

# **Establishing an Essential Foundation: The PreK-3 Approach to Educational Reform**

**Manvell, Maxwell, & Fleming (2011)**

## **Overview**

The PreK-3 approach to educational reform aims to close the achievement gap and improve long-term learning outcomes through linking together the elements of high quality early childhood and primary education into one cohesive system. This includes elements such as access to a continuum of full-day educational opportunities beginning at age three, high quality teaching practices, and supportive engagement with children's families.

## **Components of PreK-3**

The PreK-3 approach encompasses the following four elements: (1) access to a continuum of educational opportunities that begins at age three. (2) High-quality educational practices and teaching. (3) Connections among families, schools, and communities. (4) Collaborative professional development and planning. Through these components of the approach, advocates hope to join all elements into one cohesive system to close achievement gaps and improve long-term educational outcomes.

## **Origins of PreK-3**

The PreK-3 approach makes the most of what has already been done by integrating and building on the concepts from educational reform initiatives over the last several decades. One of the most important concepts of this approach includes the idea of preschool education as the first step in formal education. An example of this can be seen in the Head Start program, a program that provides educational interventions for three- and four-year-old children growing up in poverty. The goals set out by the developmentally appropriate preschool through the identification of ten research-based practices that are effective in transitioning young children into formal education.

## **Rationale for PreK-3**

The initiative to introduce a PreK-3 approach began after the recognitions of significant achievement gaps and educational inequities for disadvantaged children. These achievement gaps are starting young and widening, as well as reflecting the disparities in educational access and quality. The latter can be seen in fragmented access to early learning opportunities, the fade-out effects and inconsistent quality in the early grades, and the negative impact of current accountability strategies. A PreK-3 approach will help to eliminate these gaps and inequities.

## **Research Basis of PreK-3**

The research in which the PreK-3 approach is grounded include research from multi-year early education interventions, which included analyzing whether or not children attended preschool or full-day kindergarten, the level of their parent's involvement in their schooling, the stability of their K-2 school environments, and the amount of time spent on literacy instruction in kindergarten. Research has also been conducted in developmental science that helps to advocate for a PreK-3 approach by looking at high-quality teaching, transitions and alignment, and flexibility and a longer-term view.

## **Critical Issues and Key Policy Considerations for Adopting a PreK-3 Approach to Educational Reform in Illinois**

There are four key dimensions of educational policy that are addressed when considering the PreK-3 approach, including: (1) access: ensuring universal access to full-day learning opportunities through state-funded prekindergarten and Head Start enrollment and funding or through full-day programs. (2) Quality: supporting high-quality teaching in PreK-3 that is grounded in developmental knowledge by preparing PreK-3 teachers, preparing principals to be PreK-3 leaders, and by providing coordinated professional development across the PreK-3 grades. (3) Accountability: establishing standards and assessments that are compatible with the PreK-3 approach through student learning standards, kindergarten readiness, high-stakes testing, and ensuring teacher quality. (4) Infrastructure: building administrative structures to sustain a PreK-3 continuum through multiple funding streams and administrative auspices, coordination and governance structures, and use of data for evaluation and planning.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to recognize that the PreK-3 approach in educational reform uses science-based research to build the early childhood foundations for long-term school success. A lack of initiative in PreK-3 contexts has resulted in achievement gaps and a decrease in learning outcomes. It should be identified that PreK-3 provides a framework for how to make the most of what has already been accomplished in early childhood education and how to advance in it.

Erikson Institute. (2011). *Establishing an essential foundation: The preK-3 approach to educational reform*. Chicago, IL: Manvell, J., Maxwell, C., & Fleming, J.