



# Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project: Looking Back Moving Forward

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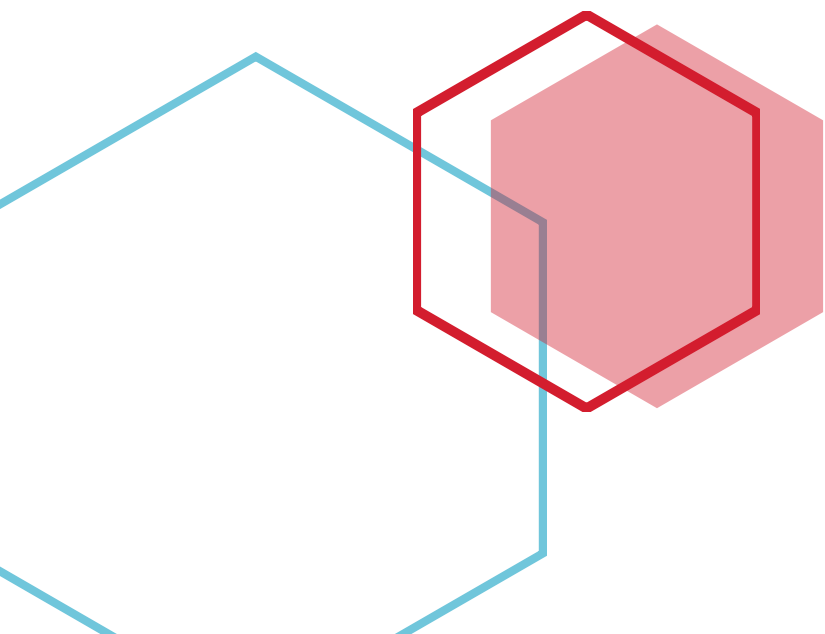
REFLECTING ON THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

January 2019

PREPARED FOR THE ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION  
BY THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATION POLICY AT ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Authors:

Ashley Long, Director, Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project  
Elizabeth Rothkopf, Birth-to-Third Grade Community Liaison  
Karen W. Yarbrough, Consultant



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the efforts and collaborative accomplishments of four years of work at the state level and in communities throughout Illinois by early childhood stakeholders. These stakeholders include a range of perspectives – programs, schools, community collaborations, state agencies, higher education, and advocacy. Using a selection of case studies from communities that received Preschool Development Grant – Expansion (PDG-E) funding and technical assistance to develop and implement birth-to-third grade alignment strategies, the report provides reflections and insight from the work undertaken. We hope that this analysis can help to encourage the next iteration of innovation in birth-to-third grade alignment efforts as well as to help those states and communities just embarking on this journey.

Illinois has long been a leader in early care and education. Over the last few decades, Illinois has increased funding to expand access to early childhood programs, implement high standards, and build an infrastructure to support early care and education programs. In the continuous effort to grow and improve, birth-to-third grade alignment has been identified by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) as one of the state's current priorities. In 2013, Illinois embarked on this work with support from the National Governor's Association (NGA), holding the first state-wide birth-to-third grade symposium, creating a series of case studies, and beginning work to validate the Danielson Framework for Teaching in PreK-3 classrooms.

In 2015, the federal PDG-E funding allowed the State to partner with Illinois State University (ISU) to establish and implement a comprehensive system of supports for the birth-to-third grade alignment, the Birth-to-Third Grade (B-3) Continuity Project. The B-3 Continuity Project launched with seven communities that received comprehensive supports from ISU supported by this funding. In the subsequent years, the project has grown and is now providing access to varying levels of support through an annual conference, webinars, and technical assistance to over seventy communities throughout Illinois.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Adequate early care and education funding provides legitimacy for preschool education in the eyes of kindergarten through high school (K-12) administrators.
- B-3 strategies must be responsive to community context.
- Stable funding over time is necessary to support this work.
- Stakeholder commitment over time is key to sustaining momentum.
- A shared body of data helps to clarify community needs and make the case for needed services.
- As with all systems building work, solid relationships form the foundation for change.
- Serving the most at-risk children and families, as opposed to serving a universal or less at-risk population, requires a different approach, additional staff competencies, and sets of services.
- Because of a lack of integration and coordination at the state level, communities and individual programs bear the burden of managing multiple, sometimes conflicting and redundant, requirements and procedures.

Birth-to-third grade alignment requires multiple systems and stakeholders to come into correct relative position to support a coherent educational experience from birth through age eight. Creating an aligned birth to age eight educational system requires changes on the part of both ECE and K-12 systems. Willingness to change and partner across systems requires understanding and building of mutual respect and trust.

Illinois' work has focused comprehensively on birth-to-third grade alignment as opposed to just aligning curriculum and improving transitions within a single school. Ambitiously, Illinois has adopted the following eight core elements for B-3 alignment:

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*"We are making progress. Funding moved us faster and forced us to do some things. We have increased awareness of B-3 strategies with elementary and middle school administrators. We are pushing for developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in Kindergarten and 1st grade. Our Family Liaisons have created a strong foundation of family engagement practices."*

Sandra Warner, Early Learning Center Principal,  
West Chicago District 33

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This report is comprehensive but structured to assist readers in identifying and pulling out key pieces that are relevant to them. In addition to more detailed background and context, readers will find:

- A summary of high level key findings drawn from the case studies through individual analysis as well as structured group conversations among community leaders.
- More in-depth information on the birth-to-third grade alignment strategies with real life examples from the participating communities.
- The complete set of five community case studies.
- A synthesis of a 2018 conference session where community leaders reflect on and answer questions about their B-3 alignment work.

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THE B-3 CONTINUITY PROJECT IS A COLLABORATION WITH:



**Illinois**  
State Board of  
Education



Governor's Office of  
Early Childhood Development



ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATION POLICY  
320 DEGARMO HALL  
CAMPUS BOX 5900  
NORMAL, IL 61790-5900  
PHONE: (309) 438-2579