
Foreword

Since the 1970s, the United States has not only lost its standing as the country with the highest rates of college graduation in the world, it is also a country where K–12 educational achievement remains stubbornly stable at less than globally competitive levels. These basic facts are profoundly disturbing for a democracy that values individual achievement and effort as the path to a good life.

Educational success remains the path by which Americans improve their economic status from one generation to the next. Getting on that path begins early in life, even prenatally. Thus, policy-makers and others focus on the critical importance of the early years in a child’s life and the role that families play in being the child’s “first teachers.” However, since the end of the Second World War, American children now spend more time outside the home in a wide variety of family child care homes, Head Start, and prekindergarten (PreK) programs. States are beginning to recognize the value of quality PreK programs in contributing to the educational success of children.

These programs vary in their educational quality, and few are connected with the K–12 educational system. Typically there is a gap between the early childhood and the K–12 education systems that is inefficient and acts to obstruct the creation of a seamless continuum of learning for children from prekindergarten to kindergarten through third grade (PreK–3). As a result, even gains from quality PreK programs can fade out when children encounter poor quality elementary grade classrooms.

In what I call “a movement from the base”—a movement among educators in schools and in school districts—this gap is being closed through the thoughtful, innovative, and deep commitment of individuals who care about the educational success of all of America’s

children. Whether in Bremerton (Washington) or in Montgomery County (Maryland) or in First School (North Carolina), educators are showing that it is possible to put children—especially children who come from immigrant, low-income, or working-class families or are racial/ethnic minorities who do not typically experience good education—on a firm path to a college education and to opportunities for a good life in our country.

The authors are such educators who worked on connecting their K–12 school district, specifically grades K–3, with the community-based centers serving young children before kindergarten entry, starting in 2000. They did so, because they had a clear goal of increasing the educational achievement of the children in Bremerton. They succeeded. They write from direct experience combined with the ability to reflect on what they have learned and to share it with their colleagues so that many more children can benefit from what they accomplished.

How did they achieve what has eluded the vast majority of school districts in the United States, specifically those that have high rates of underachievement among their students? The answers to this most significant challenge facing American education are offered in this book in a clear, engaging, and useful manner. The lessons learned are ones that I have seen in other school districts and schools throughout the country that successfully integrate their early learning/PreK programs with their K–12 systems and have results to show for it. It is not rocket science. It is the plain hard work of creating an educational experience based on what works.

Here is how it can happen. Leadership—whether a superintendent or a principal—is key to articulating a focused goal of increasing the numbers of children who successfully complete their PreK–12 education. That individual, including being an instructional leader, must navigate through the normal political thicket that is part of any school district.

A team of dedicated, patient educators with their eyes on the prize and respect for all they work with, especially community members and staff in early learning programs, must work well with the leader to create a shared sense of purpose exemplified in joint professional development between the PreK and the K–3 staff working together on a common, aligned curriculum, which is democratically chosen. Instruction is constantly informed by data—what children are learning—and instruction is modified based on ongoing assessments of children’s progress. Accountability is a hallmark and results are widely shared.

Every child can succeed, if more educators understood what it takes to create schools and districts where children can thrive. Such schools and districts begin with full-day prekindergarten and kindergarten programs that are laser-focused on instruction and learning. These schools use a standards-based curriculum, supported by shared professional development, shared diagnostic assessments, and shared accountability between educators and families. The entire effort is disciplined and data-driven.

To my knowledge, this is the first ever book to be written for educators on the path to implementing PreK–3 approaches. As more policy-makers and educators see the value of these approaches, and they will, this book will pave the way to high quality and thoughtful implementation. The specificity and clarity of what needs to be done will be useful to those who have day-to-day responsibility for students. This is a guide written by their colleagues, who have walked the talk.

If we can get more schools and districts on this path, America will regain its entire educational leadership role. That time cannot come too soon.

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