

# MAKING A Difference

## 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System



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*Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a  
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require for a brighter future. This is not a choice between providing children with a nurturing environment to develop social skills *or* with a strong early childhood skill foundation (vocabulary, oral language, math, reading, science, and writing). We do not have the luxury to pick and choose what to teach. Armed with the most current research on how young children learn, and aware of the critical components necessary to teach, we can all agree that our children need it all.

## **Connecting the Early Childhood Community and K–12 Public Schools**

### **Gather Current Research and Establish Need**

It is important to ground your collective efforts in research and the needs of children. Gather current research and information to share with your PreK–3 groups to establish a common level of understanding and create an environment of inquiry. A respectful examination of new information facilitates the discussion and is more productive than reexamining old practices and opinions on how children should be taught. Here are a few important facts that we have found helpful in mobilizing preschool community efforts. We have used these in handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and “Did you know?” talking points to let preschool providers know how important their work is and why we need to join efforts.

- “The opportunity to attend a quality PreK class makes a child 40 percent less likely to need special education services, 40 percent less likely to repeat a grade, and twice as likely to attend college” (*Patrick, 2007*). The key is quality education. This again underscores the need to define *quality* in your PreK–3 system.

- The reverse is also true; our nation pays a significant price for inadequate education in terms of income, health care, crime, and dependence on public assistance (*Levin & Belfield, 2007*). What are the implications for children who start behind? Two out of every five students receiving special education in the United States were identified because of difficulties in learning to read (*EdPubs 2002*).

- Recently, many states have discovered that despite their best efforts to provide quality preschool instruction, the benefits start to fade after first grade. Both Ruby Takanishi and Kristie Kauerz have done extensive work in this area and have provided valuable information

(Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008). A critical step to providing a sustainable PreK–3 system is to align instruction.

## **Expanding Beyond the Public-School Preschool Model to Reach More Children**

In response to the urgent need to increase the number of children entering kindergarten with strong foundational skills, some school districts and states have created district-sponsored preschool programs. A district-run preschool offers several advantages, including the implementation of school district curriculum, certified teachers, no cost or low cost to families, and smooth transitions. Some disadvantages are a significant reduction in the number of children served and the potential loss of shared resources and revenue to community preschools and child care programs.

We advocate for lifting up your entire early childhood community. Work with all preschools in your community using a mixed model: Head Start, state-owned, community, faith-based, and in-home child care providers. In our work with a number of early learning preschool providers with a variety of backgrounds and formal education, we know that when you treat preschool providers with respect and furnish the research and tools they require, combined with job-embedded professional development, the results yield positive documented outcomes for children. This gives families expanded options, and more children receive early learning support. When school districts are not paying the cost of preschool operations, they are able to extend their other resources, such as professional development, curriculum materials, and assessments, to community preschools.

## **Establishing Need and Prioritizing Your PreK–3 Efforts**

### **What Are Your Reasons?**

Take a moment right now and list all the reasons why this effort is so important and why you need the help of everyone in your community. For us, with a background in special education, it was personal and very basic; when children enter kindergarten behind, very few ever recover. Add that to current research in learning disabilities associated with reading and math emphasizing the importance of early intervention and need for research-based instruction (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007), the importance of vocabulary and background

knowledge (Marzano, 2004), and the fact that quality preschool makes a significant difference in the future of our children.

We, like many of you, believe we have a moral obligation to help all children in our community. In our work, we found that not every kindergarten through third-grade classroom is of high quality, and not every preschool is a place where you would enroll your own child. What are the realities in your state or community? Think about equity and access. Are there high-quality preschools and examples of aligned preschool and kindergarten efforts that you wish you could replicate or extend? Are there children arriving at the door of kindergarten lacking foundational skills and continuing on a downward educational path? Look at your own children, ask the questions, and call for a unified community effort. Establishing the needs of your children, PreK–3, and a commitment to respectful dialog are your first steps to establishing a PreK–3 system.

## **Your First Early Childhood and K–3 Meeting**

The next step is to connect with and invite your community preschool providers to a PreK–3 meeting. The group that you invite will become your leadership group. This group will look at the critical skills needed for children to enter kindergarten with higher-level foundational skills and will select one or two priority goals to work on and problem-solve together. Right up front, it is important to convey to the preschool community how much you need their help and what a difference they make in the lives of children.

## **Narrowing Your Focus**

To build your PreK–3 system of support, you will need to start with one or two skills that both the early childhood and K–3 teachers agree are important for children to learn and demonstrate with greater proficiency. You want to even the playing field where both systems serve an important role in the child’s skill development. One suggestion is to start with social and emotional skills, as well as reading skills.

An examination of how children learn and the best PreK–3 instructional practices using current brain and early literacy research is a great place to start. Carol Cummings does an excellent job in her book, *Winning Strategies*, of pulling together the brain research on how children learn and their social and emotional needs for success with the need to teach skills. She states that one of the ways we can increase these expectations for success is by teaching the skills necessary to perform

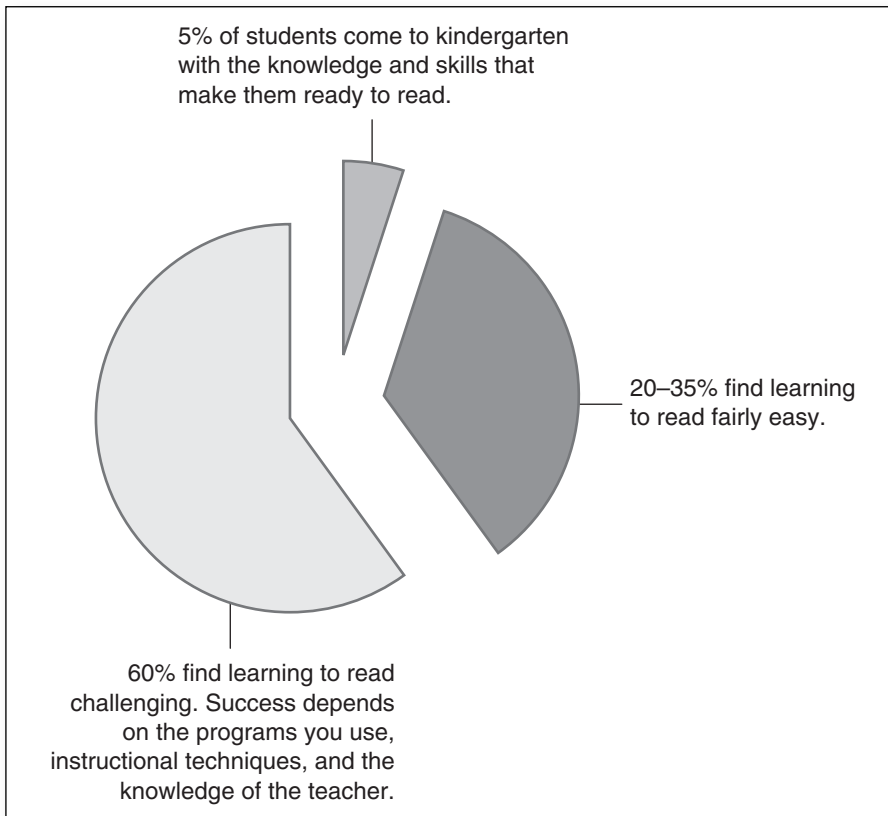
the task (Cummings, 2000). In the area of reading, early childhood and K–3 play a critical role in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, language development, fluency, and comprehension. Providing the following materials at your first meeting and having them available for review and discussion, as well as other current references, will build the background knowledge necessary for your first meeting and the work of this group:

- The report *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (2008) covers the importance and the essentials of teaching early reading. It is a free National Institute for Literacy publication.
- *Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel* (U.S. Department of Education, 2008) contains essential components of math instruction and stresses the importance of teaching early math.
- *Nurturing Knowledge: Building a Foundation for School Success by Linking Early Literacy to Math, Science, Art, and Social Studies* (Neuman, Roskos, Wright, & Lenhart, 2007) combines both early childhood research and practice.
- *Brain-Friendly Strategies for the Inclusion Classroom: Insights From a Neurologist and Classroom Teacher* (Willis, 2007) discusses the optimal learning and teaching environment.
- *12 Brain/Mind Principles in Action: Developing Executive Functions of the Human Brain* (Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2009) provides teaching strategies based on neuroscience.

One quick way to select your shared target area(s) for your initial focus is to have your leadership group participate in a selection process. Ask all participants at your first meeting to list all of the developmental areas (skills) that they directly work on (teach) at each grade: preschool, kindergarten, first, second, and third. Circle or combine areas that are similar, continue through third grade, and have a significant impact on student learning. This activity will not be necessary if your community has already established a primary focus. Your next step will be to reinforce this by establishing specific needs and areas of focus.

## **National Data**

We have provided the following statistics that you can share with your community. These national statistics call us to action. Examine the following data and make these into a PowerPoint presentation or handout. To establish your need, share these facts and questions with your leadership group at your first meeting (*Reading Reality*, 1998):

**Figure 1.1** Children Entering Kindergarten

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2006)

- Many children find learning how to read very difficult. Children require the help of knowledgeable teachers; all will benefit from a research-based curriculum that provides the greatest probability of success.
- 5 percent of students come to kindergarten with the knowledge and skills that make them ready to read.
- 20-35 percent find learning to read fairly easy.
- 60 percent find learning to read challenging. Success depends on the programs you use, instructional techniques, and the knowledge of the teacher.
- What are the implications for children who do not receive quality early childhood instruction? When children start behind, many children stay behind despite heroic educational efforts. When children enter kindergarten with strong foundation

skills, their options expand and their futures have many positive possibilities. Children who are below reading-benchmark skill levels by the end of first grade have a one in four to one in seven chance of catching up without intensive and costly intervention (Simmons, Coyne, Kwok, McDonagh, Harn, & Kame'enui, 2008).

- Which children are most likely to struggle? Children in poverty and children at risk for learning disabilities are in danger of needing additional intervention.

When sharing this first-meeting information, it is important to read the Hart and Risley (1995) study. This study focuses on American children's family experiences, their socioeconomic status, and the implications for vocabulary development. Be sure to emphasize to your community that the difference in interactive words is not due to a lack of love or interest on the part of low-income families. These families are often struggling by trying to support their families and as a result, use language that is more directive and shorter in length. For example, if a child has fewer options for shoes, parents will use fewer adjectives to describe the shoes they want their child to put on. This difference continues well into elementary grades, as illustrated below.

**Figure 1.2** Beginning Kindergartners' School-Readiness by Socioeconomic Status (SES)

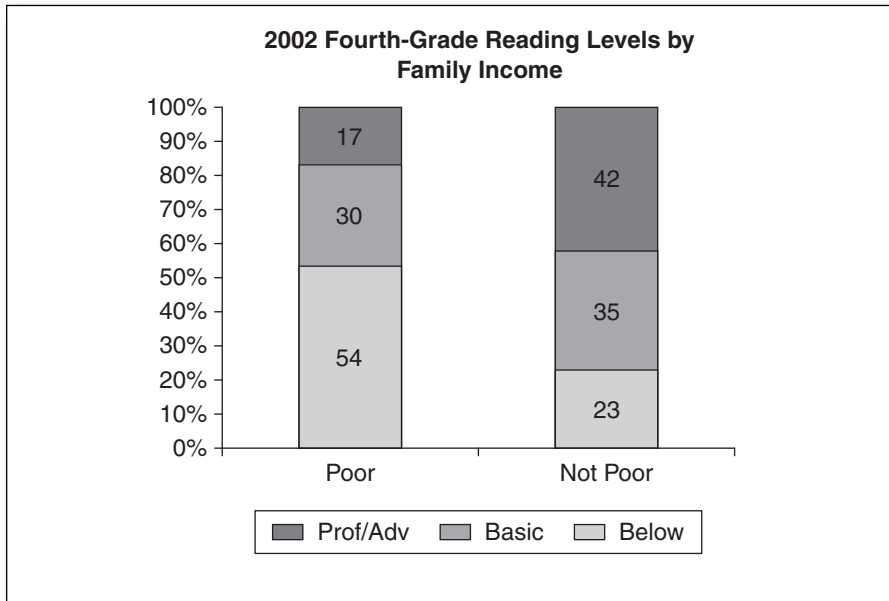
	Lowest SES	Highest SES
Recognizes letters of alphabet	39%	85%
Identifies beginning sounds of words	10%	51%
Identifies primary colors	69%	90%
Counts to 20	48%	68%
Writes own name	54%	76%

	Lowest SES	Highest SES
Amount of time having been read to prior to kindergarten	25 hours	1,000 hours
Total number of words heard	13 million	45 million

Sources: Lee & Burkam, 2002; Adams, 1990; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Neuman, 2003; Hart & Risley 1995.

**Figure 1.3**

Socioeconomic status is the greatest predictor of academic success.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2006)

## Local Data

Next, gather and examine your own data to look at the specific needs of the children in your community. Check for the following:

- Poverty level
- Number of children who qualify for free and reduced-cost lunch
- Mobility rate
- Number of available preschools in the area
- Number of Head Start programs and availability
- Number of children attending preschool
- Number of children who do not attend preschool
- Remedial budgets and compensatory services (Title I, special education)
- Achievement trend data

How does your community compare with national-trend data? What is the cost of trying to remediate deficits in your school district? Are you using measures that are comparable nationwide? To increase



the quality of our programs and instructional practices, we need to be willing to use measures that compare our children to children across the nation. It is important that you are clear on the intent of gathering this form of assessment data and that you include your community preschools in discussions regarding the need for, and the use of, these data. The assessment you choose is not to identify children for special education or to make placement decisions at the individual child level. Assessments that are more comprehensive are required when making high-stakes decisions for children. These assessment data are used to measure progress on your target outcomes and to improve your instruction (system of support).

At the time of publication, we still do not have quick comprehensive measures for children that meet all our needs in the area of assessment. Choose from what is available to give your group consistent feedback as to how your children are doing. Without this local data, you will not be able to go to your community and ask that they examine their own practices to create a PreK–3 system of support. If we want to increase the quality of instruction in our learning environments, we must be willing to add to our repertoire the ability to gather useful assessment data aligned to our goals.

Many states and school districts use the following individual assessments:

- Dynamic Inventory of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
- Get It Got It Go, for preschool literacy assessment
- AIMS Web for math and literacy
- Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment Program (DECA) for social and emotional assessment
- Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading, Florida Center for Reading Research

These measures will give you a universal screening indicator to let you know if children are at risk and need more targeted practice opportunities. Many states, including Washington, have early childhood assessment documents that may help you select a universal screener to administer to your preschool and kindergarten children if you have not done so in the past. One excellent free resource is *Washington State: A Guide to Assessment in Early Childhood Infancy to Age Eight* (Slentz, Early, & McKenna, 2008). See Resource A for more information.

When we looked at our own local data, we had to admit that our children and families struggled with the same risk factors, and our outcome data [were] consistent with national trends. In fact, it was a

shock to find out that despite our successful efforts in the area of social and emotional needs and our work with our early childhood providers on integrating special education students, our students came to kindergarten woefully behind. Be willing to admit to your community the fact that when your children start kindergarten behind, it is very difficult for them to catch up. The more children that enter kindergarten behind, the more resources that are needed to provide the intensive support these children require to develop basic skills. Approach your early childhood community to look at your need, respectfully examine data, and establish mutual goals. Your initial contacts and first meeting are critical for establishing a climate of inquiry, mutual respect, and problem solving.

#### STEP 1 AT A GLANCE

- Gather research and information to share with your PreK–3 group to establish a common level of understanding and to ground your efforts.
- Take a moment to list the reasons that compel you to unite with your early childhood community. These reasons make a difference now in the lives of children and families in your community.
- Acknowledge the fact that children are your priority and create a culture of mutual respect for all PreK–3 staff and families around this common theme.
- Make a decision to include all community providers to lift up the quality of education for all children.
- Gather information for your first early childhood (PreK) and K–12 meeting.
- Establish the need and prioritize your PreK–3 efforts.
- Narrow your focus.
- Gather national and local data to present at your first meeting.

**Next Step:** Connect with and invite your community preschool providers to a PreK–3 meeting. The group that you invite will become your PreK–3 leadership group.