

**Establishing an Essential Foundation:
The PreK–3 Approach to Educational Reform**

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: 1) To summarize the research that provides the foundation and rationale for a PreK-3 approach to improving early education and improving child outcomes; and 2) To outline the current context for considering PreK-3 reforms in Illinois.

The PreK-3 approach to educational reform seeks to help close pervasive achievement gaps and improve long-term learning outcomes by joining all the elements of high quality early childhood and primary education into a cohesive system. These elements include access to a continuum of full-day educational opportunities beginning at age three, high quality teaching practices grounded in research about young children's unique developmental needs and ways of learning, and supportive engagement with children's families. In the PreK-3 educational continuum, key roles are assigned to collaboration, alignment, and transitions across programs and grade levels.

Research documents the institutional barriers that PreK-3 is designed to address. These barriers include inequitable access and fragmentation of early childhood and primary education, especially for families who depend on publicly funded programs. They also include inconsistent quality across the early childhood and primary grades which contributes to the "fade-out" of educational gains from preschool participation.

At the same time, research also documents the *promise* of PreK-3 for addressing institutional problems and starting early to close achievement gaps. Findings from studies of a variety of multi-year early childhood interventions converge to show the benefits of combining early education with continued instructional enhancements and family engagement during the early elementary years. Research from the developmental sciences has yielded new knowledge about high quality PreK-3 teaching, effective transition practices, and the developmental sequences of children's early learning. This research provides further support for the potential of PreK-3 to meaningful educational reform.

Educators are integrating elements of PreK-3 into their practices with positive benefits for children. These innovations can only be sustained or expanded, however, without addressing the institutional and policy contexts within which PreK-3 operates. Illinois has made gains in regard to four key dimensions of policy relevant to building a high quality system of PreK-3 education – access, quality, accountability, and infrastructure. Wide-ranging issues and questions emerge in considering how these gains can provide the building blocks for PreK-3 reform in Illinois. The challenge will be to work collaboratively and strategically to construct new educational possibilities for our state's young children that capitalize upon advances that have already been made.

The Components of PreK–3

At its core, PreK–3 seeks to help close achievement gaps and improve long-term educational outcomes by establishing an “initial and essential foundation” for young children’s education (FCD, n.d.). It is based on the premise that an aligned system of high-quality, developmentally oriented PreK–3 education will yield benefits for all children and families, especially children whose backgrounds place them at increased risk of poor school outcomes. This includes children from low-income households, minorities, and English language learners.

PreK–3 has no single definition but encompasses the following common components (FCD, n.d.):

1. **Access to a continuum of educational opportunities that begins at age three.** PreK–3 ideally includes voluntary full-day pre-kindergarten available to all three- and four-year-old children and mandatory full-day kindergarten for all children.
2. **High-quality educational practices and teaching** that are grounded in research about young children’s unique developmental needs and ways of learning. Key dimensions of quality include
 - Alignment of educational goals, standards, assessments, and teaching strategies within and across the PreK–3 grade levels, in order to promote continuity of learning.
 - Comprehensive curricula and instructional practices that promote the development and learning of the whole child. Children’s emotional and social development is viewed as inseparable from their academic learning.
3. **Connections among families, schools, and communities** that provide assistance as children transition across programs and grade levels and offer opportunities for families to become more actively engaged with their children’s learning. Connections with preschool programs in the community are cultivated when not offered as part of a public school.
4. **Collaborative professional development and planning** among educators within and across the PreK–3 grade levels, backed by knowledgeable administrative leadership.

While many schools, districts, and states have already put selected components of PreK–3 in place, advocates of PreK–3 seek to join *all* the elements of high-quality early childhood and primary education into a cohesive system.

The Origins of PreK–3

Although the term “PreK–3” may be new to many, the approach capitalizes on what has already been accomplished, integrating and building on concepts from educational reform initiatives undertaken over the past several decades.

Chief among those concepts is the idea of preschool education itself as the first step in formal education. Head Start, a federally funded program launched in the 1960s to provide educational interventions for three- and four-year-old children growing up in poverty, marked the beginning of a trend toward increased enrollment of young children in center-based care and education programs, particularly publicly funded prekindergarten. Head Start has since been joined by a growing number of state-funded prekindergarten programs. In 1980, state-funded prekindergarten was available in only seven states (Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulma, 2003). This figure quadrupled to 28 states by 1991, and by 2009, 38 states were funding prekindergarten programs that served more than one million three- and four-year-old children (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009).

Right from the Start, the 1988 report of the task force of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), recommended new models for developmentally based teaching in the early grades and for linking preschool programs with public schools. The report’s primary recommendation was the formation of “early childhood units” in elementary schools. The intent was to promote new organizational and pedagogical approaches to public education focused on how children ages four to eight learn and develop.

A decade later, the intergovernmental National Education Goals Panel identified eight goals, the first of which was that all children in America would start school ready to learn by the year 2000. This goal included the objective of providing universal access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool. Additionally, the panel’s *Ready Schools* report identified ten research-based practices of schools that are effective in transitioning young children into their formal education (Shore, 1998). These included commitment to every child’s success, formation of strong home-school connections, and the promotion of continuity between early care and education and elementary schools—all components of PreK–3.

The Rationale for PreK–3

The PreK–3 initiative, then, was born out of the dual recognition that (1) significant achievement gaps and educational inequities for disadvantaged children persist despite other major reform efforts (including No Child Left Behind), and (2) promising reforms have often been overlooked in favor of practices and policies that are inconsistent with research-based knowledge about the early childhood foundations for academic achievement and school success.

Achievement Gaps Start Young and Widen

By many indicators, too few American children are getting off to a good start in school—and too many are not succeeding in the long term. This raises particular concern for children whose backgrounds place

them at increased risk for poor educational outcomes. Research has documented that disparities in a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development correlate with income, ethnicity, home language, and maternal education and emerge as early as nine months of age (Halle *et al.*, 2009). Children with high-risk backgrounds are less likely than their peers to have strong language and preliteracy skills when they enter school (Coley, 2002; Flanagan & McPhee, 2009). For math skills, up to a 20 percentage point gap has been shown to already exist by kindergarten entry between African American and Hispanic children and their white peers (Lee & Burkham, 2002).

Research further shows that these achievement gaps tend to widen during kindergarten and continue to grow over the early elementary years. Gaps in reading ability at kindergarten entry for African Americans, boys, and low-income children have already widened by the time more formal reading instruction begins in first grade (Chatterji, 2006). The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study documented this as a more pervasive pattern, with achievement gaps identified at school entry increasing from kindergarten to third grade (Rathburn & West, 2004).

While standardized tests in third grade and beyond provide a limited view of student learning, the results are nevertheless startling with regard to achievement gaps. The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009) showed that only one-third of the country's fourth-graders read at a proficient level and just 38 percent are proficient in math. Clear disparities are apparent in the NAEP data, with 15 percent of African American and 21 percent of Latino fourth graders demonstrating proficiency in reading, compared to 41 percent of white children. While 45 percent of fourth-graders who live above the poverty level are proficient in reading, the same is true for just 17 percent of poor children. The achievement gap in math is smaller, but still significant. The NAEP results for Illinois fourth-graders are very similar to the nationwide results. The Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) likewise indicates pervasive achievement gaps in basic reading and math skills at the end of third grade, especially for students who entered school with higher educational risk factors.

These test results have far-reaching implications because achievement in the primary grades is linked to long-term educational and life outcomes. One study found that six to seven of every ten high school dropouts could be predicted by the math, reading, and language capabilities children exhibited in the third grade (Lloyd, 1978). Another study found that reading ability in first grade was a strong predictor of reading and vocabulary skills in eleventh grade, even when controlling for cognitive ability (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). In general, research demonstrates that if children do not gain the skills and dispositions necessary to succeed in school by third grade, they will struggle to acquire and sustain the higher-level skills and motivation needed for future achievement.

Achievement Gaps Reflect Disparities in Educational Access and Quality

As striking as income and ethnic disparities in achievement are, even more striking is what research reveals about the relationship between these gaps and disparities in children's early educational experiences. Achievement gaps in elementary school and beyond have been found to relate to inequities in the availability of high-quality preschool and early education. These disparities include fragmentation of access to early learning experiences, the fade-out of benefits gained from early

education in isolation, and inconsistent quality across the PreK–3 continuum, including negative influences from mandated accountability strategies. The net result is that the current educational system not only does little to close learning gaps that exist prior to school entry, but may actually contribute to their widening.

Fragmented Access to Early Learning Opportunities

PreK–3 is based on the central tenet that all children, especially those who face educational risks, should have access to a high quality educational continuum that connects prekindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and the early elementary grades into a coherent educational experience. Research documenting positive short- and long-term effects of early interventions has established that high-quality preschool is an invaluable first step in this continuum (Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Barnett, 1995; Currie, 2001). Research also suggests that full-day kindergarten makes a meaningful contribution to children’s academic progress that is greater than the contribution of half-day kindergarten (Lee, Burkam, Ready, Honigman, & Meisels, 2006; Kauerz, 2010).

Children’s access to early education programs, including kindergarten, is hampered by the fragmented nature of early education. The current early education system is not really a system at all, but rather a loose network of programs funded and administered by different sources and with differing goals. Some three- and four-year-old children qualify for Head Start, others have access to state-funded prekindergarten programs, others attend private center-based preschool or child care, and still others participate in family child care, or any combination thereof. In 1988, the NASBE task force called this a “diverse, under-funded, and uncoordinated system.” Today, the Foundation for Child Development refers to it as a “fragmented education pipeline.”

This fragmentation is most critical for families and children whose access to high-quality early education depends on public funding. As noted, state-funded prekindergarten programs have grown in recent decades, but they are still not an institutionalized component of public education. Most states that offer some level of state-funded prekindergarten do so through grants and supplementary funding, and only thirteen states integrate the financing of state prekindergarten into the public school funding formula (Boylan & White, 2010). While all fifty states offer the federally financed Head Start program, only 16 provide funding supplements to the federal Head Start allocation. All told, only 24 percent of four-year-olds and 4 percent of three-year-olds nationwide have access to state-funded prekindergarten programs (Boylan & White, 2010), and only 10 percent of eligible three- and four-year olds attended Head Start in 2008–09 (Barnett, Epstein, Friendman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009). The bottom line is that there are not enough programs to ensure all young children have access to a high-quality early education experience.

Fragmented access persists in kindergarten, which is typically not compulsory and, like most Head Start and state-funded prekindergarten programs, is often not full day. Although kindergarten is generally accepted as the starting point for public education, it is not yet treated as an equal partner in the K-12 system. Despite increasing evidence about the benefits of attending full-day kindergarten (Lee, Burkam,

Ready, Honigman, & Meisels, 2006), half-day kindergarten is still common in the United States, with only twelve states requiring districts to offer full-day kindergarten (Kauerz, 2010).

Fade-Out Effects and Inconsistent Quality in the Early Grades

The rationale for a PreK–3 approach is based not only on the fragmentation of early education opportunities but also on the need to prevent the well-documented fade-out of the benefits of early education. The Abecedarian Project and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, the gold standards of research on the benefits of comprehensive, high-quality preschool, both showed long-term positive impacts on children into adulthood (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005). Research on the long-term effects of other, less-intensive early childhood interventions, however, has produced mixed results. Studies of state-funded prekindergarten programs and Head Start indicate that while children do show improvement at the end of participation, most of those gains fade out by kindergarten or first grade (Currie & Thomas, 2000; Gilliam & Zigler, 2000).

There is enough evidence of this fade-out phenomenon to establish that the inoculation approach to early childhood education—in which one or two years is viewed as enough to set a child on a new course—is not realistic. In the words of early childhood expert Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (2003), "to expect effects to be sustained throughout childhood and adolescence, at their initial high levels, in the absence of continued high-quality schooling is to believe in magic." Rather than a belief in magic, PreK–3 is based on the understanding that high-quality programs for three- and four-year olds is a valuable first step in improving the educational trajectories of children at-risk of poor school performance, but longer-term success requires consistent quality across the early elementary years.

Research has shown that a major factor contributing to fade-out is the quality of experiences in the early grades, which is generally poor, or variable at best, for the most educationally vulnerable students (Brown & Bogard, 2007; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Indeed, one large-scale study showed that children belonging to a minority group, children with low preschool achievement, and children from low-income families were twice as likely to be in a low-quality rather than high-quality first-grade classroom (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2009). This same pattern has been found to be generally true for Head Start students, low-income children, and African Americans, who, as a result, show greater fade-out effects (Currie, 2001; Currie & Thomas, 2000; Entwistle, 1995). Lee and Loeb (1995) sum up the situation by describing gains made in early education programs as being "structurally undermined" by poor quality primary education.

Negative Impact of Current Accountability Strategies

More specific concerns about inconsistent quality in the early grades have escalated as school practices and policies have been increasingly shaped by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related accountability strategies. Curricula have narrowed the focus of teaching to the content of high-stakes standardized tests that start in third-grade, leading to an overemphasis on rote learning in reading and math, with little attention paid to science, social studies, the arts, or play-based learning (Cooper, 2009; Maeroff, 2006). Because low-performing schools face particular scrutiny in this atmosphere, children already at risk educationally are more likely to be affected by these push-down pressures. The net result is that

achievement gaps are often exacerbated by broader gaps in learning opportunities, with young children from low income households being offered a basic skills curriculum while children from higher income households receive an enriched array of educational experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

There is also a trend toward a more rigid, one-size-fits-all application of grade-level standards and expectations (Meisels, 2007). Increased pressure is exerted for three- and four-year olds to get “ready” for kindergarten, and for children at each early grade level to meet expectations on a short-term schedule. This trend has reportedly hampered the use of flexible organizational structures, such as multi-age groupings, which can facilitate individual responsiveness to young learners as well as help avoid practices known to be harmful in the early grades such as grade retention and low ability tracking (Entwisle, 1995; Chatterji, 2006; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Hong & Yu 2007; Silbergliitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). The PreK–3 approach incorporates a commitment to accountability through the use of standards and assessments, but seeks to reform practices and policies to ensure they are compatible with current knowledge about how young children learn.

The Research Basis of PreK–3

PreK–3 holds promise for addressing institutional problems and starting early to close the achievement gap. The PreK–3 approach is grounded in research, including studies that have shown the benefits of combining early education with continued instructional enhancements during the early elementary years. Research from the developmental sciences lends further support for the potential contributions of PreK–3 to meaningful educational reform.

Research from Multi-Year Early Education Interventions

There is still little research available on programs that are explicitly identified as “PreK–3.” Findings from research on a variety of multi-year early childhood interventions converge, however, to suggest the promise of the approach.

The Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) intervention was implemented in the 1980s to facilitate the academic success of low-income children (Reynolds, 2000). The CPCs incorporated preschool, kindergarten, parent supports, and two to three years of on-going intervention into elementary school (e.g., reduced class sizes, instructional enhancements). Longitudinal research on outcomes for CPC participants found that children who participated in the program showed higher achievement, lower retention rates, lower placement in special education, and higher high school graduation rates than children in a control group (Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 2000; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). The effects were greatest for students who participated in the program through the early elementary school years, compared to those who participated during preschool only.

The National Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Demonstration Transition Project provides additional research support for the value of a multi-year approach. This project was authorized by Congress in 1990 to explore the benefits of providing additional services to children, their families, and the schools they attended following participation in Head Start. These post-preschool supports included

efforts to promote developmentally appropriate practices and continuity in the children’s schooling through the early elementary years. The results of the intervention were positive. While the Head Start children participating in the project had below-average reading and math skills when they entered kindergarten, most were performing at the national average by the end of third grade (Ramey *et al.*, 2000).

Finally, data from the large-scale Early Childhood Longitudinal Study have also been analyzed to examine the impact of multi-year early education supports on young children’s achievement (Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2006). Components of the PreK–3 approach that were considered in the analysis included whether children attended preschool or full-day kindergarten, the level of their parents’ involvement in their schooling, the stability of their K–2 school environments, and the amount of time spent on literacy instruction in kindergarten. Results showed that children who experienced more of these components had higher achievement and lower grade retention rates than children who had fewer or none of the components. These results were most pronounced for children living in poverty. Another analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that collaboration by PreK–3 teachers to align curricula, another central component of PreK–3, was also related to increased achievement for children (Brown & Bogard, 2007).

Developmental Science Research and PreK–3 Components

Taken together, research findings from multi-year early education interventions suggest that the components of the PreK–3 approach can combine to make a positive contribution to young children’s learning, providing the pathways through which more children will achieve success by the end of third grade. Additional research-based support for PreK–3 is provided by the burgeoning body of developmental science research on early learning and development (Ritchie, Maxwell, & Bredekamp, 2009).

In highlighting ages three through eight as a unique educational period, the PreK–3 approach assigns key roles to the interrelated elements of high-quality and developmentally appropriate teaching practices, transitions across grades, alignment, and individualized flexibility (Sameroff & Haith, 1996). The recent convergence of scientific evidence about the integral connections among child development, social-emotional competence, subject matter learning, and academic achievement provides a significant resource for informing efforts to advance the effectiveness of education from prekindergarten through the early grades.

High Quality Teaching

PreK–3 is grounded in research showing that high-quality teaching must be present consistently across the early grades to yield enduring benefits for children’s achievement. But what defines high-quality teaching in the context of PreK–3? Recent advances in developmental science highlight essential characteristics of effective teaching for young children.

Research is clear that children’s academic and cognitive growth is inseparable from their emotional and social development (Eisenberg, 2006). Teaching that builds on responsive interpersonal attachments

and incorporates strong instruction with an emotionally positive classroom climate has repeatedly been shown to correlate with greater social and academic outcomes for children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). And while it has long been acknowledged that effective PreK–3 teachers apply knowledge of young children’s unique developmental characteristics to plan and deliver instruction (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), new research reveals that effective teaching requires a much more complex repertoire of developmentally-informed, content-specific instructional strategies than previously assumed (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Horowitz, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005).

Researchers are continually building a deeper understanding about the developmental sequences of children’s learning in core content areas, including the trajectories of early learning in math, language, and literacy (e.g., Clements & Sarama, 2009; Dickinson, 2006). Research in this area is still evolving, but it is clear that the fundamental concepts and skills that are precursors to more advanced academic and intellectual attainment cannot be overlooked if children are to continue to progress and flourish in school. It is therefore crucial that PreK–3 educators understand the interplay between child development and content-area learning and be able to apply this knowledge in the classroom. This recognition—that there is no dichotomy between developmental appropriateness, including attention to social-emotional development, and academic and intellectual “rigor”—is central to the promotion of high quality teaching across the PreK–3 continuum.

Transitions and Alignment

Transitions from grade-to-grade play a central role in promoting or interrupting children’s educational progress across the PreK–3 continuum (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). Studies have confirmed that children who experience positive transitions from preschool through first grade are more likely to sustain and build upon the cognitive benefits of preschool and are less likely to be placed in low ability tracks (Entwisle, 1995; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Research has further confirmed that effective transitions should incorporate (1) personalized engagement with both children and families; (2) initiation of transition activities before the school year begins; and (3) emphasis on on-going communication and collaboration between early childhood programs and schools (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001; Mangione & Speth, 1998). While these forms of transition support are resource-intensive, their benefits make them worthy of attention in PreK–3 practice and policy reforms (La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999).

In addition to the value of relationship-based transition activities, research makes it is clear that transitions must occur in an environment in which standards, curricula, and assessments are aligned (Kagan, Carroll, Comer, & Scott-Little, 2006; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). By applying their knowledge of child development, subject matter content, and pedagogical approaches to align educational experiences along the PreK–3 continuum, educators ensure that children enter classrooms that promote their on-going educational progress by building on what they learned during the previous year. This alignment is particularly critical given the new knowledge we have about the developmental sequences of early learning.

Flexibility and a Longer-Term View

One of the most well-documented developmental characteristics of the PreK–3 age span is that variations in children’s rates and ways of learning are predictably wider during that time than during any other period (Sameroff & Haith, 1996). This variability in young children’s learning has been further amplified by the increased racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of children currently entering school. What science tells us about the variability in development during early childhood points directly to the hazards of a short-term view of learning and development and the application of one-size-fits-all educational mandates.

The emphasis of PreK–3 on a “coordinated continuum” of educational experiences across several years necessitates a longer-term, more flexible view of children’s pathways toward high achievement. The effectiveness of the PreK–3 approach depends upon the extent to which the underlying premise of flexibility is actualized through both practices and policies. In the words of one commentator, “the years from prekindergarten through third grade loom as a proving ground for the ability of schools to absorb diverse children and provide each of them with a worthy education” (Maeroff, 2006).

Critical Issues and Key Policy Considerations for Adopting a PreK–3 Approach to Educational Reform in Illinois

While educators and administrators across the U.S. are integrating components of the PreK–3 approach into their practices, these initiatives cannot be successfully sustained or expanded without addressing the larger institutional and policy contexts within which PreK–3 operates. Illinois has made selected gains in this regard, but a cohesive policy framework for PreK–3 remains to be developed. Looking at four broad dimensions of educational policy — access, quality, accountability, and infrastructure — we asked *What basic systems-level building blocks for a PreK–3 approach currently exist in Illinois? What policy-relevant issues and questions emerge in considering PreK–3 reform?*

Access: Ensuring Universal Access to Full-Day Early Learning Opportunities

A fundamental component of PreK–3 is access to a learning continuum that begins with voluntary full-day prekindergarten to all three- and four-year olds and mandatory full-day kindergarten for all children. While school districts usually have some flexibility in how they implement prekindergarten and how extensively involved they are with Head Start, policies and funding established at the state level affect factors such as how many programs are offered, who is eligible to attend, and how much instructional time is provided.

State-funded Prekindergarten and Head Start Enrollment and Funding

Illinois has long been considered a leader in providing state-funded early childhood programming, having done so since the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) was established in 1985 to support prekindergarten for three- and four-year olds in addition to programs and services for children from

birth to age three. Beginning in 2003, a minimum of 51 percent of children enrolled in state-funded prekindergarten had to be deemed at risk. New legislation has increased that number to 80 percent as of fiscal year 2012. Three- and four-year olds at risk of poor school outcomes also have access to Head Start programs.

Despite its commitment to early education, approximately 70 percent of the state's three-year olds and 57 percent of its four-year olds are still not enrolled in either publicly funded prekindergarten or Head Start. In fiscal year 2009, enrollment in these programs in Illinois was as follows (Barnett, Epstein, Friendman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009):

- 95,000 three- and four-year olds were enrolled in state prekindergarten funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant, representing 21 percent of Illinois three-year olds and 29 percent of four-year olds
- 33,000 three- and four-year olds were enrolled in Head Start, representing 8 percent of Illinois three-year olds and 11 percent of four-year olds

Because ECBG funds must be appropriated by the legislature each year, Illinois's state-funded prekindergarten program is subject to political support and budget allocations. A strong early childhood advocacy community in the state has supported the growth of the ECBG over the years and in 2006 legislation was passed to make prekindergarten universal. Yet expansion has stalled due to budget shortfalls. In fiscal year 2010, the ECBG budget was cut for the first time ever (by 10 percent). So far funding has remained at that level; however, this has been accomplished as a result of intervention by the governor. Because of the state's long commitment to funding prekindergarten through the ECBG, Illinois does not provide funds for Head Start beyond the match required by federal regulation.

Full-Day Programs

While many young children in Illinois have access to publicly funded prekindergarten and kindergarten, many do not have access to full-day programs. State funding for Preschool for All covers 2.5 hours of daily instructional time and the majority (54 percent) of children attending Head Start are in part-time programs. Illinois requires all school districts to offer kindergarten; however, kindergarten attendance is not mandatory, and districts are not required to offer full-day kindergarten. In the 2009-10, 72% of kindergarten Illinois children attended full-day kindergarten (Voices for Illinois Children, 2011).

Policy-Relevant Questions Related to Ensuring Universal Access

- How can we increase the stability and sustainability of funding for state-funded prekindergarten and Head Start?
- How can we ensure that the children who most need state-funded prekindergarten and Head Start have access to it?

- How can we expand the availability of full-day publicly funded early education programs, including Head Start, prekindergarten, and kindergarten? Are there ways existing funds can be used to support this expansion?
- Are there additional federal funds, such as Title I, that can be used to increase access to prekindergarten and other supports within the PreK–3 continuum?

Quality: Supporting High-Quality Teaching in PreK–3 that Is Grounded in Developmental Knowledge

It is not enough to provide children with access to early childhood education. The potential success of the PreK–3 approach is based, more than anything else, on high-quality teaching throughout a child’s progression from prekindergarten through third grade. Successful implementation of PreK–3 requires a renewed, strengthened approach to preparing and supporting educators of young children—an approach in which knowledge of young children’s development is central and ages three through eight are viewed as a continuum during which key foundational learning occurs. This requires careful consideration of the content and structure of teacher education and principal preparation programs, teacher certification requirements, and professional development (NCATE, 2010).

Preparing PreK–3 Teachers

PreK–3 is based on an ever-increasing body of research documenting the importance of teaching that builds on knowledge of child development (NCATE, 2010). Effective PreK–3 teachers must also have a firm grounding in a range of content areas and a related repertoire of pedagogical approaches appropriate for both the subject matter and children’s developmental trajectories. Regrettably, the field is falling short in this area. Early childhood teacher preparation programs across the U.S. have been found to focus heavily on literacy, with significantly less time spent preparing early childhood teachers in other content areas (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2005).

In addition to its focus on developmentally-informed content, high-quality PreK–3 teaching requires the knowledge and skills to respond effectively to the developmental and learning needs of a population that is becoming increasingly ethnically diverse. For example, the percentage of Latino children ages 9 and under in Illinois increased more than two-fold in one decade, growing from 11% in 1990 to 24% in 2009 (Voices for Illinois Children, 2011). The Developmental and Educational Needs of Culturally Marginalized Children (DENCMC) study at Erikson Institute is examining how institutions of higher education prepare teachers to work with young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Findings from the study indicate that Illinois institutions are insufficiently and unevenly preparing pre-service teachers in this area. The study’s researchers are currently exploring strategies for increasing the capacity of teacher education programs to more effectively meet the need for culturally responsive early childhood educators (Ray, Bowman, & Fleming, 2010). One impetus to such advances is a new Illinois mandate that prekindergarten teachers in transitional bilingual and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs hold a bilingual and/or ESL endorsement by 2014.

Closely linked to teacher preparation, the structure of educational certifications has broad implications for supporting high-quality teaching in PreK–3. Illinois, like many other states, currently offers separate early childhood (Type 04) and elementary (Type 03) teacher certifications, which overlap for grades K–3. Type 04 certification covers programs for children from birth through third grade, while Type 03 covers kindergarten through grade 8. Because of these overlaps, there are no clear patterns in the certifications held by PreK–3 teachers. At the prekindergarten level, teachers in Illinois Preschool for All programs are required to hold a Type 04 early childhood certificate, but this is not a requirement for Head Start teachers. At the elementary level, administrators typically prefer the flexibility that comes with hiring someone who can teach all elementary grades, so there is reduced incentive for teachers to obtain the early childhood (Type 04) certificate. As a result, many teachers in kindergarten and the early primary grades have little specialized knowledge about teaching and learning at the PreK–3rd grade levels.

Preparing Principals to be PreK–3 Leaders

It goes without saying that high-quality teaching must be supported by effective administrative leadership. The PreK–3 approach places increased attention on the importance of specialized child development knowledge and experience for elementary school principals. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has worked to develop federal legislation that would provide funding and guidance for professional development that teaches principals about developmentally appropriate practices for young children. This professional preparation would include strategies to bridge the gap between pre-kindergarten and the primary grades, ways to support K–3 teachers, and approaches to building a school culture that supports young children’s learning (NAESP, 2010).

Illinois is one of the few states to take legislative action to make changes to elementary school principal preparation requirements. A state law passed in the summer of 2010 (Public Act 96-0903) reforms the process for recruiting, training, and certifying K–12 school leaders and requires colleges and universities to redesign principal preparation programs by July 1, 2014, to “emphasize the role of the principal as the school instructional leader.” One significant new development is that principal preparation programs are now required to include increased course work in child development and experience in an early childhood setting—all of which would enable principals to be more effective PreK–3 leaders.

Providing Coordinated Professional Development across the PreK–3 Grades

PreK–3 requires not only high-quality teaching within each classroom but also on-going collaboration among educators across grade levels in order to provide a seamless, aligned educational continuum. This can be especially challenging to implement because professional development for early childhood and elementary teachers is typically separated by grade level, with prekindergarten (and sometimes kindergarten) teachers participating in different activities than teachers in the elementary grades. This is further exacerbated by the differing administrative auspices and mandates under which prekindergarten and K–12 education operate, as well as organizational and time constraints that limit opportunities for collaboration across programs and grade levels. While there are barriers to providing on-going PreK–3 teacher professional development even when prekindergarten is located within an elementary school, a

recent Illinois study documented that it is particularly rare for this to occur when principals and program directors have to reach outside their buildings to facilitate such collaboration (LINC, 2009).

Policy-Relevant Questions Related to Supporting High-Quality Teachers in PreK–3

- How can we increase the number of PreK–3 teachers and administrators who have specialized early childhood preparation, certification, and professional development?
- How can we ensure that all PreK–3 teachers are adequately prepared to work with children from diverse backgrounds?
- What needs to be done to reduce barriers and provide incentives for joint professional development across programs and grade levels for PreK–3 teachers and administrators?
- How can we ensure that schools provide the structures and time for on-going collaboration among PreK–3 educators?

Accountability: Establishing Standards and Assessments that Are Compatible With the PreK–3 Approach

Quality assurance and accountability provisions such as student learning standards, kindergarten readiness assessments, and high-stakes tests are increasingly impacting prekindergarten, kindergarten, and the primary grades. This has raised significant questions about how best to ensure program quality and accountability in early schooling.

Student Learning Standards

Developing shared understandings about what young children need to know and be able to do is at the core of educational quality and accountability. Increasingly, states are implementing early learning standards to identify key characteristics of high-quality programs for young children. In 2001, just 14 states had implemented early learning standards, but by the 2008–09 school year 47 states had standards in place (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009). The Illinois State Board of Education approved the Illinois Early Learning Standards in 2002, with the stated goal of “provid[ing] teachers and caregivers useful information that is directly needed as part of their daily classroom work.” (Birth-to-three standards were also approved at the same time.) The Early Learning Standards focus on ages three to five years and were designed to be aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards for K–12.

In 2010, Illinois adopted the Common Core Standards to replace the Illinois K–12 standards that had been in place since 1997. The Common Core Standards are the result of an effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers to establish “a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce.” They specify content that “each child in America should know by the end of each year between kindergarten and 12th grade.” While the Illinois K–12 standards covered a wide range of areas, including science, social studies, physical and social/emotional development, the Common Core Standards

address only English/language arts and mathematics. This has caused concern among educators that the trend toward narrow curricula will be further fueled, resulting in less attention to other subject areas at all grade levels, including PreK–3.

Kindergarten Readiness

As new grade level standards are implemented, “kindergarten readiness” has re-emerged as a policy issue, and it has significant implications for PreK–3. If standardized assessments are used to determine whether a child is ready for kindergarten, the result could be that many children who have risk factors are denied entry with the rest of their age group, which could play a role in widening the achievement gap. To be compatible with PreK–3, a kindergarten readiness assessment would need to recognize the unique ways and rates at which children learn and develop.

In partnership with the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Advance Illinois, Erikson Institute is coordinating the Illinois Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Planning Initiative on behalf of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The overall goal of this effort is to develop recommendations for ISBE to develop a uniform kindergarten assessment process in Illinois. The purpose of the assessment is to document the skills and achievements of children throughout the kindergarten year. Assessment results will provide teachers information to guide their instructional practices, as well as enable the state to be more strategic in its efforts to allocate instructional resources, provide professional development to teachers, align the early childhood and K–12 systems, and monitor trends over time.

High-Stakes Testing

No Child Left Behind (2001) ushered in a new era of educational accountability. Under NCLB, states are held responsible for establishing standards for making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and must demonstrate such progress starting with third-grade students. School accountability systems based on the “high stakes” standardized assessments used to measure student achievement and AYP have changed educational experiences starting with the early childhood and primary grades, placing the pressures of testing on young children, teachers, and school administrators.

In response to these pressures, elementary schools have focused significant energy on preparing children for the third-grade standardized tests. Teachers are spending more time on test preparation (which often emphasizes rote learning and memorization) and as a result, less time on other, more effective, pedagogical approaches, such as those promoted by PreK–3. Administrators report that this counter-productive situation of having third-grade metrics drive PreK–3 practices will not be fully remedied until school performance indicators are expanded to include developmentally informed, validated measures of educational effectiveness and quality relevant to the early childhood and primary grades.

Ensuring Teacher Quality

In 2010, Illinois passed the Performance Evaluation Reform Act, requiring districts to adopt new teacher and principal evaluations that incorporate student growth as a “significant” factor. A Performance Evaluation Advisory Council has been convened to work out the details for implementing this new law, including establishing definitions of what constitutes effective teaching and performance at different grade levels as well as creating valid methods to measure and collect information on student growth.

As these implementation details are considered, it will be critical for Illinois to ensure that knowledge of child development is incorporated into the performance evaluation of teachers in PreK through third grade (NCATE, 2010). Research-based knowledge about high-quality teaching and learning in PreK–3 points to the importance of using multiple measures to assess teachers’ performance in the classroom and establishes the inappropriateness of relying on children’s performance on standardized tests as a measure of teacher quality. There is already interest in using reliable and valid observational measures of the quality of early childhood teaching practices, including social-emotional and instructional support. The Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), one of the more prominent measures used to assess early childhood teaching, has been adapted for use in Preschool for All classrooms across Illinois. Results from the CLASS are used to guide decision making about Preschool for All teacher professional development and other supports.

Policy-Relevant Questions Related to Standards and Assessments

- How can we ensure the state’s early learning and common core standards are aligned and encompass critical domains of early learning and development?
- What assessment systems need to be developed and implemented across PreK–12 to promote system-wide alignment and support continuous improvement in the quality of PreK–3 teaching and learning?
- What are the most appropriate and effective ways to assess PreK–3 program and school accountability? How would this fit into a larger PreK–12 accountability system?
- How can we ensure that the methods of assessing teacher effectiveness are meaningful and appropriate?

Infrastructure: Building Administrative Structures to Sustain a PreK–3 Continuum

Successful implementation of PreK–3 reforms requires bringing together disparate systems into a coordinated and aligned educational experience starting with prekindergarten and continuing through third grade. Ideally, this continuum would also be closely linked with birth-to-three programming, as well as education in grades four and beyond. There are significant challenges inherent in building an infrastructure consisting of multiple sectors (which include government agencies, local school districts, and community-based organizations) and areas of focus (such as birth-to-five, preschool, and K–12), but these connections are necessary for creating an aligned educational experience for children.

Multiple Funding Streams and Administrative Auspices

Illinois funds early childhood education and services through multiple state agencies and funding streams, including the Department of Children and Family Services (child care services for children in the DCFS system), the Department of Human Services (child care reimbursement for low-income families; early intervention services) and the Illinois State Board of Education (Early Childhood Block Grant; early childhood special education; Title I; and Even Start). With so many different agencies funding and overseeing early childhood programming and no central coordinating body, the state does not currently have a cohesive early childhood system. This poses a challenge for connecting these programs with one another and with elementary schools.

Of the 40 states with prekindergarten programs, only one-third fund them through the K–12 public school funding formula. Far more frequently, prekindergarten is funded through grants that are subject to legislative appropriations (as is the case in Illinois) or supplements to the federal Head Start grant (Boylan & White, 2010). Preschool programs that are funded in these ways are more susceptible to cuts—as well as total elimination—than those that are incorporated into the public education funding formula. Some advocates, such as PreK Now, argue in favor of “embedding pre-k within the state’s school funding formula” in order to best ensure “equitable, sufficient and sustainable prekindergarten funding that supports quality, grows with enrollment to meet demand and has the capability to serve all children.”

Coordination and Governance Structures

In addition to bridging multiple funding streams, coordination and governance structures are critical at the state and district levels to support the type of educational alignment and shared accountability systems required in a PreK–3 approach. The Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2007 created a requirement that every state establish an Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC). The purpose of the councils is to bring together early childhood stakeholders to communicate with each other and inform state policies and practices related to early childhood education. Illinois has already laid the groundwork for this collaboration, having established the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC) in 2003. The ELC’s goal is to develop a comprehensive early learning system to meet the needs of children from birth to age five. While neither the Head Start ECACs nor the Illinois Early Learning Council have PreK–3 as a focus, they provide a platform for creating a more coordinated early childhood system. Any effort in Illinois to implement PreK–3 statewide would need to be closely linked to the ELC’s existing work in support of education goals and standards as well as teaching strategies and teacher professional development.

A related recent occurrence prompted by federal action has been the creation of statewide P–12, P–16, and P–20 councils, which consist of representatives from education, business, and policy sectors and seek to increase educational alignment in order to improve outcomes. While prekindergarten is technically the “P” in these councils, they are typically based on goals for the upper end of the learning continuum, and thus tend to take a top-down approach that emphasizes outcomes such as high school graduation rates, college attendance, and workforce participation. Illinois established a statewide P–20 council through legislation in 2007 that began meeting in late 2009. The Illinois P-20 Council addresses

recommendations for developing a statewide system of quality education and support from birth through adulthood (graduate and professional school). Early childhood education advocates have a strong case for emphasizing the importance of building a solid foundation on which the later grades can build and should call for active inclusion of PreK–3 components in the state’s P–20 Council.

Use of Data for Evaluation and Planning

The education field is increasingly recognizing the importance of comprehensive, longitudinal data systems to inform planning, and decision making, as well as provide useful information about program impact. While many states have had K–12 longitudinal data systems for years, only recently has there been movement towards incorporating prekindergarten and early childhood special education programs into those systems. Illinois has received more than \$9 million in federal funds to expand and improve its longitudinal data system, including assigning unique student identification numbers to children in state-funded prekindergarten programs rather than waiting until they enroll in kindergarten (Illinois State Board of Education, 2008). The unique identifier will enable the state to track student progress from prekindergarten through grade 12. This type of data system has potential to facilitate the kind of information sharing that is crucial to establishing the continuum of learning required in a PreK–3 approach.

Policy-Relevant Questions Related to Building Administrative and School Structures to Support PreK–3

- What organizational and administrative structures are needed at the state and district levels to promote a PreK–3 approach?
- What roles should statewide councils assume in advancing PreK–3?
- How can separately funded and administered early education programs be incorporated into a coherent system of PreK–12 education?
- What needs to be done to coordinate the funding streams cross the PreK–3 continuum?
- What critical changes in law or policy are needed to enhance our capacity to implement a PreK–3 approach statewide?

Conclusion

Public school educators are currently under intense pressures, including coping with budget cuts, managing increased accountability mandates, meeting new standards, and generally being asked to do more with less. Understandably, educators and policy makers are hesitant to consider new, optional reforms during such trying times. So, why take heed of PreK–3?

In the urgency to reverse pervasive achievement gaps, educational reforms that are consistent with what science tells us about building the early childhood foundations for long-term school success have routinely been overlooked. Our current policies and practices thus continue to pay little cohesive attention to children’s development and learning prior to third grade. The net result is that the

educational system does little to close learning gaps that exist prior to school entry for far too many children, and may actually contribute to their widening.

It does not have to be this way. Research highlights the promise of a PreK–3 approach in adding value to broader educational reform initiatives. In Illinois, we likewise have a number of basic systems-level building blocks in place to mount a coordinated and comprehensive use of PreK-3 as a strategy for improving educational outcomes. The major paradigm shift that is required of both educators and policymakers to realize an effective PreK-3 vision should not be underestimated (Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008). In another sense, though, PreK-3 merely provides us with an explicit framework for capitalizing on what has already been accomplished in advancing early education.

Through this paper, we set out to identify the policy-relevant issues and questions that emerge in considering a PreK-3 approach to educational reform in Illinois. Collective thought and commitment will now be required to ensure that the dialogue continues – and that actions to realize the promises that a high quality system of PreK–3 education holds for children, families, and society remain a focus of educational reform debates.

DRAFT

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