

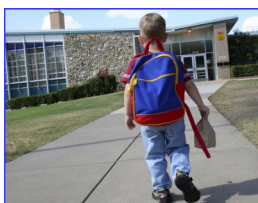
Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum (LINC)



Building a Seamless Learning Continuum: The Role of Leadership in Bridging the Gaps Between Early Childhood and K-12 Education Systems

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Project Background



Birth to age five is a critical time in the development of all children. Research on brain development has shown that from birth to five

years of age, children's brains develop the building blocks for academic, social and emotional functioning for the rest of their lives. Therefore, the foundation for student achievement is laid before a child ever sets foot in kindergarten. The creation of a single, flowing education continuum from birth through adulthood would allow students to build upon their educational experiences from early education on.

VISION: Creating a learning continuum that coordinates standards, curriculum, assessment and instruction across the education sectors to benefit students, families, educators and the workforce.

The American education system has developed in separate pieces at different times, (early childhood, K-12 and university), which has created a disconnected chain of educational experiences for students. Only in the past few decades has work begun to integrate these pieces of the education system into a coherent whole: a learning continuum, or progression, that supports students from their earliest learning experiences, through their growing years and formal schooling, and into adulthood.

A learning continuum does not involve very young children being administered paper-and-pencil standardized tests, nor does it involve play-based curriculum being forced onto older students. An effective continuum creates an educational environment where K-12 learning standards inform early learning standards and vice versa. It would mean that K-12 curriculum builds on learning in the early years, and leaders of both schools and early childhood programs understand and incorporate social/emotional development into their pedagogical approaches. In short, a learning continuum has the goal of nurturing students throughout their learning process and giving them skills for success in school as well as life.

Challenges to creating a learning continuum:

- Misperceptions of the nature and value of the work performed within organizations and schools providing care and education along the continuum.
- Complex systems of care and education, in which little communication occurs between sectors.
- Inconsistent cross-sector collaboration, leading to misalignment of various essential elements of a strong learning continuum.
- Incompatible policies, practices and funding streams that do not promote or sustain collaboration and seamless, integrated learning environments and experiences for children.

Project Principles and Advisory Group Charge

An Advisory group of local and state early childhood (defined as all of the learning and development experiences that children experience pre-school) and K-12 representatives met from August to December 2008, providing expertise and guidance to study the current status of early learning/K-12 integration in Illinois. The group conducted its work based upon three guiding principles:

1. **Leadership Matters.**

- Research shows that education leaders both early childhood and K-12 schools have a significant effect in student learning, second only to the effects of teachers.

2. **Early Learning Investment Pays Later Dividends.**

- Investments in early learning result in important and measurable gains for students, including cognitive, social, and emotional growth as well as positive life outcomes.

3. **Early Learning and K-12 Can Learn from Each Other.**

- Many effective educational methods and approaches used within each sector have important applications within the other. Sharing this knowledge will benefit students, parents and educators.

The LINC Advisory Group Charge

To develop and implement policies and practices that address the missing links in creating a learning continuum to support the whole child from birth to beyond and the role that early childhood and K-12 school leaders play in their efforts to collaborate with families, support agencies, and community and state stakeholders to provide high quality learning and developmental opportunities for children.

The Research Study

Project staff designed and administered surveys to an Illinois sample of early childhood program directors, elementary principals (with and without early childhood classes in their schools), and professional development providers. The on-line or paper survey used both qualitative and quantitative methods. It rendered 205 responses from early childhood program directors and 403 responses from elementary principals. *The study considered four primary research questions:*

1. What is the current nature of the linkages and partnerships between early learning providers and K-12 school systems in Illinois?
2. What are the most current issues and challenges that are barriers to creating a seamless learning continuum in Illinois?
3. How are early learning program directors/coordinators and elementary school principals facilitating the alignment of a learning continuum?
4. What actions do practitioners recommend that would facilitate their efforts to develop and sustain a learning continuum?

Creating a Research Base

To set the stage for informed Advisory Group discussions and the project's research agenda, project staff created an on-line research compendium, a compilation of the most relevant and current research and literature about the alignment of the learning continuum, grouped into three categories: *early childhood, learning continuum alignment, and leadership.*

The research compendium is available at <http://www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu/researchcompendium/>

Study Findings

Policy and Practices of Early Childhood Program Directors

When it comes to working with educators outside their own early childhood programs, directors rarely engage with the elementary teachers and administrators in their local school districts. Very few early childhood program directors and teachers work with elementary teachers and administrators to align the two systems' programs and curricula, observe classrooms, or participate in joint professional development.

Many early childhood program directors indicated that they did developmental screenings of each child upon enrollment as well as monitor students development while in their programs. However, some believe that federal data privacy restrictions do not allow them access to their students' data once they matriculate to elementary school, which prohibits them from using these data to evaluate and improve their programs.

Policies and Practices of Elementary Principals

Elementary principals also reported that they rarely work with early childhood program directors and teachers outside of their buildings. A large percentage of principals reported that their schools do not routinely invite early care and education providers into their classrooms to observe and learn about kindergarten expectations.

The practices that early childhood program directors and elementary principals report using the least are alignment and collaboration practices requiring these leaders to reach outside of their buildings—which are often the most beneficial.



Barriers to the Learning Continuum

Early childhood program directors cited the following barriers:

- Lack of access to follow-up data on center graduate's progress in K-12 system,
- Not enough time to build partnerships, and
- Lack of interest by K-12 districts on receiving early childhood assessment data when the child matriculates.

Elementary principals listed their own perceived barriers:

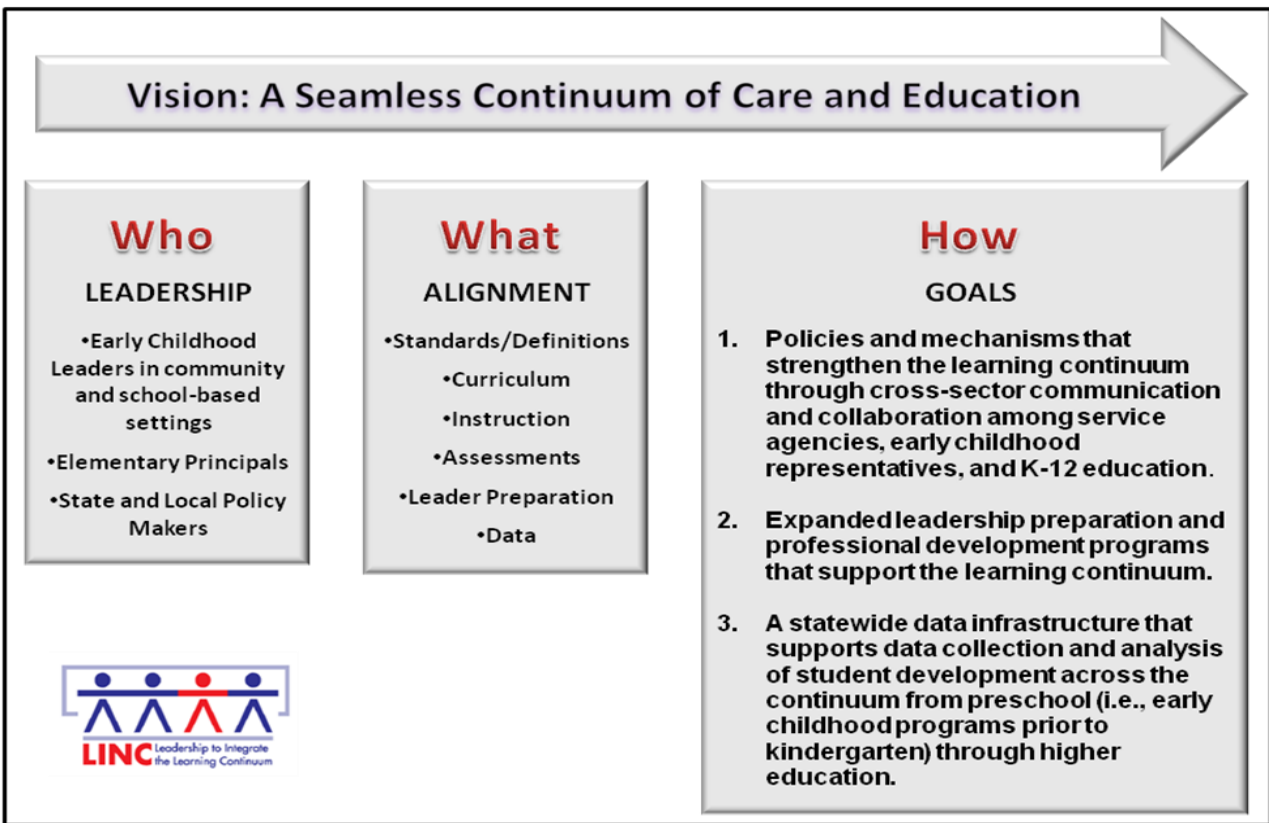
- Not enough time to build partnerships,
- Incompatibility of schedules between the two systems, and
- Privacy laws that strictly regulate the sharing of student information among people and systems.

Suggestions for Overcoming Barriers

- *Preparation* integrating more learning about early care and education into K-12 administrator preparation programs.
- *Professional development* involving educators from both sectors learning together and from each other.
- *Collaboration* between the two sectors.

LINC Goals & the Learning Continuum

After a thorough review of the published research, the LINC data analysis, and discussion progressing over several months, the LINC Advisory Group devised its goals and recommendation. As the members maintained their focus on the role of education leaders and policymakers, they created a list of alignment issues and narrowed the goal list to three key goals. The group was able to develop specific action recommendations for each goal using the vision for the who what and how of creating a seamless continuum of care and education.



To read the entire LINC Report with the full set of recommendations and for additional resources, please visit the LINC website at:

www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu/

For additional information contact:

Lisa Hood, Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University
lhood@ilstu.edu

Erika Hunt, Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University
elhunt@ilstu.edu

Center for the Study of Education Policy
Illinois State University
<http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/eafdept/centerforedpolicy/>