

# From Birth to Third: Aligning Education Systems



CASE STUDIES IN PARTNERSHIPS



## Elgin District U-46: Investments in Coordination and Alignment

This is one brief in a series of four case studies that was developed to document strategies used by elementary school districts in Illinois, to promote an integrated educational experience for children from birth to 3rd grade. Research has shown that children who have access to well-aligned and integrated programs are more likely to achieve academic proficiency and sustain growth over time. The brief below highlights one community—Elgin—and the impacts that school district leaders and their partners have made to enhance early learning as the first step along children’s educational pathway from birth through elementary school.

The goal of Elgin School District U-46’s *Give Me Five!* campaign is to ensure that every child in the district is prepared to be successful in kindergarten. A key partner in achieving *Give Me Five!* goals is the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL), a group that includes representatives from child- serving and community organizations such as the Advocate Sherman Hospital, Elgin Community College, United Way, Elgin Library and Health Department, in a community-school district partnership to benefit young children and families. U-46 and EPEL work independently and in tandem toward improving school readiness outcomes and addressing birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade goals.

Thanks to the *Give Me Five!* and U-46 partnerships, more children and families have access to early education, more young children receive support in their transitions into the public schools, and when they get there, more young children are exposed to an aligned approach to instruction.

### Elgin U-46: Community Snapshot – 2013-14

- |                                   |                            |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • District Enrollment: 40,332     | Percentages of students:   |
| • Pre-K – 8 <sup>th</sup> grade   | • White: 31%               |
| • Community: City                 | • Black: 7%                |
| • Low income: 60%                 | • Hispanic: 50%            |
| • Student mobility: 11%           | • Asian: 8%                |
| • English language learners: 25%  | • Multi-race ethnicity: 3% |
| • Students with disabilities: 12% | • Homeless: 2%             |

### Elgin U-46: Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Highlights

- **Cross-Sector Work:** U-46 established and invested resources in the Department of Early Learner Initiatives to spearhead early childhood work and its *Give Me Five!* campaign, an action plan to improve early learning. To reach one of its goals, U-46 has joined the United Way of Elgin and the Grand Victoria Foundation in creating the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL) to design a birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade system in Elgin.
- **Instructional Tools:** U-46’s *Give Me Five!* campaign establishes common messages about supporting young children’s school readiness. The campaign informs prekindergarten, kindergarten, and 1<sup>st</sup> grade instruction. U-46 also has a comprehensive approach for supporting Dual Language Learners that spans early childhood and elementary school years.
- **Continuity and Pathways:** U-46 Early Learner Initiatives staff provides intensive transitions support to 1,000 children entering the school system every year and reach other young children and families through workshops with local child care providers and other community-based organizations.

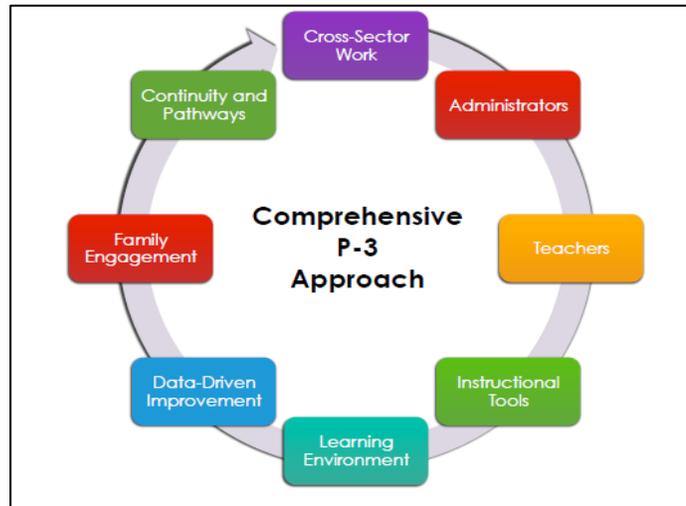
## Elgin U-46's Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reform Highlights

Below are *some* important successes that early childhood partners, Elgin U-46 and EPEL, have achieved in meeting birth-3<sup>rd</sup> grade educational goals: (1) cross-sector work; (2) Instructional tools; and (3) continuity and pathways. As depicted in the figure below, these areas are intergral to a comprehensive approach to birth to 3rd grade reform.<sup>1</sup>

### Cross-Sector Work: Investing in Collaboration

U-46 supports cross-sector work in two ways. First, it has developed The *Give Me Five!* campaign, a strategic plan focused on school readiness and improved reading abilities in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The campaign serves as the unifying framework for U-46's school readiness strategies and addresses common messaging, strengthening programs with research-based improvements, increasing family and community involvement, and aligning programs and systems. Focused on expanding community collaboration, U-46's Director of Early Learner Initiatives, who

oversees the district's early childhood services, is a liaison between U-46 and the broader community and the central player in building the partnerships to implement *Give Me Five!* A critical component of her work is to participate in the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL), the second way that U-46 supports cross-sector work. EPEL's mission is to improve school readiness in Elgin. With support from U-46, the United Way of Elgin, and the Grand Victoria Foundation, EPEL has secured adequate funding to hire a director to coordinate and drive the partnerships' collaborative school readiness efforts.



### Instructional Tools: Aligning Instruction and Assuring Continuity for Dual Language Learners

The *Give Me Five!* campaign informs U-46's instructional strategies from birth through 1<sup>st</sup> grade. As a result, school leaders have strengthened prekindergarten instructional practices and aligned them with developmentally sound teaching in kindergarten. U-46 staff are working to more closely integrate the 1<sup>st</sup> grade curriculum with prekindergarten and kindergarten instruction. Since the initiative launched, the district has seen positive trends in young children's learning. U-46 is steadily approaching its reading goal for 1st graders; 80% of 1<sup>st</sup> graders are now reading at grade level.

U-46 instructional alignment also includes an organized strategy for supporting Dual Language Learners (DLL), beginning with infant and toddler home visiting services in which seven of their ten home visitors speak Spanish. Pat Chamberlain, former U-46 Director of Early Childhood and expert on serving linguistically and culturally diverse children shared, "it is our passion and goal to support the underserved Hispanic children in the age 3 to 5 settings. So, getting into homes where Spanish is spoken is important." From there, U-46 uses evidence-based strategies for dual language instruction from prekindergarten through kindergarten. Chamberlain added, "The Bilingual Director, Early Learner Director, and Special Education Director have collaborated, found great intersections, and are building high-quality programs."

<sup>1</sup>See eight reform areas displayed in the figure from, Kauerz, K. & Coffman, J. (2013). *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

## **Continuity and Pathways: Expanding Access and Improving Young Children’s Transitions into Elementary School**

U-46 supports children’s participation in a continuum of early care and education with two strategies. First, U-46 has increased access to early childhood services. Since the *Give Me Five!* campaign launched, U-46 has added 7 preschool classrooms. U-46 also provides children who are unable to enroll in its programs with access to play-and-learn groups that are led by U-46 educators and held daily at different locations in the community. Finally, U-46 has a full-day kindergarten program that targets intensive support to the children most at-risk for poor school outcomes. This program serves 18% (250) of Elgin’s kindergarten students.

Second, U-46 has invested in supporting transitions. U-46 has a Kindergarten Transition and Head Start Liaison, who works with two paraprofessionals to support children entering the school system. Colleen Bandy from One Hope United Elgin Child and Family Resource Center affirmed the importance of U-46 support for transitions: “They see upcoming issues and try to get 0-3 screening information to preschool teachers. The Liaison keeps an eye on those kids to ensure consistent services.” The U-46 *Give Me Five!* budget also funds three part-time Community Liaisons who make connections with area child care centers and private preschools. They share kindergarten readiness expectations, screen children, and provide tailored professional development specific to each center’s needs.

### **Pivotal Opportunities for Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reform**

Elgin’s leaders noted several key events that moved them to create a well coordinated birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade educational continuum. Some of these opportunities may resonate with other communities that are pursuing birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reforms.

#### **External Funding Helped Leaders Rethink Early Education**

Julie Kallenbach, former Director of the Early Learner Initiatives, shared that one impactful event “was when we got a big grant for Early Reading First. That was a bit of a turning point for us in terms of the school district. We started looking at more research-based practices” to improving early education with coaching. This opportunity highlighted the importance of early development and encouraged U-46 to adopt a more robust approach to early education.

#### **Changes in the District’s Organizational Structure Unified Early Learning**

U-46 made a critical administrative decision when it moved kindergarten under the leadership of the Early Childhood Director changing the position from the Director of Early Childhood to the Director of Early Learner Initiatives. This was a “very powerful shift to connect instruction between Pre-K and the K-12 system,” said Julie Kallenbach. With this change, U-46’s Preschool for All and special education preschool classrooms, which are located in both local school and community- based organizations, became integrated into district-wide instructional planning. For example, they have built an aligned, developmentally appropriate preschool to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade assessment system under the leadership of the District’s Assessment Department.

#### **The Mayor and Superintendent’s Leadership Elevated Early Childhood**

Robust leadership in Elgin helped drive educational coordination. When former U-46 Superintendent Dr. Torres joined the district, it was clear that he understood the value of early childhood and embraced the idea of community collaboration. Elgin’s Mayor also added momentum with a strong commitment to early childhood and a view of education as an economic development tool. An historic

Education Summit in 2013 brought together 175 residents from Elgin’s education, community services, and business sectors. Following the Mayor’s summit, Elgin committed to adopting the Nashville-based Alignment, a cradle-to-career initiative that is engaging new partners, particularly in the business community, to support Elgin’s birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade work.

## Lessons Learned

In reflecting on their work, Elgin’s early childhood and elementary school staff had several lessons for other communities focused on birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade initiatives.

### **Build Trust**

Lynne Bosley, Executive Director of United Way Elgin and EPEL participant, said that participating in a community collaborative “hinges on trust. On getting to know one another and understanding the motivations of one another and what are you willing to give up to get to the common good.... We were able to build that over the years but we had to move really slowly.” Trust lays the foundation to be able to make tough decisions about the partners’ priorities on behalf of young children.

### **Be Strategic, Not Programmatic**

EPEL and U-46 stakeholders agreed on the importance of being strategic. According to Lynne Bosley, “Initially we were going about it the wrong way. We were about tactics, not strategy... We were looking to create programs to fill gaps, but were not thinking about building a system.” Then, they engaged an experienced facilitator who “made us get a mission, vision, and plan.” In order to design a strategic approach, they agreed on a consensus model of decision-making. Kris Young from the YWCA Elgin noted the value of this approach in setting priorities. “We each have our passions, but whatever order we put them in are all good. Maybe my first priority is now third, but I can live with that. We all want us to do everything.” As EPEL works with U-46 on their 3-year strategic plan, the group will collaboratively address their priorities.

### **Take Time and Celebrate the Small Wins**

Elgin’s early childhood leaders suggested that birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reform groups look for easy wins in order to build support for their work. EPEL Director Casey Amayun said they have identified “the intermediate successes that we can share and assure people we are moving.” In other words, “celebrate the small wins.” They are collecting “both the quantitative and qualitative data to talk about the growth we have made and what the story is behind the numbers and what can we discuss.”

## Conclusion<sup>2</sup>

Building off strong relationships, Elgin’s partners have developed deep collaborations that are helping to establish a continuum of excellent care and instruction for children from birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. They are poised to act on their strategic goals and ensure that all children and families thrive in U-46.

---

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful for the insights shared by several key members of Elgin’s community, including Casey Amayun, Colleen Bandy, Lynne Bosley, Jennifer Beuche, Pat Chamberlain, Theresa Heaton, Theresa Forthofer, Julie Kallenbach, and Kris Young. For more information about Give Me Five! contact 847-888-5000 ext. 6991.