

Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project: Maintaining the Momentum

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATION POLICY, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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PURPOSE

As funding for the Birth-to-Third Grade (B-3) Continuity Project at the Center for the Study of Education Policy (CSEP) winds down, this paper represents an effort to document key accomplishments and provide thoughts and direction to other community systems development efforts in Illinois. The concept of community systems development encompasses a range of collaborative activities to support and further the creation of local early care, development, and education systems that seamlessly meet the needs of young children and their families. From better aligning transitions across the range of programs serving young children to ensuring alignment of learning goals and approaches; this project focused explicitly on the goal of aligning services and experiences of children and families from birth-through-third grade. This paper includes the following:

- Key accomplishments that contributed to the success of the project
- Direction on where to access resources developed for the project
- Recommendations on next steps to support B-3 alignment efforts

PROJECT BACKGROUND

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 statewide 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 Preschool Development Grant – Expansion (PDG-E) funding allowed the State to partner with Illinois State University (ISU) to establish and implement a comprehensive system of supports for 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.

PROJECT APPROACH

Early in the project, the leadership team developed a conceptual framework to approach this complex work. This included a focus on both process and content strategies. As with all systems building work, the process efforts were key to making real change at the community level. Facilitating the development of relationships in the context of a growth and change mindset

among community leaders allows for real and substantial work to take hold. Descriptions of both types of strategies are included in the following sections.

B-3 ALIGNMENT PROCESS STRATEGIES

Establishment of a state-level team: Initially, a state-level team, including a Director of the B-3 Continuity Project, was formed to conceptualize and initiate the work. The team included representatives from ISBE and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD) with whom the B-3 Director worked closely. The B-3 Director held responsibility for the project’s vision, facilitating the leadership team’s efforts, and managing project activities. All leadership team members worked to ensure that consistent messages and information were shared across the multiple ECE (Early Childhood Education) programs in Illinois. To help create a larger cultural mind-shift towards the importance of B-3 alignment, the B-3 Director also served on a variety of state-level committees representing the need for aligned systems.

Group convenings: A substantial portion of the project’s work involved planning and convening the annual B-3 continuity conference. Additionally, throughout the year, the project worked to identify and create webinars, facilitate other professional development opportunities, and support peer-to-peer networking and relationship building. These events were instrumental in building a sense of community among project participants and served to grow and expand expertise among Illinois stakeholders.

Individualized supports for communities: Project staff provided strategic and substantive consultation to build capacity of and support efforts of local leaders to create aligned systems of child development and educational services for children from birth-through-third grade and their families. This consultation came in the form of site-visits, participation in local collaborative activities, individual phone consultation, and one-on-one meetings with project stakeholders. Project staff were able to listen to the needs of communities and reflect with community leaders on their efforts. Tangible support included meeting facilitation, connections to other peers, as well as concrete tools, resources, and support on using identified materials.

B-3 ALIGNMENT CONTENT STRATEGIES

State-level project staff and consultants spent a great deal of time identifying, compiling and curating, and creating or adapting existing resources. Illinois’ work has focused comprehensively on birth-to-third grade alignment as opposed to just aligning curriculum and improving transitions within a single school. Project staff originally conceptualized the following content strategies, as adapted from the work of Kristie Kauerz and Julia Coffman. Curated and developed materials were then conceptualized into these strategies.



HIGHLIGHTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENT

Building this infrastructure, developing and cultivating relationships with and among community stakeholders and development and curation of resources allowed for many substantial community accomplishments. The report, [Looking Back Moving Forward](#), was released in January of 2019 to represent the efforts and collaborative accomplishments of PDG-E funded programs and state level efforts.

The accumulation of all the project's activities resulted in impact across participating communities. This report's deep dive into expansion program's activities revealed eight key findings (found on the right) for making the work successful. As result, communities expressed a cultural shift towards comprehensively serving their children and families and better working relationships between stakeholders. Creating an aligned birth to age eight educational system requires changes on part of both ECE and K-12 systems. Programs intentionally built respect and trust with new partners across their systems to see better outcomes for children.

Additionally, some programs are seeing better alignment of developmentally appropriate practices from ECE to kindergarten and from kindergarten up into first and second grades. Programs have found success in alignment within areas of curriculum, the use of the KIDS tool, services supporting families, and several other areas. The full report includes a more detailed description of the substantial accomplishments and headway made at the community level to achieve greater continuity for our youngest learners and their families. Real life success stories are included for each of the eight B-3 strategies.

Beyond the impact that many communities are experiencing the highlights of accomplishments at the state or systems level are articulated in the timeline on page six.

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD REPORT: 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.

PROCESS: STRONG AND THRIVING COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Relational trust is the foundation of systems work, listening and being responsive, knowing your lane and not trying to be everything to everyone is key to the success of this work. As a systems effort,

recognizing all the pieces and how they need to work together and facilitating connections, across systems and individuals were integral to the B-3 Continuity Project.

Meaningful and responsive engagement of stakeholders (as evidenced in the timeline) at the annual conferences, meetings and webinars as well as engagement with content resources served to:

- Create shared language and understanding
- Create a strong peer-to-peer support network for individuals that are doing very complex and nuanced work
- Create a knowledge base of expertise among stakeholders so that people do not have to start from scratch

CONTENT: MATERIALS, TOOLS, AND RESOURCES

While much research and material on B-3 Continuity was available at the beginning of the project, it was incumbent upon project staff to identify, curate, and provide the appropriate materials to local community leaders at the right time. Beyond curated materials, resources and tools were developed throughout the project to meet the individual needs of communities and to support the provision of content through conferences and other professional development opportunities (many of these tools can be found in the page 6 of the project's key accomplishments).

These bedrock resources were meaningfully organized in a way to support their use at the appropriate time by stakeholders. The previously described process strategies were the critical mechanisms to identify community need and disseminate materials and resources. Project staff were instrumental in helping communities identify and use tools as appropriate for where they were in their local efforts.

BUILDING ON THE MOMENTUM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

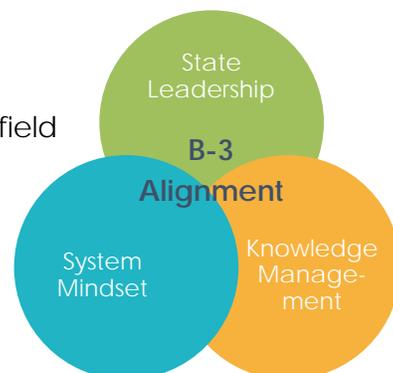
After four years of accomplishments and community building it will be critical to put in place supports to maintain the systems and relationships that have been developed through this project. The following section identifies key components of the infrastructure and systems that need to be maintained. It also includes recommendations for further policy and systems change to support birth-to-third grade alignment efforts.

State leadership and representation: Representation matters! To continue to acknowledge the importance of B-3 continuity efforts and make changes at the state level to further these efforts, we need stable representation to...

- Serve on government and public private tables (e.g., Early Learning Council (ELC) & subcommittees)
- Advocate for alignment of state-funded supports of existing and new B-3 aligned systems building efforts
- Represent and foster a context-sensitive, cross-systems perspective – including building collaboration among various state funding streams that touch children and families
- Adapt to time-sensitive changes in funding cycles, programs, and local conditions

Ongoing B-3 systems community of practice: To build on strong relationships and systems mindsets developed through the Birth-to-Third Grade Continuity Project's established network of practitioners, Illinois should consider these potential needs...

- Resources to provide needed professional development – this includes the current annual conference and other professional development not available elsewhere (e.g. B-3 systems alignment, RFP supports, etc.)
- Networking events and forums that allow for connections to be made among those doing work in the field
- Intentional and designated entity to address questions from the field
- Institution and management of B-3 listserv or other interactive platform for stakeholders to engage with one another



Content knowledge and practice: To address need for timely access to resources and support the following strategies should be considered...

- Management, updates and content development to existing set of B-3 resources
- Better inventory of professional development offered across state targeted to those supporting children from birth-to-third grade and their families – including the alignment of efforts by strategic/content area not just by age or specific funded programs
- Intentional engagement with the field for identification of gaps in needed professional development and development of targeted partnerships for provision of supports
- Designated tool (e.g. listserv or newsletter) for timely dissemination of timely resources from the field

Without plans for these supports, Illinois's early childhood collaborations, programs, social services and community partners are left without the infrastructure to continue growing B-3 aligned systems throughout the state.

SUMMARY

Birth-to-third grade continuity efforts are a very specific strand of early childhood systems building. This project and the specific focus and funding it provided served to elevate the importance of B-3 concepts, vastly broaden the range of stakeholders throughout Illinois engaged in this important work and provide models for other communities and states. In order to sustain the gains Illinois has made the placement of ongoing strategies described herein must be very carefully considered to ensure the work continues.

B-3 CONTINUITY PROJECT – ANNUAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS OVERVIEW

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A state team of CSEP, ISBE and OECD staff design B-3 Continuity Project supports and draft a B-3 Community Self-Assessment Laying the foundation for the B-3 Community of Practice, the inaugural B-3 Summer Institute takes place, hosting 48 systems builders representing 7 PDG-E communities from across Illinois. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IL adopted eight core strategies towards the State's goals of expanding and aligning high quality early learning and K-12 school systems B-3 Continuity Project website developed to house resources for each of the eight core strategies B-3 Community Self-Assessment and Action Planning Guide was developed to help communities develop plans around B-3 alignment Site visits to the first cohort of Expansion programs – visits helped connect local community stakeholder groups, prioritize common goals, and flag barriers for systems building efforts Networking and training worked to fill gaps between existing initiatives to address alignment across systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Best practices overviews developed for each of the eight B-3 strategies of focus in the project B-3rd Continuity Overview webinar created for use in on-boarding new communities 13 Preschool Expansion Programs received Technical assistance – Assistance included but was not limited to role creation supports, facilitation of peer mentoring and networking, strategic planning assistance One-on-one outreach and offering of TA to 24 newly funded state PFAE programs 4 professional development opportunities provided serving 474 individuals – two of these were in a webinar format and had 99 views* within three months following the original recording The B-3 Continuity Project webpage hosted materials and co-sponsored events to support programs in applying and re-applying for Early Childhood Block Grant funding (740 views*) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) Training webpage was developed to house materials from all DAP trainings – this includes a highly requested video recording on DAP training and complimentary training guide (357 views*) Two KIDS Early Learning (EL) Instrument Crosswalk documents were developed. One utilizing 14 state required measures and one demonstrating alignment for the 29 measures included in the KIDS Five Readiness Domains. 12 other professional development opportunities were offered serving 417 participants and 120 follow-up views of recorded trainings – these trainings included a webinar provided jointly with Illinois' KIDS team to provide support around the first release of statewide KIDS data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Birth-Third Grade Continuity Project: Looking Back Moving Forward report (220 views*) Community Self-Assessment received a refresh and update of content Supporting and Evaluating Developmentally Appropriate Practices (AA3021), an Administrators Academy, was developed in collaboration with the Illinois KIDS team – the academy is available in conjunction with the B-3 Continuity Conference and will be offered from KIDS coaches throughout the 2019-2020 school year A B-3 Community of Practice event hosted 129 preschool administrators and family support specialists – this event focused on the importance of family engagement and provided an opportunity for networking across the state.
<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Conference Attendees: 48 Communities: 10</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Conference Attendees: 75 Communities: 13 Website: 201 views*</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Conference Attendees: 111 Communities: 20 Website: 879 views*</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Conference Attendees: 154 Communities: 24 Website: 1,692 views*</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Conference Over 180 Registered</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Project Website: n/a</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Project Website: 324 views*</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Project Website: 2,323 views*</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B-3 Project Website: 3,712 views*</p>	
Communities receiving funding and eligible for B-3 Continuity Project Supports				
<p style="text-align: center;">PDG-E: 25</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PDG-E: 25</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PDG-E: 25 PFAE: 24 Total: 49</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PDG-E: 29 PFAE: 54 Total: 83</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PDG-E: 29 PFAE: 61 Total: 90</p>
*The number of page views represents the unique number of views a page had during the indicated calendar year.				