

# From Birth to Third: Aligning Education Systems



CASE STUDIES IN PARTNERSHIPS



## Oak Park District 97: Leveraging Resources for a Comprehensive, Collaborative, Community-Based Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade System

*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 cohesive learning environments are more likely to achieve academic proficiency and sustain growth over time. The brief below highlights one community – Oak Park – 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.*

Frustrated by the achievement gap in their schools, community leaders in Oak Park began to focus on early education and brain development research over a decade ago. They recognized that a comprehensive approach to education was needed, starting before children enrolled in kindergarten, to reach their goal of providing *all* of Oak Park’s children with a stellar education.

Oak Park’s District 97, High School District 200, and the Village of Oak Park made a joint investment in the Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood to spearhead efforts to build a community-wide early childhood system in partnership with more than 60 organizations. The Collaboration provides all local early childhood professionals with training and education and is building an infrastructure to provide young children with quality services from birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

### Oak Park Community Snapshot – 2013-14

- District Enrollment: 5,922 Pre-K – 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - Community: Village
  - Low income: 25%
  - Student mobility: 5%
  - English language learners: 2%
  - Students with disabilities: 14%
- Percentages of students:
- White: 56%
  - Black: 23%
  - Hispanic: 5%
  - Asian: 4%
  - Multi-race ethnicity: 11%
  - Homeless: 2%

### Oak Park Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Highlights

- *Cross-Sector Work:* The Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood was established in 2002-2003. It now has funding from all of Oak Park’s governmental agencies, individual donors, and foundations to lead the community’s Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade work.
- *Teachers:* The Collaboration makes significant investments in professional development, hosting an annual symposium that includes child care professionals, kindergarten teachers, early intervention specialists, and others. It provides coaching and a content specific training series each year. Preschools and child care centers receive support to participate in developmental screenings and make referrals to schools and early intervention when indicated.
- *Data-Driven Improvement:* The Collaboration is developing a comprehensive shared longitudinal database to inform school and early childhood program improvements.
- *Family Engagement:* The Collaboration supports all families with factors that may place children at-risk of poor developmental outcomes in Oak Park through the Parents as Teachers home visiting program and a new Parenting Resource Program.

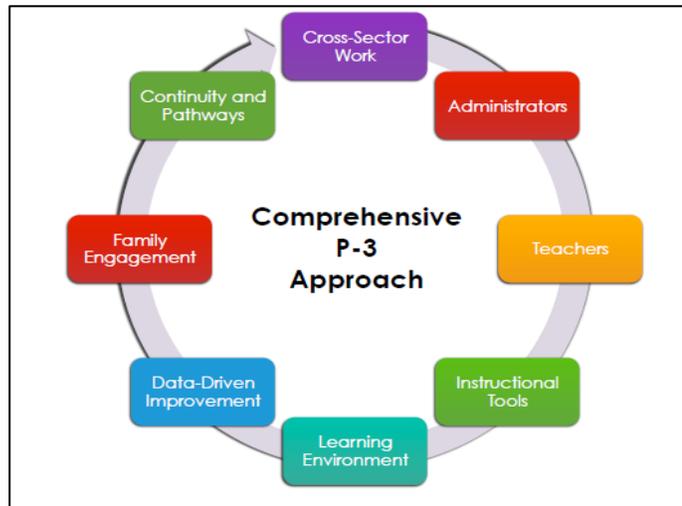
*Illinois’ P-3rd Briefs were produced in collaboration with the IL Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, the Ounce of Prevention, and the BUILD Initiative. The briefs were generously funded by the National Governor’s Association.*

## Oak Park's Birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reform Highlights

Below are *some* of Oak Park's important achievements in several areas: (1) cross-sector work, (2) teachers, (3) family engagement, and (4) data-driven improvement. As depicted in the figure to the right, these variables are integral to a comprehensive approach to birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reform.<sup>1</sup>

### Cross Sector Work: Investing in the Collaboration for Early Childhood

The Collaboration for Early Childhood was launched in 2002 to spearhead and coordinate work to support young children and their families as they transition from early learning into the elementary school system. In addition to funding from District 97, the High School District 200, and the Village of Oak Park also invest in the Collaboration through a joint contract that requires the Collaboration to carry out a number of activities to enhance the community's early childhood system. In 2009, the Collaboration hired an Executive Director who has been working to achieve specific goals related to teaching quality, family support, and integrated data systems.



### Teachers: Providing Professional Development for *all* of Oak Park's Early Childhood Teachers

The Collaboration hosts an annual symposium that provides shared professional development for early childhood and elementary school teachers, early intervention specialists, and social service providers. The symposium brings over 300 professionals together to gain knowledge, perspective and practical skills in promoting constructive learning experiences. In addition, the Collaboration provides coaching and a content specific training series each year.

### Family Engagement: Bringing Families into the System of Supports

The Collaboration also supports families by contracting with a community-based family support agency to offer the Parents as Teachers home visiting program to Oak Park's families with young children who are at-risk of not being prepared for school. This expanding effort provides intensive parent education and support services to approximately 175 families. The Collaboration also offers a Parenting Resource Program designed to reach every family with a child under 3 years. They partner with local child care programs, preschools, and physicians' offices to increase developmental screenings and provide families with access to early childhood services. During the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 800 children received developmental screenings through this initiative. The Collaboration also assists families with young children who attend the local Head Start and District 97's Preschool for All programs transition into the public school system.

### Data Driven Improvement: A Comprehensive Longitudinal Data System to Inform Early Childhood Systems and Services

<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.

Recently, the Collaboration helped design a voluntary longitudinal data system to guide school and early childhood program improvements. The Collaboration's contract with its three main sponsoring bodies sets specific benchmarks related to children's well-being and early childhood program quality, creating a system that will collect data, establish baseline performance, and mark progress in meeting goals. The Collaboration has created shared data agreements between early childhood providers and the schools that protect children's privacy. The system will collect child information from the first time that they receive early childhood services (e.g., a developmental screening) and track the services received in addition to well-being and academic progress measures through elementary school. The data system will provide a powerful tool to advance improvements to Oak Park's birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade services.

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

Oak Park's leaders noted several key events that moved them toward 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 reform.

### **Building Support From District 97 and Oak Park's Government Agencies**

In 2002, school board members, community leaders and the Superintendent agreed: "Despite all our efforts and focus on kindergarten, we were still not closing the achievement gap." "We realized we were not going to be successful if we didn't start earlier" shared Eric Gershenson, founder of the Collaboration and a former District 97 board member. As more of District 97's school board members began to support early childhood, they recruited other community jurisdictions. Carolyn Newberry Schwartz, who is now the Collaboration's Executive Director, recalled, "The founders moved the needle from blame to let's do something about it...we've made ongoing presentations to each jurisdiction about the Collaboration's progress. We are accountable and that's a hugely important strategy for maintaining their engagement." Their effort resulted in the Collaboration being established in 2002 by all six of Oak Park's government agencies: District 97, High School District 200, the Village of Oak Park, the Library, the Park District, and the Township. Each entity has a role in supporting the Collaboration's early childhood strategies.

### **Ambitious Strategic Planning**

In January 2009, the Collaboration developed a strategic plan for creating a coordinated, high-quality system of early childhood services to support all of the community's youngest children and their families and make meaningful progress in narrowing the school readiness gap by kindergarten entry. Eric Gershenson noted: "Up until then, we had some really great pieces. But, this was the point at which we said 'comprehensive coordinated early childhood' system with all the components and players that are interrelated." District 97 School Board President Bob Spatz noted that in the early years they "thought about building an early childhood facility that would serve about 200 children but [shifted course because] we have thousands of kids to support." Instead, they focused their efforts on teachers, family engagement, and the longitudinal data system, which has a broader community impact.

### **Formalizing the Collaboration: Governance and Funding**

Following the strategic planning process, the Collaboration became an independent 501(C)3 and hired staff. According to Carollina Song, Chair of the Collaboration Board, "having paid staff is key to keeping the efforts going and taking it to the next level. We realized that this couldn't just be a volunteer effort... it was just not sustainable over time." Early investments in staffing has had "an amazing impact" and led to additional investments of time and resources from the community. In order to ensure the Collaboration's viability, the founders made two important decisions. First, the Collaboration initially decided not to fundraise from individual private donors to minimize a sense of competition with its

partners. Second, a consensus model of decision-making was set up which includes three representatives from the early childhood community, three that are not from early childhood, and the remainder representing a variety of backgrounds. In addition, the 60 community partners who are coalition members are encouraged to participate in committee work and are invited to monthly Council meetings to strengthen cross-sector relationships and determine the direction of the Collaboration and provide a balance of perspectives.

## Lessons Learned

In reflecting on their work, Collaboration members shared insights for other communities focused on connecting birth to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade initiatives.

### **Celebrate Small Wins**

Eric Gershenson suggested that other communities looking to replicate their work should “find a group of people passionate about young children in their area. If you have that, then you are rolling.” He suggested, “Find the first target of opportunity for success. Do it, celebrate it, and move to the next piece.” For Oak Park, the professional development symposium was an early success that has continued to provide annual benefit to Oak Park’s early learning and early elementary professionals.

### **Set High Expectations**

According to Carollina Song, a key to the Collaboration’s success has been that “we expect ourselves to make things happen... We have to be able to make the case that it’s not a waste of people’s time.” She added that we “couldn’t attract these amazing people if we were just patting ourselves on the back.” The strategic planning process helped them set ambitious goals.

### **Sustain Leadership**

Collaboration leaders have been concerned about engaging new supporters and sustaining the leaders they have. To that end, the Collaboration has established a Founders’ Board as a way of keeping people with invaluable institutional knowledge involved while recruiting new voices to the table.

### **Be Persistent**

Collaboration members repeatedly attribute their success to their persistence over time. They noted that they share the value that “if something doesn’t work, they’ll just try it another way.”

## Conclusion<sup>2</sup>

More than 10 years after the initial strategy of integrating early learning and development services with the local school district, the Collaboration has made significant in-roads to supporting young children and their families. The Collaboration continues to focus on professional development projects, home visiting and parent support programs, as well as the longitudinal database and serves as the hub for the coordination of services between elementary schools, the early childhood community, young families, social service providers, and the entire community.

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful for the insights shared by several key members of Oak Park’s community, including Ann Courter, Eric Gershenson, Carolyn Newberry Schwartz, Al Roberts, Diana Rosenbrock, Bob Spatz, Carollina Song, and Joan White. For more information about the Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood visit <http://collab4kids.org/>.