

Strong Early Learning Systems = Strong Young Readers: *New Jersey's action plan for success*



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In early 2014, a diverse group of early childhood stakeholders came together to create a plan on how best to address barriers to developing an aligned and coordinated system of early learning in New Jersey. For more than 15 years, New Jersey's state-funded preschool has been a national model for quality. Far less attention, however, has been paid to those years of learning before and after preschool and how they are aligned to provide quality experiences for all young children from birth to 8 years old.

This lack of attention is part of the reason why one-third of New Jersey's children are not proficient readers by 3rd grade — a critical year when students begin reading to learn, rather than learning to read. By not acquiring these foundational skills at this time, their chances of school success dim.

Increasingly, early childhood stakeholders are recognizing the importance of a quality early learning system to achieve positive long-term outcomes for children. The growing understanding of the strong link between 3rd graders reading on grade level and long-term educational success is causing educators and policymakers to re-examine how best to support young learners long before they sit down for that 3rd grade test.

This group of more than 50 early childhood leaders identified the major barriers to an effective early learning system from birth through 3rd grade (known as PreK-3rd) and developed concrete recommendations to address those issues.



Giving Every Child A Chance

The group's key recommendations include:

- Mandate full-day kindergarten for every child.
- Build a stronger system for ensuring effective transitions from preschool to kindergarten and then from grade to grade in the early elementary years.
- Strengthen New Jersey's system for educating teachers and school administrators who are responsible for teaching young children.
- Develop improved state guidance on using assessment data to drive instructional changes and to help students succeed.
- Establish a commission to study the costs of expanding preschool and mandating full-day kindergarten and a plan for making that critical investment.



The Practical Solution of PreK-3rd Systems Building

In order to ensure all children acquire the necessary skills, an aligned and coordinated learning system must be in place.

Unfortunately, this is no easy feat.

While New Jersey is a leader in systems building for young learners, five major areas critical to a strong early learning system remain inadequate or have yet to be addressed, standing in the way of all 3rd graders becoming proficient readers. Advocates for Children of

New Jersey (ACNJ) identified these areas after nearly 10 years of studying the development and implementation of New Jersey's PreK-3rd system and then presented those findings to the early learning leaders at the stakeholder conference.

Below is a description of each problem and the group's solutions.

Kindergarten

There is an increasing link between full-day kindergarten and better overall learning and academic achievement for young children. This also contributes to the development of other important skills that can support social competence and creative problem-solving. When looking at the entire continuum of early learning, kindergarten is the linchpin, linking children's first years of learning with their more formal years of education.

Unfortunately, kindergarten remains in the margins in New Jersey for two reasons: it is not mandated and it is each district's choice as to whether to offer a half- or full-day program.

New Jersey is one of only five states that does not require school districts to provide even a half-day of kindergarten. On its face, New Jersey's kindergarten policy doesn't appear to be a problem. Approximately 78 percent of school districts currently offer full-day kindergarten, with the remaining 22 percent providing half-day programs. When the economy takes a downturn and districts are looking for areas to cut, kindergarten can become a target.

Full-day programs are especially vulnerable, often the first to be placed on a district's chopping block. During the economic downturn beginning in 2008, school boards throughout the state looked to kindergarten as a potential area for cost reductions, with some districts scaling back their programs — all to the peril of the young students in those classrooms.

Recommendations from the Stakeholders

The group overwhelmingly agreed that New Jersey should mandate full-day kindergarten for every child. As our academic expectations of young children increase, state policies should reflect those expectations. It has become nearly impossible for schools to provide meaningful, developmentally-appropriate classroom

experiences that meet state code and guidelines in 2 1/2 or 3 hours. Time is critical to this period of learning. Full-day programs can better provide children with the environments important to the exploration of learning.

By mandating this critical year of learning, the state would protect kindergartners from the threatened budget cuts when the economy is in a downturn.

The group recognized that such a mandate would come with additional issues that would need to be addressed. The participants recommended that a commission be established to study how best to move forward. Calculating the costs to mandate full-day kindergarten, including implementation and facilities expenses, is needed so that a realistic implementation plan can be developed. Such a study would provide this much-needed information.

Transitions

Meaningful transitions for children, their families and schools are coordinated and aligned throughout all early years of learning and address how children and families move between these different learning environments — all with the goal of strengthening young students' skills.

Whether between preschool and kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade, first and second grade and beyond, the reality is meaningful transition rarely occurs between one early learning environment and another.

As a result, these learning environments frequently know very little about each other, their programs and the children whom they are serving. There are frequently missed opportunities to work collaboratively to exchange information about children, families and individual programs or share supports, such as professional development. Consequently, transition experiences for children and their families are often very limited and frequently "event"-driven, such as a child's visit to next year's classroom or parent meetings with the school principal.

The New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC), as well as the preschool and kindergarten guidelines, do address and provide guidance on transition practices, particularly from the preschool to kindergarten years. Similar guidelines for

The Staggering Problem of 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency

In January 2014, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided a "data snapshot" on early reading proficiency in the United States. The report outlined how 4th graders fared in reading on both the national and state level.

The results are sobering.

In New Jersey, 58 percent of 4th graders are not proficient readers, according to the 2013 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Even more troubling, 78 percent of New Jersey's low-income 4th graders are not reading on grade-level, compared to 44 percent of students from families earning higher incomes — a 34 percent difference.

Similarly, New Jersey's 3rd grade state assessment, known as the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ-ASK), found one-third of 3rd graders were not reading on grade-level.

The consequence of so many young students lacking early literacy skills is equally sobering. A 2011 report stated that one in six children who are not reading proficiently by 3rd grade do not graduate high school on time. That rate is four times higher than that of a proficient reader. For students who are both poor and not reading proficiently, the chance of them not graduating jump to 26 percent — more than six times the rate for all proficient readers.

Such data has long-term implications for our economy. Providing expanded access to high-quality early education not only improves the long-term economic opportunities for children, it also strengthens the overall economic health of the state. When students lack that strong educational foundation, they do not have the skills to compete for jobs in an increasingly complex global economy.



1st through 3rd grade currently do not exist, but are about to be developed by the Division of Early Childhood Education. Even with existing guidance, there is little known about how districts are actually implementing those guidelines and implementation effectiveness.

Recommendations from the Stakeholders

The group said that although guidance for transition planning exists, it is limited and has led to the development of ineffective transition plans in many districts throughout the state. Transition policies need to be made stronger, not only from preschool to kindergarten but throughout the early learning continuum. A review of existing transition regulations and guidelines through a PreK-3rd lens is warranted. Additional recommendations included:

- **Providing more professional development opportunities.** Participants said that even with the existing guidelines, key stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, need additional professional development opportunities. Equally important is training for school board members and parents who may be part of transition planning, but often do not understand its importance throughout the early learning years.
- **Providing time for transition planning.** These professionals said that good transition planning takes time — a scarce commodity for many teachers and school administrators. This much needed time for transition planning should be considered in future contract negotiations.

Higher Education

There is no question that a highly-trained, effective teacher is the most important factor in a child's learning and development. Institutions of higher education are charged with the critical task of educating future teachers and school administrators to meet the complex challenges facing them in their classrooms. New Jersey's teaching and administrator certifications outlined in the state's administrative code may be barriers to ensuring that those individuals have the appropriate skill-sets to meet the needs of all children in specific age groups.

For example, prospective early childhood teachers who wish to obtain a bachelor's degree have two options: a

New Jersey's Existing PreK-3rd Infrastructure

For years, the Garden State has been a leader in developing and implementing many of the components critical to a strong PreK-3rd system. In early learning circles, the state is best known for its high-quality, state-funded preschools, serving approximately half of the state's 3- and 4- year olds from low-income families. Besides state funding, New Jersey has been rich with tremendous foundation support, which has allowed program and policy to be strengthened even beyond the state's financial commitment.

The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE), within the Department of Education, is responsible for addressing the social, emotional, physical and academic development of New Jersey's children from preschool through 3rd grade. The division's work has included the development and implementation of "Birth-to-3" early learning standards, (along with members of New Jersey's Council for Young Children) preschool guidelines, teaching and learning standards and kindergarten standards and implementation guidelines, as well as trainings for early learning teachers and administrators.

Prospective teachers wishing to teach young children in state-funded preschools must obtain a Preschool-3rd grade certificate. Armed with a strong knowledge-base in child development, this certificate recognizes that young children learn differently than children in 4th grade and beyond.

In December 2013, the state received a four-year, \$44 million Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant that will advance plans to implement a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System, known as Grow NJ Kids. When fully implemented, Grow NJ Kids will rate and improve the quality of child care in center- and family-based settings throughout the state.

PreK-3rd grade or a Kindergarten-6th grade certificate. Prospective teachers obtaining a P-3 certificate can teach in classrooms from preschool through 3rd grade, but the code only specifically requires them to "demonstrate knowledge" of basic skills appropriate to preschool education.

Those obtaining a K-6 certificate must also demonstrate knowledge of basic teaching skills. The required skills include understanding state educational and teaching standards, but do not specifically mention critical areas to help support young learners, such as child development. As the regulatory requirements are not specific, universities have significant latitude in how their educational programs are developed to meet the requirements for a P-3 or K-6 certificate. As a result, it remains in question as to whether all early childhood prospective teachers are receiving those skills necessary to be effective instructional leaders for all ages covered within the specific certification.

The issue of attaining adequate early learning skills is even more significant for principals and superintendents. Neither a school administrator nor principal certificate requires any coursework on how young children learn. A principal can be responsible for the oversight of a kindergarten classroom and the supervision of its teacher and lack the knowledge to understand whether the class environment is appropriate for 5-year olds.

Recommendations from the Stakeholders

The participants strongly recommended that the early learning certificates should not overlap. By changing the administrative code to provide both a P-3 and a 4-6 certificate, prospective teachers could hone in on those skills important in being an effective instructional leader for the particular age group.

Group members also said that prospective school and district leaders responsible for classrooms within the PreK-3rd continuum need to have an understanding of early childhood education and that the administrative code should be modified to reflect that needed change.



Assessment

When used properly, assessment data can make the difference between a young child receiving needed help or continuing to struggle as a reader. It can guide lesson planning for a whole class or help develop a plan for intervention for students who need extra assistance.

In the past 12 years, student assessment has taken on a life of its own. In 2002, the United States spent \$423 million on standardized tests. Six years ago, in 2008, the price tag increased to \$1.1 billion. As a result, large amounts of data are being collected on children's skills, and for young children, most of those data are focused on literacy.

Knowing how to effectively use data to maximize the benefit for student success seems to be an issue for schools. As identified in a 2012 ACNJ report on assessment, there is a lack of understanding by school administrators on how to effectively use assessment findings to drive instruction. Data are often collected and recorded for compliance reasons, with little benefit to teachers or students. Districts often do not view assessment from preschool through 3rd grade as a continuum, resulting in over-assessment in certain skill areas, such as phonics, and under-assessing in other areas, such as vocabulary, a key predictor to 3rd grade reading.

Recommendations from the Stakeholders

Participants agreed that better state guidance is needed for district administrators and teachers on effective use of assessment findings. Two other areas of need were:

- **Assessment tools must include measuring children’s social/emotional development.** Like no other period in a child’s life, early childhood education focuses on “the whole child” and his/her needs. As a result, the group believed that any assessments within this period should go beyond the more traditional academic subjects, such as literacy and math, and also include social/emotional development. Group members voiced their concern about the *Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC)* assessment, which when fully implemented, will measure whether students are on track to be successful in college and careers. New Jersey is one of the first states to pilot PARCC. All agreed that this assessment places too much emphasis on literacy and math and very little on children’s social/emotional development. The final assessment tool should better reflect the assessment of the “whole child.”
- **Families should be more engaged in the assessment process.** Parents need to play a more significant role in the assessment process in order to better understand the outcomes and what those outcomes mean to their children’s learning.

Funding

Providing quality early learning requires a willingness to invest in children. New Jersey offers high quality, state-funded preschools to about 50,000 children living in low-income school districts. But the same high-quality preschools are not available to every 3- and 4-year- old from low-income families — even though the state’s funding formula requires it.

Child care providers continue to struggle to give all children a quality early learning environment. The struggle is exacerbated for programs that rely solely on state subsidies, as their reimbursement rate has remained stagnant for six years. A caretaker for a preschooler is paid approximately \$35 per day to care for an infant or toddler and \$29 per day to care for a child of preschool age.

As previously addressed, kindergarten remains in the margins, as it is not mandated in New Jersey and not every five-year old has access to a full-day program.

Recommendations from the Stakeholders:

Group members recognized the funding tension between mandating full-day kindergarten and expanding preschool to eligible children under the school funding formula. The group decided that more information was needed to address the issues of mandating full-day kindergarten and recommended appointing a commission to study the issues related to requiring full-day kindergarten in every school district.

Conclusion

With so many 3rd graders not reading proficiently, the gap between what the research tells us and existing early learning policy must be closed. New Jersey can best do that by developing and implementing an agenda that addresses those barriers identified in this action plan. Through stakeholder collaboration, both inside and outside government, and strong leadership, New Jersey can maximize the number of young children reading on grade-level, improving their chances for success in school and in life. These changes in policy and practice not only help our young students, but strengthen our schools, our communities, and the state as a whole.



Washington State: Thinking Strategically and Planning for All

The State of Washington has taken major steps in developing and implementing an early learning plan for its young children.

In 2010, after more than a year of planning and input from hundreds of residents throughout Washington, the *Washington State Early Learning Plan* was issued. The plan was developed to guide state early learning policy and funding decisions for 10 years. It is a roadmap for building a comprehensive, coordinated, effective, measureable and accessible statewide early learning system that supports school readiness for children ages birth through 3rd grade. Stakeholders aimed to attain this goal through a common vision, with defined outcomes and specific strategies linked to those outcomes.

Simply put, the plan maps out what the state should do and by when, the research and evidence that proves these strategies will work, and how the state will measure its success.

In developing the outcomes and strategies, the stakeholders focused on four subject areas:

- Ready and successful children
- Ready and successful parents, families and caregivers
- Ready and successful early learning professionals
- Ready and successful schools



It is a roadmap for building a comprehensive, coordinated, effective, measureable and accessible statewide early learning system that supports school readiness for children ages birth through 3rd grade.

The plan was mandated in 2006, as part of legislation created by the state's Department of Early Learning (DEL), and was developed with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Thrive by Five Washington, the state's public-private partnership, as lead agencies in the plan's creation. The

collaborating agencies make up the Washington Early Learning Partnership.

Despite the economic downturn, the partnership has made significant progress in implementing the plan's priorities. The achievements have included:

- A quality rating and improvement system, "Early Achievers"
- A campaign that deepened parents' understanding of child development
- A kindergarten readiness and assessment program
- Public and private support to increase the number of at-risk families receiving home visiting services

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