



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 – Urbana – 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.

When Urbana’s District 116 first applied for the state funded Preschool for All grant almost 20 years ago, they made a strategic decision: early childhood services would be integrated into the District’s policies and practices.

Urbana Community Snapshot – 2013-14

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Enrollment: 4,077 • Pre-K to 12th Grade • Community: Town • Low income: 70% • Student mobility: 20% • English language learners: 10% • Students with disabilities: 18% 	<p>Percentages of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White: 39% • Black: 35% • Hispanic: 12% • Asian: 5% • Multi-race ethnicity: 9% • Homeless: 3%
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That choice gave district staff the opportunity to design joint curricula, instructional practices, professional development, and family engagement efforts for preschool aged children. Early childhood and early elementary staff say they now have a “true understanding of our common mission” and that they have established “mutually beneficial relationships.”

Urbana’s Birth to 3rd Grade Highlights

Instructional Tools: In Urbana, Early Childhood School’s staff are full partners in curriculum and instructional planning. Learning standards are aligned and early childhood staff participate in all curriculum reviews.

Teachers: District 116’s professional development approach is integrated from prekindergarten through elementary school. For example, the coaching system is unified so that instructional coaches from elementary level go to the early childhood school and early childhood staff go to the elementary school when appropriate.

Family Engagement: District 116’s Strategic Plan emphasizes the importance of families’ engagement in supporting children’s achievement. The plan calls for moving from family involvement in school activities to actual engagement in their children’s learning. The District has developed many resources to help families understand the schools’ strategies for supporting their children.

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Urbana's Birth to 3rd Grade Reform Highlights

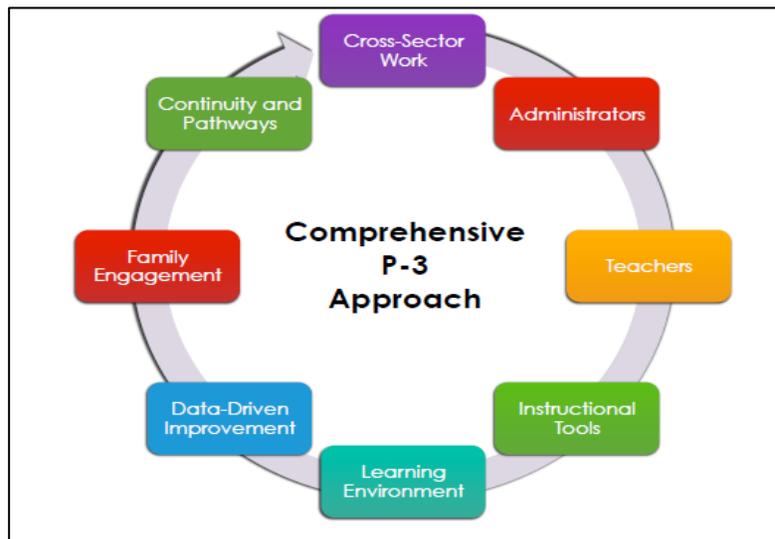
Below are *some* of District 116's achievements in several areas: (1) instructional tools, (2) teachers, and (3) family engagement. As depicted in the figure below, these areas are intergral to a comprehensive approach to birth to 3rd grade reform.¹

Instructional Tools: Coordinating Assessments and Integrating Curriculum

Urbana's highly mobile population of children and families demands a coordinated approach to instruction; if a student moves from one school to another, it is essential that he or she has common experiences and supports. In order to do this, District 116 has worked with its community-based providers to use the same screening tools and assessment systems. District 116's Early Childhood School Principal, Crystal Vowels, reported "it doesn't matter where a child is screened, the results of the screening will inform the services a child receives."

In addition to a common screening which sets the stage for a cohesive approach to birth to 3rd grade instruction, children enrolled in District 116's Early Childhood School participate in a curriculum that vertically aligns with kindergarten curricula. According to Jean Korder, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and

Assessment, Urbana "is unique in that our curriculum is built from the state standards by committees of our teachers. So, we start with the state standards, we look at what kids should know, understand and be able to do, and then we create our curricula." This comprehensive process enables Urbana to align instruction from preschool through high school with the full participation of District staff. Korder shared, "Aligning instruction is an ongoing labor of love. To ensure curriculum and assessment are aligned from preschool through high school, we have representatives from every building involved, and teachers from the early childhood through high school are involved."



Teachers: Unifying Professional Development

Understanding the importance of teachers having shared experiences and common understandings, District 116's professional development approach is integrated from prekindergarten through elementary school and beyond. Principal Cris Vowels shared that "the coaching system is unified so that instructional coaches from elementary level go to the early childhood school and early childhood staff participate in professional development at the elementary school when appropriate." To further extend teaching quality and coordinated practices, there is a "fund for elementary teachers to visit the Early Childhood School and early childhood teachers to visit the elementary school. There is job shadowing so

¹See 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.

then there is more alignment and knowledge of what each other is doing.”

Family Engagement: Actively Involving Families in Children’s Learning

Urbana’s District 116 prides itself on the many ways that the schools engage families. The District’s 5-year Strategic Plan emphasizes the importance of “moving from family involvement to actual engagement. It takes more effort on our part to get folks actually engaged.” The District provides resources to help families become involved and understand school practices and policies, like the Common Core Standards. For example, the District has designed materials called *learning links* – these resources link back to curriculum and include “ask questions” to help families talk with their kids about school. Teachers at the Urbana Early Childhood School use their bulletin boards and daily newsletters to share the classroom activities with parents, the early learning standards that the activities relate to, and then provide tips for parents to extend learning at home. For example, the daily news may share things such as the class did finger painting, its relation to fine-motor skill development and creative expression, and the newsletter will then suggest that parents extend the learning by finger “painting” with their children using shaving cream or pudding. The specific strategies used in the early childhood and elementary schools are coordinated to reach District 116’s goals for family engagement.

Pivotal Opportunities For Birth to 3rd Grade Reform

Urbana’s leaders noted several key events that moved them toward a well-coordinated birth to 3rd grade educational continuum. Some of these opportunities may resonate with other communities that are pursuing birth to 3rd grade reforms.

Incorporating Early Childhood into the District Structures

From the time that Urbana first applied for the Preschool for All grant in 1986, they fully integrated the Urbana Early Childhood School into the District’s policies and practices. As a result, prekindergarten and special education services for children from ages 3 to 5 are afforded the same emphasis and resources as in elementary school. Early learning staff has access to the same professional development and instructional supports as their peers who teach children in older grades.

Elevating the Early Childhood School

District 116 has invested significant resources in its early childhood services. In a time of tight budgets, the School Board supported the construction of the new state-of-the-art Urbana Early Childhood School building thanks to hard work, persistence, and patience. Key to this investment was the support from School Board members who believed in the importance of early childhood. District Superintendent Dr. Don Owen also demonstrated support for early childhood education. Because District 116 now consolidates its early childhood services in one building with a principal who directly reports to Dr. Owens, early childhood has an equal voice with the other school principals when the District is making decisions. Furthermore, Dr. Owens has empowered the principal at the Urbana Early Childhood School with the authority and responsibility for supporting birth-3rd grade integration in Urbana. In this role, she participates in community collaborative groups that focus on children from birth through 3rd grade and reports directly to the Superintendent about her work with the District’s youngest learners. In this capacity, Principal Cris Vowels ensures that the recommendations and new efforts that come from the community are “best for all of our students based on what we know about best practices.”

Lessons Learned

In reflecting on their work, Urbana's early childhood and elementary school staff had several lessons for other communities focused on birth to 3rd grade initiatives.

Just do it

When asked about advice to other communities who are seeking to enhance the continuum of education, Jean Korder said, "When you're starting something this big, you have to just do it. Start somewhere and take baby steps. Get yourself a plan and know where you want to be in five years and get started." Cris Vowels agreed, in Urbana we "dive in and fix it as you go....pick something small and do it." They agreed that if they waited to have the resources to implement the ideal approaches, they'd "never get there."

Be Community Specific

Barb Sartain, Principal at Urbana's Wiley Elementary School, emphasized the importance of ensuring reforms fit the community context, particularly when it comes to "implementation." Reforms are most effective when "a school acts on a framework for what you need and then develops it in a way that makes it your own." Cris Vowels affirmed the importance of understanding the local context when starting any reform effort, "There are certain key questions you have to ask: What are my resources? Where do I want to go? How can I get there with the resources I have? Who can help me get there? What are the other models? You look at the answers to those questions... we are all a little different because of where we are."

Stay Persistent, Patient, and Ready for Opportunities

In reflecting on the Urbana Early Childhood School's progress, Cris Vowels shared the importance of being persistent. It "took 40 years to make plans for the current early childhood building....it took that long to get this in place.... Not everyone in our community believes that early childhood needs to be supported or promoted, but we do have some advocates who believe in early childhood." As Urbana teachers waited for the opportunity to arise, they built support from the families they serve. When Urbana was able to find the resources through a small sales tax increase, "it was the community and parents who decided it needed to fund the building."

Conclusion²

As Urbana's partners look to the future, they aim to expand understanding in their community of the foundational importance of the early years towards long-term learning. They strive to engender support and resources for early childhood so the partners "can grow, keep our high quality teachers, and continue to reach our goals."

² We are grateful for the insights shared by several key members of Urbana's community, including, Brandi Granse, Mary Hensley, Jean Korder, Kathleen Liffick, Kari May, Barb Sartain, and Cris Vowels. To learn more about Urbana's Early Childhood School, visit <http://www.usd116.org/uecs/>.