
Introduction: Connecting Early Childhood and K–12 Programs

How to Build a PreK–3 System

It is with great joy and hope that we write this book for those who have the passion and desire to connect early childhood programs with the K–3 system in order to increase achievement for all children. The joy comes from the assurance that if you build a strong PreK–3 system of support, children will benefit greatly. The hope comes from the knowledge that you can do the work of combining efforts to build a community-based support system that leads to higher gains for our young students.

We wrote this book for principals, administrators, school board members, and early childhood education directors and practitioners who are passionate about early learning. Providing a high-quality educational foundation starts children on the path toward academic success and multiple possibilities for a bright future. People who want to strengthen their efforts to build a PreK–3 system by adding broad-based support, community engagement, and financial stability realize they cannot do this work in isolation. Resources are difficult to secure and the needs of families and children are increasing. Connecting early childhood programs with the K–12 educational system is a proactive strategic plan to increase student achievement. Combining

and maximizing every available resource, prioritizing your learning needs, and unifying your efforts to provide children with the early-foundation skills and academic instruction they require will have a lasting positive impact on the children in your community.

The question of whether or not to provide children with a high-quality education has been answered with a resounding yes from the field of early childhood research. The question of whether we should invest early to save remedial education and health and social services resources on the other end has also been answered in the affirmative. The question is not: "Should we connect our early childhood and K–12 communities to build a PreK–3 system?" The real question is *how* to do this. The authors have spent the past few decades learning how to connect early childhood programs with the K–12 system. We expanded our work to the larger community and recorded a systematic approach. The steps presented in this book will save you time and will make a significant positive change for children.

Numerous statistics keep us up at night and confirm the need for PreK–3 intervention. The United States has the largest per capita prison population in the world (Pew Study, 2008). Sixty percent of America's prison inmates are illiterate and 85 percent of all juvenile offenders have reading problems (National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992). The cost of illiteracy to businesses and taxpayers is \$20 billion per year ("Illiteracy: A National Crisis," United Way). The Committee for Economic Development found that investing \$4,800 per child in preschool could reduce teenage arrest by 40 percent (Carroll, 2008). Just as compelling is the growing body of research that confirms the significant impact we make when children receive quality early education aligned with quality K–3 education. It is no wonder that there is a renewed energy around early learning across our nation. President Barack Obama's State of the Economy speech, on April 14, 2009, included these words:

But in this new economy, we've come to trail the world's leaders in graduation rates, in educational achievement, and production of scientists and engineers. That's why we have set a goal that will greatly enhance our ability to compete for the high-wage, high-tech jobs of the 21st century. By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. That is the goal that we have set and we intend to meet. To meet that goal, we have to start early. We have dramatically expanded early childhood education; we are investing in innovative programs that have proven to help schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps.

With early learning as a top priority, many of us are engaged in conversations about the hopeful possibilities. There is a willingness on the part of both the preschool and the K–12 communities to work together. Currently, thirty-three states are looking at a PreK–age 16 or PreK–age 20 initiative as a way to increase student achievement. Ruby Takanishi and Kristie Kauerz stated,

Aligning early childhood education with elementary schools is not a new idea. Since initiatives in the early 1970s to connect Head Start with elementary schools, such as Project Follow Through and Project Development Continuity, a few policy makers and educators have tried to bridge that gap between the culture of early education and K–12 education. They considered 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 prekindergarten programs requires continuing to provide them with high-quality learning experiences into the elementary school years (Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008).

We have referenced our work in the Bremerton School District as well as other examples of success stories across the nation to demonstrate what can happen when early childhood programs and K–12 public schools unite. For those of you who have already developed a community-based PreK–3 system, we encourage you to read through each chapter, finding validation in what you have already accomplished and making note of what may be helpful to enhance your system or broaden your base of support to increase student achievement. Upon completion of this book, you may want to go back and use it as a resource to review, revise, and extend your system.

The following steps are arranged in sequential order for people like us who want to know where we are going and how to get there.

Step 1: Establish Need and Common Interests. This is the first step to bringing your community together. It starts by having you take a critical look at the educational needs of the children you serve and comparing them to national data and trends. While acknowledging the work that has been done thus far, you will gather current research and information to share with your group to establish a common level of understanding and ground your efforts.

Step 2: Connect With Your Early Childhood Learning Environments. We will walk you through a process of locating your community preschool

partners and enable you to navigate your way through the world of early childhood education. Practical location strategies are provided to get all stakeholders at your first PreK–3 meeting. A helpful outline for the first meeting that ends with a commitment and established goals is provided.

Step 3: Develop a Leadership Group. This step will show you how to gather representatives from the preschool and K–12 environments who are committed to your established goals. It provides a simplified plan with accompanied activities to establish a culture of inquiry and respectful problem solving. Procedures for reaching agreements, establishing common curriculum, and ensuring assessments that support your goals and measure your progress are provided.

Step 4: High-Quality Professional Development. Included here are practical strategies and a format to use with your providers to create monthly professional development. Step 4 presents meaningful application of research, hands-on activities, and strategies to meet the needs of a wide range of adult learners.

Step 5: Connect and Align Quality PreK to Kindergarten. Here we provide the next steps to move the very best of a quality preschool foundation up to elementary school and also the strengths of a K–12 system down to preschool. Important parts of this step are how to align early learning benchmarks (standards) with K–3 state standards, how to develop and align a strong assessment and information loop, and how to align curriculum and instructional practices that support children’s learning. Also in this section is how to build PreK–3 or PreK–5 elementary schools and the role of the principals.

Step 6: Maximize the Benefits of Full-Day Kindergarten. This step is full of practical strategies and sequential components to build a strong instructional program. It will illustrate how to establish agreements on the best instructional practices and support systems to use districtwide. Information is also included on how principals and their instructional-leadership team utilize assessment data to inform instruction.

Step 7: Align and Connect a Strong Full-Day Kindergarten With Grades 1–3. Here we take the process outlined in Step 5 and apply key concepts to use for Grades 1–3. This alignment provides an important foundational component needed prior to Step 8 to prevent fade-out.

Step 8: Conquer the Fade-Out. This step looks at current research and recommendations to ensure that your documented success and the benefits to children from your preschool efforts do not fade. It will guide your group through a planning process to ensure that you are

keeping a watchful eye on every child, adjusting and modifying the curriculum as children continue through the grades. It also provides strategies to align vertically, horizontally, temporally, and more. Your group will formulate a plan from the start to make certain that your system is strong enough to conquer the fade-out.

Step 9: Create a Sustainable System of Support. Outlined here are the critical components to finance and sustain your PreK–3 system of support. A dynamic PreK–3 system is one that continues to respond to the needs of the children in your community. We suggest ways to build broad-based support, recruit and engage community partners, and plan for financial stability.

Step 10: Review, Revise, and Extend. Just when you thought you were done, you realize that these same steps allow you to revise and expand your system of support. Examples are provided on how to extend to in-home providers and expand to higher education. Step 10 will provide considerations for building a PreK–16 system and beyond.

One of the greatest joys of working with so many passionate and talented people for so many years is experiencing on a daily basis the positive impact quality education and instruction have on the lives of children and families. With joy and hope also comes a sense of urgency and accountability for the children under our watch. Because we have seen the encouraging effects of high-quality PreK–3 grade systems on children in many communities, in addition to the discouraging effects and the dismal, lasting impact of substandard early learning environments and poor instruction, we can no longer settle for mediocrity. We stand firm in our belief that you cannot increase student achievement with isolated efforts of excellence. It takes a community-based team effort to build a dynamic PreK–3 system that continues to expand and respond to the needs of all children. We believe that you need both a top-down (policies and allocated funding) as well as a bottom-up (community-based efforts using existing resources) approach to accomplish this work. Our goal is to help as many local communities, states, and federal organizations as possible so that this hope becomes a reality and life-changing opportunity for children everywhere.

