs and services that benefit children and families
- Building and supporting leadership at all levels to influence policy and practice and to foster buy-in around the need for alignment
- Streamlining approaches to instruction through aligned professional development and standards for children's learning
- Engaging families and the broader community to meet the diverse needs of all children
- Using data to inform policy and practice and to build evaluation activities into alignment initiatives

Each of these strategies and initiatives are highlighted in detail in the following sections.

Region: United States ^[3]

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