

PK Inclusion: GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT A P-16 EDUCATION SYSTEM

A P-16 system must pay particular attention to the P-3 years, from early childhood through third grade, because learning during these years lays the foundation for everything that follows.

BY RUBY TAKANISHI AND KRISTIE KAUERZ

WITHIN the broad P-16 framework, the transition from high school to college has commanded the bulk of attention from policy makers, think tanks, foundations, and the research community in general. Immediate and long-term concerns about the skills of the American work force and our global competitiveness fuel this focus. Significantly less attention has been paid to the “P” part, the first years of the P-16 continuum that pertain to young children.

We argue here that the P-3 years — from pre-kindergarten through the primary grades — are the cornerstone of any P-16 system. They provide a strong foundation for children’s lifelong learning, educational excellence, and eventual competitiveness in the marketplace. From the perspective of P-16 systems, the learning experiences children have during the early childhood years (birth to age 5) should be better integrated and aligned with those they have during the kindergarten and elementary school years.

Aligning early childhood education with elementary schools is not a new idea. Since initiatives in the early

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1970s to connect Head Start with elementary schools, such as Project Follow Through and Project Developmental Continuity, a few policy makers and educators



have tried to bridge the gap between the cultures of early education and K-12 education. They recognized that one or two years of early childhood education would not be sufficient to sustain gains in achievement over the long term. For low-income children, sustaining the gains made as a result of attending high-quality pre-kindergarten (PK) programs requires continuing to provide them with high-quality learning experiences into the elementary school years. As public investments in PK programs increase, the challenge of sustaining gains from high-quality programs is rising on the policy agen-

da. And as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) raises expectations for all children's achievement, the challenge of preparing strong and eager learners from the start, rather than remediating them later, is also rising on the policy agenda.

To ground the discussion of P-3 presented here, we offer brief descriptions of what P-3 might look like in policy and practice. These examples are by no means a comprehensive depiction of P-3. At the level of the child, a focus on P-3 ensures that children experience continuous learning opportunities that bolster their social, emotional, and cognitive development.¹ These opportunities — including emotional supports, instructional supports, and classroom organization — would be in place whether a child is 3 years old and enrolled in a PK program or 7 years old and in a second-grade classroom.

At the school level, a focus on P-3 is evident in clear transition policies to help children and families navigate the changes that occur as children move from grade to grade.² For example, a school might institute policies and practices that enable PK children and their parents to visit kindergarten classrooms before the start of their kindergarten year, thereby permitting them to get to know the teacher and become familiar with the classroom layout, materials, and schedule.

At the district level, a focus on P-3 might be evident in the implementation of common professional development requirements for both PK teachers and K-3 teachers. Such professional development would focus on providing staff with the tools and knowledge to provide meaningful learning opportunities to all young children from 3 to 8 years of age.

At the state level, a focus on P-3 is evident in the creation of common learning standards that are informed by research about the developmental characteristics of children and that are used by all publicly funded programs. These learning standards would be appropriate for children at each grade level and would be aligned from grade to grade.

DEFINING THE 'P' PART

We ourselves have differing views on how to define and conceptualize the "P-3" part of P-16 systems. Although we agree that the P-3 part extends to third grade, we disagree on how to define the starting point of the continuum. We present both of our perspectives here as a way of highlighting the importance of the issues involved. Some states, school districts, communities, or individual schools might recognize their own efforts and intentions in one of these two perspectives. Yet, despite

our differences, what we agree on is more important than our disagreements. We agree that meaningful education reform will not be realized unless there is substantially increased attention to improving children's educational experiences at the front end of the P-16 continuum. Specifically, we agree that there must be increased alignment and coherence across what has traditionally been seen as early childhood education and what has traditionally been seen as K-12 education.

P-3: preschool through third grade. In one definition, that held by the second author, P stands for "preschool" and includes all of the learning and educational experiences that children have beginning at birth and extending to their entry into the public school system. This definition recognizes the variety of programs, both public and private, in which children spend much of their time, including, but not limited to, child care, family child care, prekindergarten, Head Start, Early Head Start, nursery school, and early intervention programs.

This perspective focuses on learning and education as broad concepts that can take place in a variety of locales, not just in schools. It recognizes that children and families have different circumstances, different needs, different preferences, and different learning styles. Just as P-16 reformers look to improve alignment between high school and college by ensuring multiple pathways for students (e.g., vocational options, two-year college, four-year college), the P-3 perspective supports the notion that children will enter the K-12 public school system from different pathways. What is crucial is ensuring that all pathways are aligned and of equal quality with regard to safety, health, curriculum, standards, and accountability measures. The existence of different pathways is not important as long as they all follow similar standards and strive to provide a solid foundation for children's lifelong learning.

The P-3 perspective is not about merely extending the existing education system to serve younger children; it is about changing that system itself. The concept of P-3 embraces the decade or more of system building in early care and education in which states and communities have worked to coordinate and align child care, Head Start, prekindergarten, and other programs and services that have traditionally been categorical and non-aligned.

PK-3: prekindergarten through third grade. The view of P-3 held by the first author begins with PK or "prekindergarten" — those programs that serve 3- and 4-year-old children, in both school- and community-based settings. This perspective recognizes the critical need to improve the public education system, especially the need to extend the current K-12 system to serve younger chil-

dren in PK classes. As such, the term “PK-3” would be most applicable to describe this part of the continuum.

The pressures for increased academic accountability, including the No Child Left Behind Act, are focusing more attention on how to narrow the achievement gaps that are evident as early as kindergarten. As research about the critical importance of early learning experiences in families and in programs becomes better known, more public and private efforts will focus on educational programs for younger children. Many leaders in school districts and individual schools are already looking to create and expand programs that serve younger children to address these needs. Charter public schools offer one example of starting school at age 3. In addition, several governors (e.g., those in Illinois and Oklahoma) have gone on record in favor of PK programs to begin at age 3. As public investments in PK programs increase, there will be more pressure to make stronger connections between PK programs and K-12 education in order to sustain gains students make in high-quality PK programs.

A PRELIMINARY RECONCILIATION

To summarize, the P-3 perspective starts at birth and incorporates a broad array of programs that serve infants and toddlers, as well as 3- and 4-year-olds, including those in PK programs. The PK-3 perspective starts with 3-year-olds and focuses on the need to expand the current K-12 system to provide educational services to 3- and 4-year-old children on a universal, but voluntary, basis.

While the differences between these two perspectives deserve further discussion, what they have in common is more important. The P-3 perspective includes PK as a core component of the continuum of learning; the PK-3 perspective recognizes the importance of high-quality infant, toddler, and child-care services, but it does not see them as central to a reformed PK-16 education system. Both perspectives acknowledge that the “P-3” part is routinely overlooked in broader P-16 discussions and deserves substantially more attention and investment from policy makers, researchers, think tanks, foundations, and educators.

Beginning with PK programs may be more politically feasible than focusing on the earlier years, as embraced by the P-3 perspective, for a PK-3 perspective requires reform of the education sector alone. The broader P-3 perspective engages — and so requires reform of — the education, human services, and health sectors. For this reason, and because reform of the existing K-12 education system has gained recent prominent attention,³ we focus the remainder of this article on a

discussion of the crucial role of PK-3, relying on the following definition:

PK-3 is an approach to education [that] proposes voluntary, universal access to PK for 3- and 4-year-olds, followed by mandatory full-school-day kindergarten. Social and pedagogical experiences from PK through third grade are aligned across grade levels and aligned with the learning experiences research indicates children require based on their developmental capabilities. Teachers who are prepared to provide high-quality experiences across PK through third grade are an essential component of this approach to education.⁴

WHY PK-3 IS IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION

The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “the nation’s report card,” issued troubling findings about the educational performance of American children at the end of grade 3. About 40% of white and Asian fourth-graders scored at or above proficiency on reading; less than 20% of black and Hispanic children scored at or above proficiency in reading. These findings are highly disturbing given what we know about the educational trajectories of children who have reading difficulties at the end of grade 3. Many will face costly remediation, and others will find it difficult to do the work required in middle and high school.

Performance in third grade can be seen as a turning point in the educational achievement of many children. For those who are doing well, skill begets more skill, and they are likely to go on to master more complex tasks in reading to learn and in solving mathematical problems. However, the majority of fourth-graders, who do not have the reading proficiency required for the demands of middle and high school, are likely to struggle, if not fail altogether in subsequent years.

Thus one goal of a focus on the PK-3 years is to enable all children to attain proficiency or higher on the national tests administered by NAEP. PK-3 includes the expectation of “school readiness” on entry to kindergarten as a result of high-quality PK programs, but it raises the bar higher, setting a standard of proficiency at the end of grade 3. This latter goal is akin to reaching “base camp” for continued success during middle and high school education.⁵

Research shows that achievement gaps between children exist as early as kindergarten entry, if not before.⁶ Evaluation of the effectiveness of high-quality prekindergarten programs shows that they can increase skills among 3- and 4-year-olds.⁷ The research on the value of full-day kindergarten is also increasing.⁸ And evidence

about the benefits of both types of programs is growing in volume and in the strength of findings. It is increasingly important to make high-quality prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten universally available to children in the United States.

However, expanding prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten without attending to their essential align-

at an annual cost of about \$5 billion.¹⁰ When the editors noted that some foundations, such as the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, had withdrawn from funding in education, they failed to recognize that both foundations had subsequently made major investments in promoting PK education as a “school readiness” strategy. In this analysis of how

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ment with the crucial primary grades misses the boat. There is growing evidence that short-term gains children make as a result of prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten can diminish in a few years if children do not experience a high-quality K-3 learning experience (e.g., small class sizes, experienced teachers).⁹ Limiting investment to just one or two years of prekindergarten or full-day kindergarten is, therefore, insufficient to meet the goal of proficiency in reading and math by the end of third grade. It is also important to take into account the quality of the elementary schools that children enter after their prekindergarten experience. It should not be surprising that gains stemming from a high-quality PK program can diminish when children attend a low-resource school with inexperienced teachers.

PK: MISSING FROM THE P-16 ACTION

Despite the ease with which talk about a PK-16 seamless education system occurs and despite the evidence to support the importance of the early years of the P-16 continuum, significantly less attention is paid to how PK can be better aligned with K-12 education and beyond. More attention has been paid to the alignment of high schools with postsecondary education, including such bridging innovations as early colleges.

One major barrier to connecting PK to K-16 education is that the education establishment does not consider prekindergarten to be a legitimate part of American public education. The fact is that nearly all of the major think tanks, advocacy organizations, researchers, and foundations that focus on K-12 education consider PK to be outside the reform tent.

A recent book analyzing the uneasy relationship between foundations and K-16 education reform made no mention of PK programs for 3- and 4-year-old children, though they were funded in 38 states in 2007,

foundations could better contribute to education reform, PK was not considered part of the education system.

In another recent book reviewing education reform efforts, the focus was once again squarely on K-12 education, with a mere acknowledgment that “prevention” and starting before kindergarten can be useful in addressing the disparities in children’s literacy skills at kindergarten entry.¹¹ Such treatment marginalizes PK and reduces it to a desirable “add-on,” not a “must-have.”

PREVAILING FRAMES AS BARRIERS TO INCLUSION OF PK

If PK-16 is characterized as a “seamless learning continuum for children from PK to college,” then why does it remain outside the education reform tent? First, universal public education in the U.S. typically begins at grade 1. Kindergarten attendance is mandatory in only 14 states and the District of Columbia, 40% of American children attend half-day kindergarten programs of two to three hours per day, and only two states guarantee and fund children’s access to full-day kindergarten.¹² Efforts to increase access to full-day kindergarten are encouraging, but the political struggles to achieve this goal reveal that full-day kindergartens are often perceived as “babysitting.” If the K in K-12 education is still not well integrated into the K-12 education system, then it is not at all surprising that PK remains outside the tent.

Second, while PK is increasingly funded at the state and local levels, children’s participation remains voluntary. Historically, PK programs in the U.S. have developed largely as a private, family-funded educational experience driven by the market economy. As a result, PK programs are provided by a “mixed delivery system” of private, nonprofit, for-profit, religious, and secu-

lar sponsors, as well as by public schools. Children's participation in these programs is strongly related to family economic resources and to maternal education. Except for Head Start, which after 42 years is available only to about 50% of the eligible children from families at or below the federal poverty line, low-income children remain highly dependent on publicly funded programs for PK. Except in Oklahoma and Georgia, the majority of American 4-year-olds are not in publicly funded programs; nationally, about 35% of all 4-year-olds are in publicly supported PK programs. Oklahoma is the only state in the nation where universal PK is part of the state education system, funded through the state's education funding formula, and delivered primarily in public schools. Because PK is neither universally funded by the public nor compulsory, it remains outside the K-12 education tent.

Third, historical forces have led to a socially constructed situation in which most people, including educators, think of education as beginning with kindergarten and ending in grade 12. In contrast, PK has a different history, with its origins in early childhood education for children from birth to age 5, a paradigm in which there has been a prevailing notion that young children should not be exposed to structured and teacher-directed educational practices. Early education has traditionally relied on "child-directed" and "developmentally appropriate" practices to guide children's learning. While interpretation of these terms varies widely, the early learning/early childhood paradigm has shunned "schooling" young children, embracing instead the notion that these years should be spent "getting children ready" for K-12 school. Indeed, "school readiness" has become a popular term in connection with arguments

for the value of early PK. A clear cultural divide exists between early learning/early childhood education adherents and those in K-12 education, a division that further contributes to PK's exclusion from the education tent.

The exclusion of PK from PK-16 discussions is further reflected in the lack of coherent frameworks for federal, state, and local policies to support the closer integration of the growing number of PK programs with the K-12 system. Even when universal PK education for all 3- and 4-year-olds is advocated, little attention is paid to its integration with the remaining K-12 grades. However, there are some encouraging signs that this situation is changing.

INTEGRATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES DURING THE FIRST DECADE OF LIFE

In 2003, the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) made a 10-year commitment to promoting PK-3 approaches, supporting research on these programs, and funding policy frameworks at the federal, state, and district levels to support PK-3 implementation. FCD recognizes that schools and districts are on their own paths to PK-3 and that, within core components of the approach, they will develop their own ways of implementing it.

A PK-3 approach includes the following core components: a high-quality seamless learning experience for all children, PK through third grade; teachers who are well prepared for educating children in this age range; supportive school district policies; strong principal leadership that includes support for professional development time for teachers to plan for effective alignment and smooth transitions; and engaged families and communities that share with the schools accountability for children's educational success.

A concept central to PK-3 is vertical alignment of children's learning experiences. Vertical alignment refers to the linkages of standards, curriculum, and assessments across the PK-3 grade levels, based on research on children's developmental capabilities.¹³ Vertical alignment is based on the premise that continuity of learning across age levels is essential for healthy child development; it highlights the continuous and progressive nature of learning and development. The skills and knowledge gained in one year serve not as an end point, but as a foundation on which to build additional skills and knowledge.

The vertical alignment of standards is an area much overlooked in PK-3. NCLB requires all states to have learning standards for students, beginning with third

grade. As of June 2006, 44 states had standards for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade in at least some content areas.¹⁴ And, as of January 2004, 44 states had standards that apply to children before they enter kindergarten, and the remaining six states were in the process of developing them.¹⁵

peers. By reaching them early, providing them with a good start, and connecting their PK programs (whether in the school or in community-based settings) with elementary schools, some schools, such as the New School at South Shore in Seattle, are seeing highly encouraging results as measured by the test scores of the chil-

Despite a lack of federal, state, and, in most cases, district policies and despite a lack of public or private funding incentives, some schools and districts across the country are on the path to PK-3.

It will require considerable effort to ensure that states' PK standards align with their K-3 standards in subject areas such as reading, math, science, and social studies. Vertical alignment, however, is not a one-way street. It is not merely a downward extension of the academic expectations of K-12 into the prekindergarten years. Equally important, states that have PK standards in physical/motor, social, and emotional development should extend these learning expectations *upward* into the K-3 grades.

PK-3: A MOVEMENT FROM THE BASE

PK-3 is not a top-down idea. Although according to the Education Commission of the States, at least 30 states have P-16 plans,¹⁶ no state has systematically initiated PK-3 yet, and full implementation of these plans is virtually absent. What is encouraging is that a few foundations are beginning to support PK-3 efforts, most notably the New School Foundation in Seattle, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and the Foundation for Child Development. Georgia, a pioneer in universal access to PK programs, is beginning to address curricular alignment between the PK and elementary school programs (i.e., vertical alignment from grade to grade). The goal is to sustain achievement gains made in PK into the elementary school years.

Despite a lack of federal, state, and, in most cases, district policies and despite a lack of public or private funding incentives, some schools and districts across the country are on the path to PK-3. In some cases, a visionary principal or superintendent who sees the value of starting early begins to organize PK programs and to connect them with elementary school education. In almost all cases, the motivation is to sustain children's educational success, especially the success of low-income children who start behind their more advantaged

dren.

With funding from the Foundation for Child Development (of which the first author is president), Gene Maeroff spent two years visiting schools across the country that are "doing PK-3" and then described them in *Building Blocks*.¹⁷ Like any local innovation, these schools reflect the diversity of America — its economic divides and its geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity. (Maeroff's profiles of school districts and schools with PK-3 programs — including those developed with an FCD grant to the National Association of Elementary School Principals — can be found on www.fcd-us.org.)

Although we do not know all of the schools and districts that are currently on the path toward PK-3, we do hear continually about new examples, including those that are part of the charter school movement. Where permitted, many charter schools are starting with 3-year-olds. For example, CityBridge Foundation, in Washington, D.C., is opening a PK-3 charter school in the District of Columbia in September 2007. And Lee Academy, a pilot school in Dorchester, Massachusetts, is another example of an innovative PK-3 school.

PK-3 is an education reform that comes "from the base," from the superintendents, principals, and community organizations that are committed to children's success and that recognize that education reform must begin before kindergarten and must be sustained at least into the crucial elementary years. But PK-3 cannot be sustained on a large scale without enabling policies, high-level leadership, and pressure from outside schools.

WHAT EDUCATORS AND POLICY MAKERS CAN DO

If PK-3 comes from the broad base of education's stakeholders, what can educators and policy makers do to provide the governance, regulations, policies, and

financing to support and institutionalize what some innovators are already doing? We identify four areas in which there are already some, albeit limited, efforts to craft PK-3 awareness and broader implementation. But these are by no means the only areas to which policy makers, researchers, and others should be devoting attention.

1. *Raising leaders' awareness of PK-3 and its potential.* Before addressing state and school district policies to support PK-3, educational leaders — superintendents, principals, legislators concerned with education — must become aware of what PK-3 is and why it is crucial as the foundation for achievement during the middle and high school years. The Association for the Children of New Jersey, with funds from the FCD, recently conducted focus groups with superintendents and principals in New Jersey, which provides state-funded PK education to children in its 20 lowest-income school districts. These administrators were not prepared to address how these PK programs could be connected with their elementary schools.

This disconnect illustrates the challenge of developing a case for PK-3 that can mobilize educational leaders to play an active role in crafting legislation and policy to support PK-3 implementation. That case must be clear about how high-quality PK-3 approaches can result in better outcomes for all children in third grade.

2. *Putting policy levers in place.* The benefits of PK-3 should not accrue only to those children who live in particular school districts or communities; the benefits should accrue to all children, in all schools, and in all school districts. Policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels must play a central role in making this happen. At all these levels, there are three primary initiatives that policy makers can undertake to facilitate the spread of PK-3 programs.

First, policy makers can formally convene an inclusive group of stakeholders to focus on PK-3 issues. Whether as part of newly formed or already instituted P-16 or P-20 councils and commissions or as a stand-alone body, there should be a dedicated group of stakeholders who convene around PK-3 issues. Prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers, school principals, district superintendents, parents and family members, representatives of higher education, government leaders, and others should all have seats at these tables.

Second, policy makers can increase their knowledge of PK-3 reform and its crucial components by looking to the expanding body of PK-3 research and best practices that exists.¹⁸ While there is plenty of room for inventiveness, policy makers need not start from scratch when formulating reforms.

Third, policy makers can initiate policy audits and inventories that not only outline the current policy status but also highlight the lack of alignment between policies. Understanding which policies are in place and how they work with or against one another is one of the most significant elements of P-16 and PK-3 efforts.¹⁹ It is this understanding that will lead to concrete policy options.

3. *Preparing PK-3 teachers.* Teachers are central to children's experiences and learning in school. Reflecting the structural and cultural divides that separate PK/early learning and K-3 education, the PK-3 teaching work force is subject to a wide range of disparate requirements and professional standards. For example, public school teachers in grades K-3 must meet the NCLB standards for highly qualified teachers, which require a minimum of a bachelor's degree. In contrast, while some state PK programs require teachers to hold a bachelor's degree, others require only a Child Development Associate certificate or high school graduation. To resolve this disparity between teacher qualifications in PK and in K-3 will mean extensive discussion and advocacy nationally to require all teachers in PK programs to hold bachelor's degrees. To fully align qualifications for PK-3 teachers, it will also be necessary to require all K-3 teachers to hold certification in early childhood education.

4. *Shared accountability for third-grade outcomes.* NCLB and its emphasis on standards-based education has meant heightened attention — from parents, the public, and policy makers — to how well children are performing academically by the time they reach third grade. Because learning accrues over time, accountability for children's performance should be shared across the PK-3 continuum. Third-grade teachers alone should not be held accountable for measured outcomes; families, PK programs, and K-3 programs must be jointly accountable for how well children achieve at the end of third grade.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING PROSPECTS FOR PK-3

The ideal of a PK-16 education system is just that — an ideal. Achieving it will require structural transformations of long-entrenched practices in the American education system, practices that have proved difficult to change at any significant scale. Scattered throughout the country, in schools and in a few school districts, superintendents, principals, and teachers recognize that, to address the wide and unacceptable disparities between children arriving at the kindergarten door, they

must forge partnerships with the PK programs in their communities and in their own schools. These partnerships must be characterized by mutual respect for what each party has to offer and by shared accountability for children's outcomes.

If we can achieve these partnerships at the beginning of the P-16 learning continuum, we will achieve what W. E. B. Du Bois envisioned providing for all children: "a fairness of start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude towards truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is."²⁰ Our nation's democratic traditions and our economic power depend on enhancing the educational capital and well-being of all our children. An authentic PK-16 education system is one important contributor to this critical goal.

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