

# High-Quality PreK–3rd in the Age of Common Core

## Summary of Proceedings

On February 6, 2012, Erikson Institute hosted a forum entitled *High-Quality PreK–3rd in the Age of Common Core*. Cybele Raver from New York University provided the keynote address. Other speakers included Jennifer Cheatham, John Price, and Stephen Zrike, Jr. from Chicago Public Schools; Charles Payne from the University of Chicago; and Jie-Qi Chen, Sarah Dennis, and Gillian Dowley McNamee from Erikson. The speakers' biographies are below. This paper provides a synthesis of the ideas presented during the event.

In recent years, many studies have highlighted the importance of children's academic achievement for later success in college, career, and adult life. Governments, school districts, and individual schools have placed increasing emphasis on the need for rigorous academic programs to advance student learning. Far less attention has been paid to the appropriate meaning of rigor in the prekindergarten through third grade classroom or to the role of social-emotional skills in students' academic success, even though research has demonstrated the importance of taking a developmental, holistic perspective to advance young children's learning.

At Erikson Institute's *High-Quality PreK–3rd in the Age of Common Core* forum, researchers and practitioners grappled with how much emphasis teachers and schools should place on the acquisition of content knowledge and



academic skills versus helping children develop strong social-emotional skills. Striking this balance has been particularly challenging in an era of intense accountability for student performance. The forum, hosted by Erikson's New Schools Project and its Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy, brought together speakers from a variety of backgrounds

## Key Components of PreK–3rd Initiatives

PreK–3rd initiatives include the following:

**A continuum of education that begins at age three.** Ideally, this includes access to voluntary full-day pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-old children and mandatory full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds.

**High-quality educational practices and teaching.** These should be grounded in research about young children’s developmental needs and ways of learning and should include the following:

- Alignment of educational goals, standards, assessments, and teaching strategies within and across the prekindergarten through third 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.

### Connections among schools, families, and communities.

Schools are well connected to families and communities, and relationships between

elementary schools and preschools in the community are cultivated when prekindergarten is not offered at a public school.

**Collaborative professional development and planning.** Educators within and across the prekindergarten through third-grade levels learn and plan together and are supported by knowledgeable administrative leadership.

to explore what the integration of academic rigor and support of children’s social-emotional development should look like in an early childhood classroom.

## A Case for More Rigorous Instruction

Presenters at the forum underscored the need to improve academic performance and close achievement gaps beginning in the early years. In pre-kindergarten through third grade, children are developing the foundation upon which further learning is built; it makes sense that students who perform poorly in the early grades will be more likely to perform poorly in high school. In fact, a wealth of research indicates that children’s early cognitive development is strongly related to their academic achievement in school, and academic achievement in kindergarten through third grade is a predictor of high school graduation.<sup>i</sup> In Chicago, 37% of third graders do not meet grade level reading standards, and 21% do not meet grade-level math standards.<sup>ii</sup> Looking at third grade achievement by race, 14% of white students, 39% of

Latino students, and 42% of black students do not meet reading standards, and 6%, 19%, and 28%, respectively, do not meet math standards. Considering these statistics, it is not surprising that 42% of Chicago students do not graduate from high school, with 33% of white students, 37% of Latino students, and 47% of black students not graduating.<sup>iii</sup>

Benchmark	Overall	White	Latino	Black
Do not meet third grade reading standards	37%	14%	39%	42%
Do not meet third grade math standards	21%	6%	19%	28%
Do not graduate from high school	42%	33%	37%	47%

Echoing education reform proponents and policy makers, several presenters from Chicago Public Schools—including Jennifer Cheatham, chief instruction officer; Stephen Zrike, Jr., Pilsen-Little Village network chief; and John Price, Burnham Park network chief—discussed the potential for the new Common Core State

Standards (CCSS) to assist districts and schools in increasing rigor in the classroom and improving children’s academic performance and readiness for college and career.<sup>1</sup> Forty-five states (including Illinois) plus the District of Columbia have adopted these new standards for English/language arts and mathematics. According to Cheatham, Chicago will implement the standards using a phased-in approach beginning in the 2012–13 school year. “These standards will better define for teachers what to teach,” said Cheatham. She believes that the standards, coupled with a new instructional framework and a longer school day, will provide teachers with a platform to dramatically improve instruction in classrooms. Zrike added that the CCSS—if couched in a philosophy that values children’s active thinking, inquiry, and dialogue—can provide an opportunity for schools to transform the quality of teaching and learning.

### Developmentally Appropriate Rigor

Young children can—and should—be provided with rigorous educational environments that afford opportunities to learn important concepts in math, science, literacy, social studies, and art. However, the methods of instruction and types of learning experiences must be appropriate for young children. Sarah Dennis found in her work as a professional development facilitator with Erikson that principals and teachers often struggle to understand the appropriate and meaningful roles that rigor can assume in prekindergarten through third grade.

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<sup>1</sup> The Common Core State Standards were developed through a state-led initiative, coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts, with the goal of providing a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce. The standards can be found at: [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).

Jie-Qi Chen, principal investigator of the Early Mathematics Education Project at Erikson, proposed that rigor is about encouraging young children to think deeply about concepts and big ideas from academic content areas (e.g., math, science, language). The teacher’s role in rigorous learning is to themselves understand these big ideas, set up experiences that actively engage children’s intellect, and intentionally provide information and ask questions that guide children toward deeper understanding. Chen and Gillian McNamee, professor and director of Teacher Education at Erikson, pointed out that standards and curricula should be used to support teaching and learning but not in a way that disregards children’s developmental needs. They reminded participants that the new standards in and of themselves will not provide a silver bullet to transform the quality of teaching and learning.

### The Role of Social-Emotional Development in School Success

Early childhood experts and advocates have long articulated the need for teachers and schools to support and promote children’s social and emotional development, as well as their cognitive growth, in the early learning environment. Charles Payne, Frank P. Hixon Distinguished Service Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, asserted in his comments that recent reforms in education have led schools to become too narrowly focused on academic achievement, while neglecting the social-emotional domain. Low-income and minority children are most affected by this shift because they often require a more explicit and stronger focus on the development of the social skills and attitudes needed to connect with others

and to be able to take full advantage of learning opportunities in the classroom. Payne pointed out that although schools' concern for children's social-emotional development can be justified by its impact on academic achievement, it is important in its own right.

Cybele Raver, director of both the Institute of Human Development and Social Change and the Children's Self-Regulation Lab at New York University, presented a description and findings of research she conducted to determine the degree to which a social-emotional intervention could have short and long-term effects on preschoolers' executive functioning and ability to self-regulate and, in turn, influence their learning. Children with poor social-emotional development often exhibit disruptive behaviors and have difficulty connecting with teachers and peers, which can severely limit the opportunities for their own and their peers' learning. Children displaying these behaviors are likely to have difficulty with executive functioning, which includes inhibiting impulses, maintaining attention, and having a good working memory, and self-regulation, or the regulation of their emotions.<sup>iv</sup> Yet, studies have shown that classrooms in low-income communities may be under-resourced and ill-equipped to handle the emotional and behavioral needs of many of the children they serve.<sup>v</sup>

Raver sought to determine whether preschool classrooms and children in low-income communities might benefit from an intervention targeting children's executive functioning and self-regulation skills. Raver selected Head Start programs throughout Chicago in which most parents were working and faced a range of poverty-related stressors. Teachers in the programs tended to earn low salaries, and one-third reported high levels of stress and low confidence

in managing children's behavior in the classroom. Classrooms were randomly assigned to receive an intervention, which included support for the teacher and children by a mental health professional, or to a control group, in which each classroom was provided with a teacher's aide.

Raver's research found that the preschool intervention significantly reduced children's behavior problems in the classroom. Additionally, there was significant improvement in children's executive function, attention, and impulsivity. These outcomes demonstrate that a child's ability to self-regulate is malleable and can improve through better-managed, emotionally supportive early education classrooms. Raver's team also found that children in the treatment group performed considerably better on language, letter naming, and early math tasks, demonstrating that children in classrooms where teachers intentionally foster self-regulatory skills were better able to take advantage of instruction and learning opportunities.

Though children in Raver's study showed notable gains in both social-emotional and academic skills in preschool, additional studies demonstrated that the children did not consistently maintain these gains over time. Rather, the maintenance of gains was dependent on children's further school placements; children who went on to high-quality schools maintained their gains, while children who went to lower-quality schools did not. Raver's findings underscore the fact that, while beneficial, a one-time intervention in preschool cannot serve as an inoculation against later poor-quality educational environments. Children need sustained, aligned, high-quality experiences throughout the primary grades in order to maintain a positive trajectory of learning.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Raver's research and the information provided by other forum presenters has implications for both district and school policies and teacher practice in prekindergarten through third grade classrooms. In order to support children's development and achievement, educators should:

- 1. Redefine rigor.** All students benefit from being challenged to think, solve problems, and express ideas in an environment that is appropriately supportive. Even young children can think and problem-solve in rigorous ways. The key to elevating the quality of prekindergarten through third grade classes through appropriate rigor is to provide rich content, active learning experiences, materials, time, and intentional teacher guidance that inspire young children's curiosity, engage their intellect, and respond to their unique developmental characteristics.
- 2. Explicitly focus on social-emotional development.** Findings presented at the forum call for schools and districts to be *more intentional* in the support of students' social emotional development rather than focusing solely on students' academic achievement. Research has shown that participation in various activities can improve a child's executive function, including computerized and noncomputerized games; physical activity such as yoga, aerobics, and martial arts; and school curricula such as the Incredible Years and Tools of the Mind.<sup>vi, vii</sup> Successful interventions involve repeated practice and progressively increasing challenge to executive functions. These interventions tend to benefit children with the worse executive functions the most, and early interventions offer an opportunity to prevent achievement gaps later.

- 3. Ensure an aligned, high-quality environment from prekindergarten through third grade.** Students benefit when schools offer a continuous PreK–3rd approach that intentionally focuses on building each student's learning from one year to the next. A PreK–3rd approach offers an alignment of standards, curriculum, assessments, and professional development across the early grades. Students benefit from having a consistent and individually responsive pathway of learning, which can lead to increased gains in academic achievement. An aligned approach to PreK–3rd education is an essential first step towards closing the achievement gap.

## Conclusions

Young children benefit most when teachers and schools support both their academic and social-emotional development. One-year interventions and high-quality educational experiences in a single grade are not enough to maintain a trajectory towards success in school, college, and career. Ultimately, students learn best when they progress through a high-quality, rigorous, and responsive system of learning that spans from prekindergarten through third grade.

We would like to thank the Joyce Foundation for its generous support of *High-Quality PreK–3rd in the Age of Common Core*.

## Speaker Biographies

The speakers listed below participated in *High-Quality PreK–3rd in the Age of Common Core*. To view their taped presentations, visit [www.erikson.edu/newschools/nspevents/nspcc.aspx](http://www.erikson.edu/newschools/nspevents/nspcc.aspx).

### Jennifer Cheatham

*Chief Instruction Officer, Chicago Public Schools*

Dr. Cheatham's expertise lies in developing instructional alignment and coherence across urban school systems to achieve breakthrough results in student learning. She has worked as a chief area officer for Chicago Public Schools, the executive director of curriculum and instruction for San Diego City Schools, and a professional developer for the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). She holds a master's in education from the University of Michigan, and a master's and doctorate in education from Harvard University.

### Jie-Qi Chen

*Professor and Principal Investigator, Early Mathematics Education Project, Erikson Institute*

Dr. Chen is a Fulbright Senior Specialist and an applied child development specialist whose work focuses on cognitive development, multiple intelligences theory, classroom assessment, early mathematics education, and school-based intervention. Dr. Chen earned her Ph.D. from Tufts University and received post-doctoral training with Howard Gardner at Harvard University.

### Sarah E. Dennis

*Professional Development Facilitator, New Schools Project, Erikson Institute*

Dr. Dennis designs and delivers PreK–3rd grade teacher professional development and coaching through the New Schools Project. She has more than 10 years of experience as an instructional coach across community-based preschool, Head Start, and public school settings. Dr. Dennis earned a master's degree in literacy and a Ph.D. in teaching and learning at New York University.

### Chris Maxwell

*Director, New Schools Project, Erikson Institute*

Dr. Maxwell has directed the New Schools Project since 2009. She previously served as a professor of early childhood teacher education at Winthrop University and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Most recently, she was a curriculum coordinator and principal in the Milwaukee Public Schools. Dr. Maxwell earned her Ph.D. in childhood education at Florida State University.

### Gillian Dowley McNamee

*Professor and Director of Teacher Education, Erikson Institute*

Dr. McNamee works closely with Erikson's early childhood teacher candidates as they prepare for their educational careers, and provides long-term consultation to teachers in schools. She is the author of books on early literacy and assessment for teaching and learning. Dr. McNamee earned a Ph.D. in education, specializing in reading and language, from Northwestern University.

**Charles Payne**

*Frank P. Hixon Distinguished Service Professor,  
School of Social Service Administration,  
University of Chicago*

Dr. Payne's interests include urban education and school reform, social inequality, social change, and modern African American history. His recent books include *So Much Reform, So Little Change* and *Teach Freedom: The African American Tradition of Education for Liberation*. Dr. Payne served as the acting executive director of Chicago's Woodlawn Children's Promise Community in 2010–11. He holds a doctorate in sociology from Northwestern University.

**John Price**

*Chief of Schools, Burnham Park Network,  
Chicago Public Schools*

Mr. Price is a career educator who has taught in California and Chicago. Prior to his appointment as a CPS network chief, he served as principal of Audubon Elementary School from 2006 to 2011. Under his leadership, Audubon became a model of inclusive schooling practices for children with significant disabilities. The school was awarded a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Award for School Improvement in 2011 for its overall academic performance. Mr. Price earned his undergraduate degree from Stanford University and a master's degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**Cybele Raver**

*Director, Institute of Human Development  
and Social Change, and Director, Children's  
Self-Regulation Lab, New York University*

Dr. Raver examines the mechanisms that support children's self-regulation in the contexts of poverty and social policy, and regularly advises local and federal agencies on promoting school readiness among low-income children. She and her research team also study self-regulation among older children in classroom contexts. Dr. Raver earned her Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Yale University.

**Stephen Zrike, Jr.**

*Chief of Elementary Schools, Pilsen-Little  
Village Network, Chicago Public Schools*

Dr. Zrike leads a Chicago Public Schools network of 26 schools. He previously served as principal of several Boston public schools, including turn-around principal for the William Blackstone Elementary School. Dr. Zrike holds both a master's degree in education and a doctorate in the Urban Superintendents Program from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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## About Erikson

Erikson Institute is the nation's only graduate school to focus exclusively on child development from birth to age eight. Erikson brings the newest scientific knowledge and theories of children's development and learning into graduate education, professional training, community programs, and policy making.

Erikson's **New Schools Project** partners with principals and teachers in Chicago Public Schools to establish effective learning environments for children in prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms. The New Schools Project is supported by the McCormick Foundation, Joyce Foundation, W. Clement

and Jesse V. Stone Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Perkins Hunter Foundation Fund at The Chicago Community Trust, and Chicago Public Schools.

**Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy** conducts original research, evaluations, and analysis to inform, guide, and support effective early childhood policy. The center was launched with a major gift from the Jeffrey Herr family. It has since been supported by the Jeffery Herr family, McCormick Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and the Children's Initiative, a project of the Pritzker Family Foundation.

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