

From Birth to Third: Aligning Education Systems



CASE STUDIES IN PARTNERSHIPS



Illinois Supports Birth to 3rd Grade Reform

Early childhood and K-12 school leaders in districts across Illinois are exploring strategies for building an integrated educational pathway for young children from birth through early elementary school. The Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development has joined the Ounce of Prevention Fund to tell the stories of four communities with differing approaches to birth to 3rd grade alignment: Elgin, Oak Park, Urbana, and West Chicago. Each community's local school district has invested resources – time, energy, finances, and/or human capital – to prioritize the needs of young children and their families. The intent is to highlight promising models and ideas from each community to emphasize that high-quality early childhood experiences are not an “extra” that some children have access to. Instead, those experiences are the first rung of an uninterrupted educational ladder that leads to stronger academic and social skills in kindergarten and throughout school.

This overview elevates trends that have emerged from each community's efforts. The paper provides a general overview of each community, describing themes from the communities and then concludes with a few take-away messages.

Context

In Illinois and across the country, there is unprecedented investment in and attention to the quality of care and education that young children receive before beginning kindergarten. With Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant funds, the state accelerated initiatives to improve access to high-quality early learning programs. Illinois is enhancing the way it monitors and supports early childhood program quality improvement through the expansion of ExceleRate Illinois, Illinois' Quality Rating and Improvement System. It is also building the infrastructure – data and assessment systems and governance structures – to build a comprehensive early learning system.

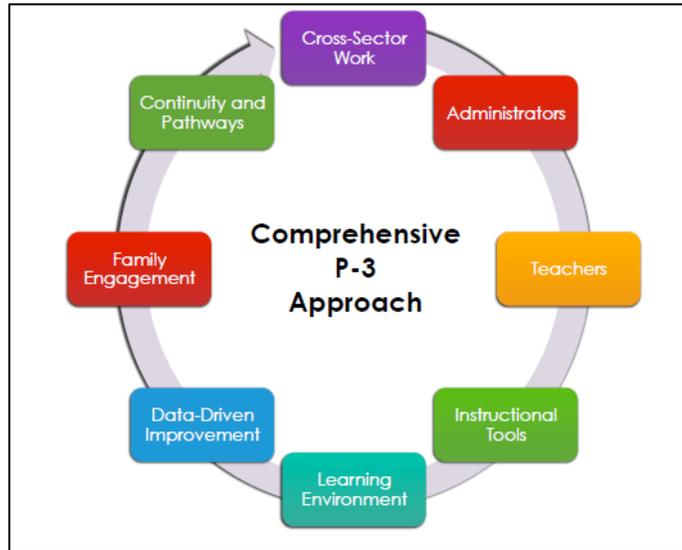
Because of these efforts, the public school sector's engagement in early childhood is on the rise. ISBE's Preschool for All state-funded prekindergarten programs are participating in ExceleRate Illinois. In addition, kindergarten teachers have a new observationally-based kindergarten readiness tool that has been designed to support student outcomes and close school readiness gaps by giving teachers information to help them tailor instruction based on children's prior experiences and abilities.

To conceptualize what this means at the local level, the community case studies draw on Kristie Kauerz and Julia Coffman's¹ *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*. Their framework includes eight interconnected “buckets” of activities or efforts associated with designing a comprehensive approach to planning improved early childhood through elementary school learning experiences. In Kauerz and Coffman's framework, PreK is a generic term used to refer to all of the learning-based programs that children experience prior to kindergarten.

¹ Kauerz, K., & Coffman, J. (2012). *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*. Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington.

The following definitions describe the goals for each of the components within Kauerz and Coffman’s *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches* that are highlighted in the visual image below. Research suggests that these specific areas of attention can significantly impact children’s behavioral and learning outcomes.

- 1. Teachers:** PreK-3rd grade teachers actively and visibly provide high-quality instruction and effective experiences for children.
- 2. Instructional tools:** PreK-3rd grade standards, curricula, and assessments focus on both academic and social-emotional skills, and are aligned to create instructional coherence.
- 3. Learning environment:** Children’s learning environments – campuses, buildings, schools, and classrooms – promote collaborative relationships, actively engage children in a variety of learning settings, and support the health and wellness of children and staff.



- 4. Data-driven improvement:** Improvements to schools, classrooms, instruction, professional development, and other systems are based on current data.
- 5. Family engagement:** Families are actively and systematically involved in their children’s education, PreK-3rd, as a core instructional strategy.
- 6. Continuity and pathways:** Every child, especially those most at-risk for school failure, has access to a clear pathway of high-quality education from PreK -3rd grade.
- 7. Cross-sector work:** Mechanisms and structures exist that reflect, support, and sustain a shared vision, mission, and accountabilities between early childhood and K-12.
- 8. Administration:** Administrators – school superintendents, principals, and early childhood directors – actively and visibly create a culture that supports PreK-3rd.

Four School Districts that Support Birth to 3rd Grade Reforms

The Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development and The Ounce of Prevention Fund identified four communities with diverse strategies for building coherent birth to 3rd grade systems. To learn from each community’s work, publicly available information was reviewed and interviews and focus groups were conducted with key personnel. Below is a snapshot of each community’s approach. While only a brief overview is provided here, a more complete case study is available for each of these communities.

Oak Park: Building a System for Early Childhood Services

Oak Park’s birth to 3rd grade work centers on the *Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood*, which is spearheading efforts to build an early childhood system in a highly diverse suburban community. The Collaboration was established in 2002 by all six of Oak Park’s governmental agencies: District 97, High

School District 200, the Village of Oak Park, the Library, the Park District, and the Township. The Collaboration supports all of Oak Park’s families with young children, with a focus on serving families with variables that may place children at-risk of poor school outcomes. The Collaboration provides professional development for local teachers from community-based programs and public schools and it is building a governance and data infrastructure to ensure young children have access to quality services from birth through 3rd grade.

Elgin: Investing in Coordination and Alignment

Elgin’s District U-46 embraced birth to 3rd grade reform with the *Give Me Five!* campaign, an action plan for improving early education. Critical to the success of this campaign is U-46’s Department of Early Learner Initiatives and its staff who lead and implement the district’s early childhood work. A key partner in achieving the *Give Me Five!* goals is the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning (EPEL). This group includes representatives from child- serving organizations – child care providers, health and mental health specialists, and philanthropy – in a community-school district partnership to benefit young children and families. U-46 and their community partners work toward improving school readiness outcomes. *Give Me Five!* and U-46’s partnerships have provided more children and families with access to early education, improved children’s transitions into the public schools, and aligned instructional expectations for young learners.

West Chicago: Coordinating Birth to 3rd Grade Innovation and Collaboration

West Chicago’s WeGo Together for Kids: The Department for Partnerships for Wellness, Safety, and Achievement is housed at District 33 and facilitates partnerships between the public school sector and many community organizations that support children and families, including services focused on children from birth to kindergarten. District 33’s innovative Dual Language program, has aligned language instruction from early childhood into elementary school and is making connections with community partners including, the new Educare School of West Dupage. Educare is an early childhood program serving low-income, dual-language learners in West Chicago with a high-quality early learning environment. They are working with District 33 to seamlessly transition children into kindergarten.

Urbana: Aligning Instruction

Urbana’s District 116 emphasizes the learning continuum by integrating early childhood programming into the District’s policies and practices. Instructional and practices for 3- and 4-year old children who attend the part-day prekindergarten programs at District 116’s Early Childhood School are aligned with kindergarten through 3rd grade practices. The Early Childhood School’s teachers are full partners in curriculum and instructional planning, families are engaged in children’s learning as soon as they enroll in the early childhood school, and professional development is shared from prekindergarten through elementary school.

Common Themes

District Investments Sustain and Signal Commitment

In each community, the school district has invested resources to support collaboration across age and grade levels. Along with those investments come dedicated personnel to initiate and take responsibility for building continuity between birth to 3rd grade learning environments. In some communities, like Oak Park, those investments are directed toward an outside entity. Other districts fund public school staff to support collaboration and alignment, as is the case for West Chicago and Urbana. In Elgin, the District has specific staff in its Early Learner Initiative office to guide early childhood work and collaboration *and*

has invested in community partnerships through its support for the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning. Regardless of where the resources are allocated, dedicated funding is important on two fronts. First, it demonstrates a public commitment to leveraging resources on behalf of young children and families. Second, funds maintain stability in coordinating elementary school and early childhood programs and services.

Strategic Planning Guides Priorities

In each community, deliberate planning has guided birth to 3rd grade work. The Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood’s strategic planning process reinforced the organization’s legitimacy and moved it to focus on shared systemic approaches, such as building a longitudinal data system to inform school interventions. The other three communities – Elgin, West Chicago, and Urbana – have school district strategic plans that guide the ways that instruction is aligned to include prekindergarten programs as well as building shared expectations with the broader community including with families.

Trust Builds the Collaborations Needed to Enact Birth to 3rd Grade Strategies

Each community noted that trusting relationships among school and community partners are critical to fostering sustainable collaborations in which the partners share resources, a shared vision, and a process for identifying priorities. Each community noted that the commitment between partners has been critical to their long-term success even as public/private resources have come and gone and across changes in leadership.

Takeaways

Strategies Fit the Local Context

The strategies used to build a coherent birth to 3rd grade approach reflect each community’s culture, resources, and context. Oak Park has a broader system-building focus, which stems from the diverse leaders of the Oak Park Collaboration for Early Childhood and their strategy to engage all of the community’s jurisdictions that are connected to young children. The approach in Urbana, in contrast, is narrower since it is dedicated to PreK to 3rd grade alignment within the school district. Regardless of the resources at hand, each public school system has focused on early learning experiences as an investment in school readiness and successful transitioning into early elementary school.

Conclusion

Each highlighted community recognizes that children who have responsive early learning experiences aligned with K-3rd expectations are more likely to successfully transition into kindergarten prepared to thrive. Aligning curricula, instructional practices, professional development opportunities, shared definitions for school readiness, and family engagement strategies increases the likelihood that a coherent approach from birth to kindergarten entry will foster an environment wherein children will continue to acquire new skills and knowledge in kindergarten with little regression or delay. Coordination and collaboration can be challenging, however, each community affirmed that the children and families they care for and educate benefit greatly from birth to 3rd grade partnerships.