

# LINKING READY KIDS TO READY SCHOOLS

A REPORT ON POLICY INSIGHTS FROM THE GOVERNORS' FORUM SERIES

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*Arizona, Connecticut, Mississippi, Ohio and Pennsylvania*

**Embargoed for Release, Monday, March 30, 2009.**



2009

PREPARED FOR W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

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## A REPORT ON POLICY INSIGHTS FROM THE GOVERNORS' FORUM SERIES

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# Introduction



**By Gregory Taylor**

*Too often government officials design programs for children as if they lived their lives in silos, as if each stage of a child's life were independent of the other, unconnected to what came before or what lies ahead.*

— James Heckman, *Education Week*, March 19, 2007

Each year too many children start kindergarten unprepared to learn. Many will never catch up. The reasons for this are complex, but this much is clear: The multiple systems – from family to schools to government – that should be supporting young children too often are failing to do so. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation seeks to change that, and to permanently improve systems that affect children's learning.

As policymakers look for ways to improve student outcomes by creating “seamless” systems of education starting at preschool, communities have been getting it done. SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) — a five-year initiative funded by the Kellogg Foundation — has contributed a unique, community-based perspective to the national conversation on what it takes to effectively link learning systems. In particular, SPARK examines what it takes at the beginning of the education pipeline to link early learning to the early grades. The goal is to make sure that children are ready for school and that schools are ready for them — a formula critical for a lifetime of successful learning.

SPARK efforts are deeply anchored in the community and are designed to assure that children are successful both before and after they enter school. The strategy of working with schools, early care and education providers, families and community partners has yielded a set of proven ways to align local systems of education — approaches that have been tested in diverse rural and urban communities in Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio and Washington, D.C. What SPARK community-based sites have done to create connections across local systems of learning stands to influence larger school reform issues and state policy discussions about what is needed to create a more holistic learning experience for children — one that results in academic success at grade three and beyond.

Initiatives like SPARK serve as local incubators for what works. They are an important way to demonstrate success and lead to the creation of state policies that bring about positive outcomes.

SPARK provides answers to two key challenges for policymakers: knowing what policies and mechanisms enable systems to work together effectively and bring about positive student outcomes, and understanding how those policies work in a local context so they support the very place they are expected to have the greatest impact.

With SPARK results in hand, governors and legislators will have the tools they need to create effective community-based programs.





## LESSONS FROM SPARK

WKKF and SPARK did something that very few other initiatives have done: they called attention to and programmatically addressed the fact that children's achievement is a function of what happens both before and after they enter school. Beginning with children at age three and following them through grade three, SPARK provides a continuous set of services and supports designed to increase school success. By working across two disparate systems — early education and elementary school — SPARK shapes the cultures of each and has led the way in demonstrating best practices for creating smooth transitions and improved continuity.

This is the unique and lasting policy contribution that SPARK and the Kellogg Foundation have made to assure children's success in school and in life.

SPARK is at its core a partnership or a series of partnerships among the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, public and private grantees, community groups, preschool providers, child advocates, parent groups and school leaders. At first, the partnerships focused on strengthening the conditions of early education in the community, in child care and preschool programs, and in the home.

As SPARK children began to move into kindergarten, the focus of the conversation expanded to include elementary schools and methods for smoothing the transition from early education to kindergarten.

Over the past two years, SPARK participants have shown strong results and begun to attract the attention of state and federal officials, as well as other funders. The Kellogg Foundation, meanwhile, has worked to spread the lessons learned from SPARK. A series of high-visibility Governors' Forums

on "Linking Ready Kids and Ready Schools" have been held in Arizona, Connecticut, Mississippi, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to accelerate state efforts to link early education to elementary school. Kellogg also has worked to help SPARK partners find new sources of money and to replicate their work in other communities.

## THE KEY TO SUCCESS

SPARK follows four guiding principles:

- **Strong partnerships** among families, early care providers, community organizations and ready schools ensure that all children can learn and succeed.

SPARK created teams — comprised of community leaders, service providers, business leaders, parents, policymakers and preschool and K-12 educators — to improve quality and

facilitate links between early child care and education and the early grades. The teams worked to raise understanding of the importance of those early years and to broaden commitment to children's success. They also provided a forum for educators at all levels to work together and explore ways to create more continuity for young children. The effect: new voices and champions for linking early learning and the early grades, and improved program quality for preschool and elementary grades.

- **Quality** is a critical element of a child's early learning, from birth through the early years of school.

Providing high-quality, integrated learning experiences that are aligned from grade to grade and classroom to classroom and continuous from child care and preschool through the early grades leads to better outcomes for students. SPARK increased alignment and continuity by focusing on program and teacher quality and creating opportunities for professional development. Alignment also was increased by collecting and sharing data among schools and programs, and training teachers to use the data to make their lessons suitable for their students.

- **Parents and families** — working with early care providers — are critical to ensuring that children succeed in school.

SPARK recognized and built on the capacity of parents to be their children's first teachers. SPARK sites developed approaches to work with parents based on their abilities and circumstances. Support was ongoing and evolved over time to meet the needs of parents and children as they moved from early learning settings and home to kindergarten and the early grades. Programs ranged from intensive home visits to resources and referrals; and from small peer support groups to leadership training, family literacy and customized parent-child programs. The most important aspect of SPARK has been its continued focus on sustained interactions and support for parents.

- **School leaders and teachers**, working with the community's support, can create smooth transitions from early learning settings so that children can succeed in school.

The role of the elementary school was a key focus of SPARK and was driven by the need to introduce and support practices that create "ready schools" — schools that can smooth transitions and establish continuity across systems. In that effort, the support of principals was paramount. As the instructional leaders of the school, principals are critical to instituting practices and policies that support more coordination and continuity across systems.

Coordination between early childhood education and elementary schools, which operate under separate systems, is not always easy. Principals need information and guidance on effective and tangible ways to create better links. SPARK created a definition of a ready school and a self-assessment designed to increase continuity and smooth transitions. The ready-school assessment provided principals and planning teams with a useful tool for measuring a school's capacity and setting improvement goals.

Transition also is critical to establishing stronger connections. SPARK-supported transitions play a dual role: to help children and parents make the move from home and early care and education settings to elementary school, and to establish a broad system of supports and resources to increase continuity across all levels.

## **POLICIES THAT PROMOTE SEAMLESS LEARNING**

SPARK demonstrates what it takes to create an early learning/early grades continuum. By linking school readiness to ready schools, children's experiences before they enter school can be sustained through transitions. High-quality and coordinated teaching and learning occurs at every level.

State policies can help districts, schools, and early care and education programs create linkages to align continuous systems of learning. But to establish a true continuum, they also have to create similarities across systems, provide interconnected services and reflect understanding and insight into the work as it is implemented on the ground in schools, districts and communities.

There's another thing policies can't do: foster a real sense of teamwork between the early childhood education and K-12 communities. A joint effort between the people responsible for children before and after they enter kindergarten is critical to the creation of a seamless system, one that will improve children's success from the moment they begin to learn and for many years to come.

SPARK sites have been highly successful in bringing to the table two learning communities not traditionally accustomed to working together to investigate how their joint efforts can improve outcomes for children. Creating a more seamless system across early learning and the early grades cannot be viewed as the sole responsibility of either early childhood education or K-12 schools. Rather, it is the willingness and capacity of both sectors to work together and share accountability for building student success, supported by strong state policy, that will make a difference in the end.

As states continue to expand their efforts to create a seamless continuum to educate children from birth through the post-graduate years, they should consider looking to community-based efforts like SPARK for examples of what works. Strong community-based efforts represent transparent and highly effective laboratories for developing good state policy and should be considered valuable resources.

*Gregory Taylor is vice president for Programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.*





# Moving from “Transitions” to Policy Change: Next Steps for Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools



By Sharon L. Kagan

## INTRODUCTION: THE PRESS FOR A FOCUS ON TRANSITION

This report comes at a propitious time. Despite very tight budgets, many state governments have committed to enhancing investments in young children. Moreover, given the federal stimulus package, coupled with the Obama administration’s push to increase spending on health, education and energy, it is likely that more public dollars will be going toward early care and education. Exactly how much money will be spent and where it will go is a matter for debate. But that debate needs to transcend conventional lines of inquiry and focus on the things that will most surely prepare healthy children for lives in a quick-paced, globalized and vocationally unpredictable world. Society must force itself to transcend familiar policy strategies and instead examine alternatives more appropriate to the environment that awaits today’s young children. Educating for yesterday is inadequate; educating for tomorrow is requisite.

For many early educators, this stance is not new. Constantly faced with insecure funding, those concerned about the well-being of young children have long had to defend the services they provide. Policymakers and the public have demanded to know not only if early interventions made a difference to young children entering school, but also the degree to which such differences were sustained as children moved through the elementary years. Dubbed by some as the “sustained effects” rationale, this focus on transition has two deep and compelling roots. First, the importance

of transition to young children’s development has been supported by countless (and ideologically diverse) learning theorists, including Jean Piaget, Johann Pestalozzi and Lev Vygotsky. They underscore the need for effective transitions, confirming the intuitive observations and experiences of practitioners and policymakers. The second focus, more policy-charged, grows out of early studies that, however inaccurately, documented and vigorously popularized the “fade out” of Head Start benefits. Although occurring long ago, the (mis)use of these data forced early education advocates to defend and justify programs and services that many other countries regard as an automatic right.

In an effort to prove that transition programs made a lasting difference, the federal government conducted and evaluated a number of demonstration transition efforts. Sadly, they failed to show sustainable gains. In reviewing these studies, some contended that they were poorly designed; others said the implementation was never fully realized; still others noted that the transition efforts were too short-lived. Whatever the rationale, a transition agenda remained a noble but elusive goal, one that was strongly supported in principle but that failed to firmly engage the majority of the nation’s programs and schools.

## TRANSITION RECONCEPTUALIZED

Recognizing the dilemma, scholars, practitioners, policymakers and foundations set out to “right” the situation. Thoughtful essays and books emerged, as did speculation on new ways to think about transition. Some, for example, suggested that





**Given the policy opportunity that current commitments to education offer, a *conceptual mind shift* is needed to reconsider what is meant by transition and what should be done in its name.**

transition efforts had been too narrowly construed as short-term, end-of-the-year activities; they called for sustained, year-long, non-Band-Aid approaches to readying children for school and readying schools for children. Others noted that transition efforts were often too narrow, focusing on particular classrooms or schools; they suggested that to be effective, transition efforts needed to embrace families, schools and communities as partners. Finally, some suggested that as important as transition efforts were, they often ignored the realities of inconsistent and unaligned expectations, curricula and assessments.

Beyond the rhetoric, the commitment to advancing transitions grew to include the idea that not only did children have to be ready for school, but schools and communities needed to become ready for children. With this important twist, countless efforts emerged to bolster schools' capacity to advance

the development of young children. They broadened transition to embrace vertical links as children move from home to preschool and from preschool to school, as well as horizontal links among health, welfare, social service and other community agencies.

Bearing numerous names — including P-3, P-20, community schools, ready schools, transition and alignment and systems-building — the work is rapidly taking hold throughout the nation. Accompanying (and largely driven by) the bevy of efforts, new ideas about transition are emerging, as is new language to describe and circumscribe these amoeba-like endeavors.

### **TWIN CHALLENGES: A NEW “THINK” AND MORE INTEGRATED POLICIES**

Policymakers face twin and entwined challenges. One is a conceptual challenge, the other a strategic one.

Conceptually, policymakers and the entire early education field are faced with the need to bring some coherence to “transition” work. What does it include? How do the emerging efforts fit in? What, if anything, distinguishes transition, links and continuity work? How can the efforts avoid overlapping? How can we more accurately label and explain them to those who make policy and find it difficult to distinguish among their stated goals?

Given the policy opportunity that current commitments to education offer, a *conceptual mind shift* is needed to reconsider what is meant by transition and what should be done in its name. Without such clarity, we are likely to foster overlapping efforts that are complicated to understand, navigate and evaluate. Moreover, despite our good intentions, we may cause confusion for families, providers and policymakers, and will create practice, policy and fiscal inefficiencies.



A new approach to continuity must include at least three prongs, pursued concurrently. The first prong includes *pedagogical* efforts targeting what and how children learn and teachers teach. It focuses on the alignment of content, curricula and interactions between children and adults as children move from home to preschool to school. Second, a *programmatic* orientation to transitions looks beyond what young children experience inside the classroom to the congruence of their experiences outside the classroom. This approach seeks to alter the links among the institutions that touch young children's lives, including families, schools and communities. Moving beyond the classroom and the program, the third and final prong regards transitions from a *policy* perspective. It embraces societal attitudes, laws and regulations that affect direct services and the early childhood infrastructure. Taken together, these three prongs suggest that new thinking about transition, continuity and interconnections must be nested within the context of early childhood systemic reform. In short, instead of speaking about transition, links or continuity projects, we must embed *transition-think* into all reforms affecting young children.

Transition-think must also consider the future facing today's children. It must embrace the challenges posed by the many diversities inherent in this land and world. How culture and language affect young children and their families as they deal with America's mainstream institutions warrants far more attention than it currently gets. Moreover, we need to consider how to use technology as new transition-think is crafted. And we must fully tease out the impact of globalization and the need to ready young children for life in a greening, interconnected world. Any new think must embrace not only new ideas about transition, continuity and linkages, but must allow for cultural variation, technology, greening and globalization — not a simple undertaking.

The second challenge addresses strategic policy options. It might be considered logical to take a "wait and see" stance; that is, to let policy rest while the conceptual issues are worked out — until the new think is created. But as those concerned with young children well know, policy does not wait for data or for new ideas, much less for a new conceptual think. Policy sets its own pace. To that end, what policies could be advanced?

First, provision needs to be made for conceptual work to take place. Such efforts could and should be supported by foundations with strong input from policymakers, practitioners and scholars. They should begin with the premise that fresh thinking, fresh ideas and a fresh approach are needed. An effort to promote a new think should be broad based, inclusive and guided by a set of fundamental principles that can be acted upon.

Second, current funding streams need to be examined for their attention to transitions and continuity that will advance the interconnections between home, programs, schools and communities. Guided by a new think, money should be spent on things that fundamentally realign curriculum, pedagogy, programs and policies.

Third, some of the money in the federal stimulus package and in President Obama's budget should be devoted to efforts that durably alter these links. If, as the stimulus package suggests, investing in infrastructure stimulates growth, investing in the connective infrastructure is essential to early care and education's short- and long-term effectiveness.

Finally, all new funding for young children should be subjected to a "linkage impact statement," similar to the environmental impact statements that have become commonplace. A review should be made of all child-related bills and pending actions by the government and by foundations to discern the degree to which the proposed grant, policy or program would foster or inhibit transitions and

associations. Will the new effort be another add-on or will it contribute to a more finely honed, integrated system of services for children?

## IN CONCLUSION

Perched at the precipice of a new era, the early care and education field has the opportunity and the responsibility to define where it intends to lead the nation on transitions, continuity and relationships. In so doing, a new think about transitions will be created, one suited for the worlds of today and tomorrow. Old understandings of transition need to give way to theoretical and systemic advances. This is not a time for new wine in old bottles; it is time to consume the aged wine and prepare our vineyards for future yields. With a vigilant eye to the future, new ideas and new policies must be advanced.

*Sharon Lynn Kagan is the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy, co-director of the National Center for Children and Families and associate dean for Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, and professor adjunct at Yale University's Child Study Center.*

# GOVERNOR'S FORUM:

*Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools*

# WELCOME



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# GOVERNOR'S FORUM:

*Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools*

# WELCOME



# The Governors' Forums: Showcases for Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools

By Jodi Enda

The evidence is abundant: Young children perform better, learn more and acquire skills that will carry them into adulthood when they are ready for school and when schools are ready for them.

The goal is straightforward: Provide seamless transitions as children move from child care or preschool into elementary school.

The challenge, though, is immense. It will require changing the early childhood education system in this country. It will require making sure elementary school teachers and principals are on board. It will require creating an education continuum the likes of which the United States has never seen, a system that would prepare children for a lifetime of learning starting as early as birth and that would push them not only to stay in school, but to achieve.

The aim is to do this much faster and more comprehensively than is customary in this country, at a time when school systems are under attack for failing to perform and when money is tighter than ever.

Despite the hurdles, a handful of governors and hundreds of educators, education experts, community leaders and policymakers gathered in five states last year to share experiences and map out strategies to reform education for the youngest learners in their districts and their states, and to generate models that might be adopted in the nation as a whole. Governors in Arizona, Connecticut, Ohio and Pennsylvania worked with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) to convene *Governors' Forums: Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools*

to review and accelerate strategies to help children move seamlessly from the early years to elementary school and beyond. Mississippi held a similar meeting of its own.

"The gains that are made in preschool cannot and must not be lost when a child enters elementary school," Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell said during a September 2008 forum in Hartford. "The challenges that the children will actually bring with them to kindergarten must be identified early and dealt with early. In these early years, children develop their love of learning, and they come to know the joys and the fun and, yes, even the hard work of academic success. We don't want to lose that.

"You don't want any child to fall away because suddenly they're faced with a different set of principles, a different set of schools, a different place," she said. "They need and deserve all of these experiences. Our responsibility is to create an environment where this can and does occur and then continue it."

But children are falling away, victims of the lack of coherence and consistency that pervades early child care and education in 21st-century America. Too many children still start school unprepared. Many never catch up.

## THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Unlike earlier decades, where many, if not most, children started school when they were five or six, it now is common for two-, three- and four-year-olds to attend preschool. Yet school systems have not changed to accommodate their needs, particularly when children move from day care

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or preschool into elementary school. There is no continuity, nothing to help children transition easily from one place to the next. Whether they are coming from preschool, a day care center or grandma's house, children are plunged – ready or not – into the same kindergarten classes with teachers who are not familiar with them or their learning experiences.

That needs to change.

“And the reasons for doing this should be obvious to anybody who remembers your first day of kindergarten. It was a traumatic experience!” said Tony Berkley, deputy director for Education and Learning at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “We know from the brain research that trauma's what makes those memories stick.”

To make the experience less traumatic in the short and the long term, educators and caregivers must create seamless transitions so that young children are ready for school and schools are ready for them, Berkley said.

“You know the first year of a child's life is a time of just incredible growth and development. We all know that. There probably is no other expenditure of resources that brings us the benefits and the rewards like a modest investment in our youngest children can bring to us,” Ohio Governor Ted Strickland said as he opened a September forum in Columbus. “It is, obviously, becoming increasingly recognized through research that when we provide the youngest of our children with a healthy start in life, with good, high-quality early child care and education that the results of that investment and that involvement last into the adult lifetime. And a better start for our children will result in a lot of the problems that we are currently dealing with in our society to be minimized.”

The need is staggering. In Arizona, for instance, only 13 percent of students are prepared for kindergarten when they get there, reported Sterling Speirn, WKKF's president and CEO. And few of them have the tools to catch up on their own.

“We know what the cost of failure is,” Speirn said, “but we don't know what the cost of success is.”

The United States needs to create a whole new system, a new paradigm, for educating its youngest children, much like it created a community college system in the 1950s, Speirn said. That system needs to link everyone involved in a child's education from the early years on, to ensure that he or she has a smooth transition to kindergarten and is put on the path to scholastic success.

In an effort to come up with some overarching and community-based strategies, WKKF has invested \$57 million in seven years on SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids. SPARK works in seven states and the District of Columbia to enhance education for vulnerable children by fostering partnerships among parents, early education providers, elementary school teachers and principals, to provide seamless transitions.

Gregory Taylor, WKKF's vice president for programs, highlights three key areas that need improvement:

**Transition and alignment.** Often, when children enter elementary school, they lose some of the skills they learned in early childhood education, he said. It is important to bridge that gap and make the transition smoother to maintain those gains.

**Parent engagement.** Taylor said one policy target is to engage parents effectively in their children's learning.

**Alignment among curricula.** The early childhood system and the K-12 system need to communicate and fit together better.

The stakes are high.

“The literature is very clear: Children who do not experience effective transitions are indeed in jeopardy of poor performance in school, difficulty making friends and other mental health and adjustment problems,” said Sharon Lynn Kagan, the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University. “So this is just

not ‘Let's do it because it's nice and we all should cooperate in the sandbox together.’ We're really talking about the need for this because of potent outcomes for children.”

Transition remains “quite remote from practice and policy,” Kagan said at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) National Forum on Education Policy in Austin, Texas last summer. However, she noted, innovative work is happening in the United States and around the globe.

## OHIO

In Ohio, the State Board of Education opted to craft a system to educate children from birth through kindergarten, said Sandy Miller, director of the state's Office of Early Childhood Education. “We know the great value of preschool, but wanted to pay attention to infants and toddlers...and to look at this in a much more comprehensive way,” she explained. The state is also participating in a pilot project in which selected schools will develop plans and take steps to redefine readiness and to increase the involvement of their wider communities.

## CONNECTICUT

Connecticut is also starting early, to ensure that children “will actually get to the kindergarten door with the knowledge, skills and behavior that you expect them to have in order to fully participate in kindergarten,” said Janice Gruendel, senior policy adviser to the governor. To gauge school-readiness, kindergarten teachers now assess each student on six areas of development.

A noted leader in early childhood education, Connecticut is targeting babies born in 2006 and every year after that for its “Ready by 5, Fine by 9” program.

“It's pretty simple. All children ready by 5, and fine by 9. Think of that!

That's not some little thing," Gruendel said. "Every year, those children are going to be on target developmentally. Pretty straightforward. When they get to kindergarten, they will be healthy and fully ready, and when they get to third grade they will be reading at a mastery level, which is the goal level for the state."

## PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania is blazing trails. It was the first state to embark on a comprehensive effort to align learning standards from birth through third grade. It also has established learning standards for infants and toddlers as well as for children in preschool, kindergarten and first and second grades; crafted assessment tools to measure children's achievement and progress as they enter kindergarten; expanded access to full-day kindergarten; created a unified approach to quality standards, professional development, program design and advocacy in early learning; developed a system to track children as they move through early learning, school and government agencies, and changed its certification system to align teachers' preparation with the developmental stage of their students.

As a testament to its commitment, the state has spent more than \$3 billion on early childhood education — more than 30 percent of its basic education money — in six years, Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak said.

Pre-K Counts enrolls nearly 12,000 at-risk three- and four-year-olds in preschool; Keystone STARS works to improve child care programs and to provide high-quality early learning for more than 175,000 children; and Child Care Works provides 235,000 children from low-income families with access to reliable, regulated child care.

State officials are also working with counties and superintendents to create "points of connection" between children and schools, between schools

**"We know what the cost of failure is," said Sterling Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "but we don't know what the cost of success is."**

and families and between preschools and elementary schools, all to smooth transitions for children.

Pennsylvania has been using a transition framework designed by Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education and director of the Center for Advanced Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. Pianta emphasizes the need for communication — between parents and early childhood educators and caregivers; preschool and elementary school teachers and parents, and among principals, caregivers and parents. Then, he says, there must be additional communication between all those people and the children, so that they can move smoothly among schools and teachers with differing styles, standards and demands.

## MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi is the only state that does not finance any Pre-Kindergarten classes. It can't afford to, even though about 90 percent of the state's four-year-olds are in child care or preschool, Governor Haley Barbour told hundreds of educators and business leaders in Jackson in December 2008. However, the state is launching a three-year pilot program, called Mississippi Building Blocks, to improve early childhood education, and raising \$10.5 million from private industry to pay for it. If the program is deemed a success, business leaders said they will look to the state to expand it. Meanwhile, the state has created a rating system for existing private preschools, a relatively inexpensive program that Barbour said would force them to compete for what

he called a "Good Housekeeping seal of approval."

Problems experienced in moderation in other states — poverty, dropout rates, illiteracy, joblessness — are writ large in Mississippi.

"We're last on every list where we don't want to be last and first on every list where we don't want to be first," said state schools Superintendent Hank Bounds.

Mississippi, Bounds noted, "has the poorest population in the country. We know that children growing up in poverty are significantly less likely to live in print-rich, vocabulary-rich, experience-rich environments. On average, the child from poverty has heard 20 million fewer words than the affluent child by age five. On average, the affluent child has the same vocabulary level as the parent who lives in poverty. Eighty percent of brain development occurs during the first four years of life."

About three-fourths of Mississippi's children start kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed, Bounds said. He called attention to the state's shortcomings as a way to persuade business leaders to pony up for the preschool project.

"Children who don't have academic experiences in the first few years of life, we know, enter kindergarten with limited vocabulary skills, and the interesting thing about that is that vocabulary levels of five-year-olds is a great predictor of future reading success," he said. "We know that kids who can't read by the end of the third grade are exponentially more likely to go to prison and they're more likely to drop out of school. Children who are not ready for school have higher retention rates and that costs the state

money. They are much more likely to be pigeonholed into special education. These children are much less likely to become part of Mississippi's workforce. These children are much more likely to be welfare-dependent and part of the criminal justice system even as a juvenile.

"So for the business folks in this room, it's pretty clear why we have to have your support. We've got to think very differently about how we get kids ready to start the first day of kindergarten. We simply can't afford to have an enormous part of our student population enter kindergarten not knowing the difference between an A and a Z," stated Bounds.

## ARIZONA

In Arizona, voters agreed in late 2006 to funnel about \$150 million a year from a tobacco tax to First Things First, a new program aimed at improving access to quality care for children from birth through age five, and to coordinate the work of educators, caregivers, families, tribal governments, communities and health-care professionals. The current ad hoc system makes transitions difficult: preschool children often are watched by caretakers with GEDs or high school diplomas, whose earnings are below the federal poverty level, while kindergarteners are instructed by teachers with college degrees and solid wages; preschoolers are taught through play and experience, while kindergarteners and first graders begin to have more traditional, didactic experiences, to meet school requirements and take tests.

The system is splintered in part because state and federal governments haven't seen the need to intervene in or pay for early child care and learning, said Nadine Mathis Basha, chair of Arizona's First Things First. It was primarily viewed as a private, family matter, she said. That meant that children whose families could afford quality care were better prepared for kindergarten than those whose families could not.

First Things First is trying to change that with receipts from an 80-cent tax on tobacco products. It is working with Regional Partnership Councils, including tribes, to improve the quality of early childhood development and health, provide access to health care, foment family support for early education, provide professional development and training and increase public information about the importance of early childhood development, explained Mathis Basha.

Former Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, now secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, also created a P-20 Council to reform and improve education from early childhood through the post-secondary years.

"It's high time that we did so because the fastest growing population in Arizona is zero- to five-year-olds," Napolitano said at a forum in Phoenix last summer. "And that population is, in some respects, an at-risk population. Almost half of these children come from families who are at 200 percent of the federal poverty line or less – 48.5 percent.

They are more likely than others to live in a household where none of the parents have a significant amount of educational attainment themselves. And they're more likely to come from a household where English is not the primary language," she said.

"And so we have these challenges in front of us to make sure that these youngsters get every advantage that we can provide, to make sure that they can take advantage of the talents they have, the intellect they have, that they are competitive and ready to go when they enter all-day kindergarten and first grade. Looking at this as a system and as linkages is so very, very important."

"The need for education reform and alignment is real," added Rufus Glasper, co-chair of the Governor's P-20 Council and chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College District. "Arizona's education statistics include below-average college-going rates, high remediation rates at the post-secondary level, [and] feedback from business

and industry that Arizona students enter the workforce lacking adequate preparedness for success."

The P-20 Council has been working to bring together the education sectors, business and community leaders and elected officials to develop policies to improve the state's education system, starting in the earliest years.

The council's goals, Glasper said, are to ensure "that every child is safe, healthy and ready to succeed, that every third-grader is able to read at grade level, that every eighth-grader is prepared to take and pass algebra, that every graduating high school student is prepared to work or [to obtain a] post-secondary education.... and [that] Arizona's education system creates a strong pipeline of students who are prepared to build and sustain a knowledge-based economy."

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Creating a P-20 system is one of four main goals of the Education Commission of the States for public education in this country, said ECS President Roger Sampson. It is the road, he said, to linking ready kids with ready schools, and one that is both necessary and difficult to attain, as it will require making massive changes to a system that is not prepared for them.

The difficulty with "just doing it," Sampson said at several forums, is evident up and down the line. Teachers, principals, superintendents, commissioners, state officials – all can present obstacles to progress. Further, he said, America's education system was designed to grant access to every child, but not to help every child achieve. While achievement has now become a goal, school systems have not shifted to meet the challenge.

"The current system that we operate under was never designed to graduate everybody and to make sure everybody achieved," Sampson noted. "There's going to be some huge changes required if, in fact, we're going to meet that





mandate....Right now, under our current system, about 10 to 15 percent of our top performing students are competitive. But what are we doing with the other 85 percent? It's going to require some huge system changes for that to occur."

The education system is rife with finger-pointing and turf wars, he said, particularly in the face of a 40 percent dropout rate. It is critical for educators and policymakers to see the connection between the failure to prepare children for kindergarten – and to prepare schools for them – and the widespread lack of achievement among high school students, he said.

"The bottom line," Sampson said, is that "there is no way that they can meet the challenge of preparing our young people to compete globally

if they don't have a steady stream of ready kids going into ready schools...Many, many principals and superintendents embrace this idea of getting ready kids and making sure their schools are ready to receive kids in the correct manner. But not everybody feels that way and not every principal knows how or wants to."

Policymakers, he said, need to remove the hurdles and help train educators for the task. And while there need to be changes in upper grades as well, Sampson said the place to start is with the youngest group.

"There is no doubt in my mind that P-3, ages three to eight, are the most important and the pieces that must come first," he said. "They're also the piece that's been left out of the P-20

discussion the most. The evidence is overwhelming...If we miss the boat by age eight, the chances of recovery are slim, the costs are huge and we ought to understand where we get the most for the investment, and that's early."

Currently, Sampson said, school systems put greater emphasis on remediation for older students than on preparation for younger ones. That formula, he suggested, is backward. Sampson's description of remediation is "high cost, low results," as evidenced by a national high-school graduation rate of just 68 percent.

"The remediation rates in secondary schools – post-secondary schools – is approaching 50 percent in this country – 50 percent!" Sampson said in Ohio. "It makes sense that we start this from the very beginning with the right start and not let them fall behind."

Sampson also offered a cautionary note to educators and policymakers in state after state. "I'm going to give you a piece of bad news: The average length of time for a new idea from conception to institutionalization in K-12 is 37 years. That's a fact. Isn't that ridiculous?" Sampson said at one point. "I don't have to tell this group that this country can't wait that long...We've got to move forward."

The good news, many educators agree, is that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to early childhood education. In fact, there could be many solutions.

"Remember that there is not an answer out there that is eluding everyone. There are all kinds of right answers to this problem and that's really being creative and thinking outside the box," said Kristie Kauerz, former Early Childhood/P-3 Policy Director for Colorado Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien. "P-3 is not a silver-bullet approach; it is a silver-buckshot approach. The point being," she said, "there is not just one thing that is going to solve the problem."

*Jodi Enda is a writer and editor based in Washington, D.C. She has written a series of reports for the Kellogg Foundation on the Governors' Forums.*





# Case Studies: How Communities and States Can Link Ready Kids to Ready Schools

## An Ohio Case Study



By Sandy Miller and Joni T. Close

*"The Ready Schools Project has provided us the opportunity to expand our perspective to a greater educational arena. We are grateful for our new partnerships with early childhood caregivers and for the byproducts of new knowledge, collaboration and collegiality. We are in a better place due to our involvement in Ready Schools."*

— Chet Lenartowicz, Principal, Youtz Elementary, Canton City Schools

### INTRODUCTION

In February 1998, the National Education Goals Panel convened national leadership to address the importance of schools being ready for all children. The panel identified ten keys to a ready school in recognition that ready children must attend schools that are ready for them. In 2006, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) moved to advance the ready school agenda. All SPARK recipients were required to develop a plan to address the school readiness concept within their overall SPARK plan.

To address the concept of a ready school, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Early Learning and School Readiness and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators entered into a partnership to develop a ready-school guidance document. Ohio's ready-school proposal to

WKKF emphasized that "readiness" is accomplished through the shared responsibility of early childhood educators and district leadership. The "leadership from both the early education and formal school arena must pave the way to create 'enduring ties' that will lead to cohesive educational programs," the proposal said.

### HISTORY

In 2001, the Sisters of Charity Foundation received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to participate in an initiative devoted to helping the most vulnerable children and their families secure the resources and services needed to ready the children for school. Although the emphasis was on ready children, WKKF places readiness within an integrated system of ready families, ready schools and ready communities. The first two years of the five-year national SPARK initiative were primarily focused on "ready kids."

SPARK in Ohio elected to work in two school districts, one urban and one rural, to identify the unique challenges and opportunities of each. The SPARK Ohio model includes:

- Parent learning partners who provided learning plans and materials to children and their families;
- Health and developmental screenings for all children and referrals as needed;
- Work with families and schools during school registration to assure



a seamless transition for children entering kindergarten;

- Work with schools to develop learning opportunities for children and families in the months preceding kindergarten;
- Collaborating with local libraries to provide additional “take-home” learning materials;
- Partnering with the Office of Early Learning and School Readiness to determine how to best influence state policy; and
- Conducting evaluations and assessing data on the SPARK initiative to determine its effectiveness and identify ways to build upon the working model.

In year three, the focus of the national SPARK initiative shifted from ready children to ready schools.

## READY FOR SCHOOL — READY SCHOOLS

Ohio has more than 4,000 licensed child-care centers and preschools and more than 14,000 home-based providers. Each of these programs offers varying degrees of education, health services and family support. That means that when the children enter one of more than 2,000 elementary schools in 614 school districts they have varying degrees of “readiness.”

The Ohio Department of Education has done a lot to assure that children are ready for kindergarten by requiring early learning content standards and program guidelines. The SPARK program helped Ohio delve deeper into the transition practices between preschool and kindergarten and advance the ready-school concept.

In 2006, a statewide team of elementary school principals, kindergarten and early childhood teachers and higher education faculty was identified to develop a ready-school guidance document for principals. The team reviewed the research on transition practices and surveyed elementary principals to learn how much they knew about the ready-

school concept and what they needed to do to become a ready school.

Ohio then defined a ready school as:

- Ready to respond to the diverse learning needs of all the children it receives;
- Ready to look beyond “risk factors” and build upon the social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills of all children as they make the transition from home or preschool to kindergarten and then adjust to school life; and
- Ready to make a decisive difference in every child’s life.

After one year, the *Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning* resource guide was finalized.

Seven topics were identified as important to becoming a ready school:

- Leadership committed to understanding and connecting with early childhood needs and experiences;
- A transition process that starts well before kindergarten registration;
- Supportive environments that recognize the need of children and families to be engaged and feel they belong;
- High expectations and high-quality instruction through aligned standards, instruction and assessment from preschool through third grade;
- A shift to understanding diversity and differences in family cultures, previous experiences in education and ability to support children’s education by building home-to-school bridges;
- Acknowledging new ways to engage families and improve home-school connections; and
- Building communities of adult learners.

The book is replete with examples of action plans for schools and national and state models of ready schools, as well as key definitions, research and resources.

In 2008, the state team, working with 10 elementary school principals from different parts of the state, created two-year plans to develop ready schools.

The schools received financial support for two years, access to a coach to help develop and implement their action plans, and evaluations.

## CONTINUOUS LEARNING

A five-month review of what has been accomplished to date provides some insight into the challenges and successes of creating ready schools.

**Learning #1: Team composition matters.** When one ready-school team arranged for parents to complete the ready-school evaluation, the responses differed greatly. As a result, parents and community members were added to the team. What parents and community members perceive as needed for a smooth transition is often different from what teachers and principals think should be done. The differences in perceptions and diverse viewpoints need to be identified and addressed. The ready-school assessment is a starting point for building an action plan with shared understandings of the needs of each participant in the transition process.

**Learning #2: It is important to work strategically.** The school district superintendent, local board of education, curriculum and assessment coordinators and early childhood/primary educators need to be involved in the planning and implementation from the beginning. Some promising strategies for gaining wider support include providing regular updates to key leaders, inviting district personnel to be part of the ready-school team, presenting the plan to the school board, inviting board members to ready-school events, linking activities to district initiatives and existing programs and inviting other schools within the district to participate.

**Learning #3: Data matters.** It is important to develop a separate transition team to coordinate activities and make sure timelines are met, improve communication with families on how best to support learning at home and communicate regularly with



the preschool community. Initially, most schools took on too many goals and did little to actually change transition activities that had been done in the past. By working with coaches and paying closer attention to evaluations, school leaders have learned to stop blaming families, preschools or child care workers if transition activities aren't working. Instead, the teams make efforts to understand what is not working and ask for input from everyone involved in the transition process.

**Learning #4: Take time!** Some schools are using their ready-school funding to hold all-day, off-site planning sessions with a broad group of staff, community and parent representatives to develop a shared vision and goals. The extended and uninterrupted

time promotes collaboration, deeper discussion and a greater opportunity to share perspectives.

**Learning #5: Build leadership.** The school principal cannot be the lone lead. Several schools have identified ready-school coordinators to monitor the planning and implementation of each activity. Some schools have created committees around each of their identified strategies. Teachers take the lead on each activity.

## NEXT STEPS

In April 2009, the second group of schools will be selected to participate in the program. Principals who were involved in the first round will serve as

resources to their counterparts at the new schools. Coaches will continue to play a significant role with both the old and new schools and will work with state officials to determine whether and how to enhance coaching as more schools come on board.

Professional development is critical to principals' understanding of a ready-school concept and the use of the resource document to accomplish their goals. Next year, all school districts receiving funding for early childhood education services will be required to identify a ready-school team, conduct a self-assessment and develop a plan for year-two implementation.

Working both ends of the learning continuum is essential. Early childhood teachers and caregivers will be "trained" to facilitate connections between the early childhood community and the school district.

A little funding goes a long way. Money is needed from private sources as well as from school districts to assure that transition receives the attention it deserves. State officials are working with local and state-based foundations to raise additional money for ready schools. Finally, each of the 15 schools involved in the second phase of SPARK is required to use the ready-school resource tool. In this manner the ready-school work is embedded within the early childhood and kindergarten requirements of SPARK.

Each of these things gives state officials a better understanding of what is working and why — and what needs to be adjusted and why. The ready-school resource document, *Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning*, provides a bridge the early childhood system and elementary schools. It is a small step forward, but an important one in creating the best foundation for readiness.

*Sandy Miller is director of the Office of Early Learning and School Readiness in the Ohio Department of Education. Joni T. Close is president of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton.*







# A Connecticut Case Study



By Janice Gruendel and  
Mark McQuillan

*The gains that are made in preschool cannot and must not be lost when a child enters elementary school... The challenges that the children will actually bring with them to kindergarten must be identified early and dealt with early. In these early years, children develop their love of learning, and they come to know the joys and the fun and, yes, even the hard work of academic success. We don't want to lose that. You don't want any child to fall away because suddenly they're faced with a different set of principles, a different set of schools, a different place. They need and deserve all of these experiences. Our responsibility is to create an environment where this can and does occur and then continue it.*

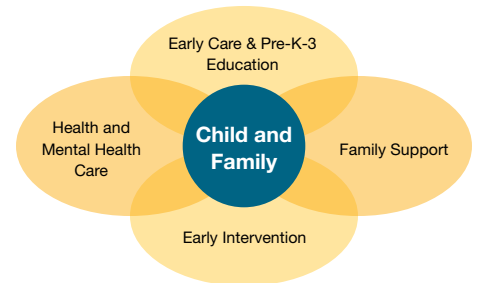
— Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell, Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools Forum, September 22, 2008

## GOALS AND VISION

Connecticut's work on the Linking Ready Children to Ready Schools partnership with the Kellogg Foundation and the Education Commission of the States begins at birth and aims to provide comprehensive, integrated, developmentally appropriate services and support during three important periods in children's lives: the first three years, the preschool years and during the first years of elementary school. In 2006, the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet articulated three goals for all young children in the state:

- Annual, age-appropriate development in each year, with a special focus on birth to age five, based on the science of early brain development;

**Connecticut proposes a seamless system of service and support in the years B-9 where public education is a major institutional player.**



- Entering kindergarten with the knowledge, skills and behavior necessary for early school success; and
- Demonstrating reading mastery by the fourth grade.

The Cabinet, established by law in 2005, advises the governor, the commissioner of education and the Connecticut General Assembly on school readiness issues, tracks outcomes from existing school readiness programs and helps develop budget proposals for early childhood education programs. In all its work, the Cabinet recognizes four core “systems” that need to be connected in order for children and families to achieve the goals of healthy development, school readiness and early educational success. These core systems are:

- Children's (and parental) health, including mental health and oral health;
- Early education and care, including family- and center-based child care, formal preschool programs AND early elementary school (kindergarten through third grade);
- Family support, including parenting education, family literacy and family economic security; and

## Center on the Developing Child Harvard University

### Positive Stress

A necessary aspect of healthy development that occurs in the context of stable, supportive relationships. Brief increases in heart rate and mild changes in stress hormone levels.

### Tolerable Stress

Stress responses that *could* disrupt brain architecture, but are buffered by supportive relationships. Allows the brain an opportunity to recover from potentially damaging effects.

### Toxic Stress

Strong, prolonged activation of the body's stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of adult support. Can damage developing brain architecture and create a short fuse for the body's stress response systems, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

- Early intervention services for children with (or at risk of) developmental delays or disabilities.

## LINKING TRANSITION AND STRESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Recently, Connecticut was selected to participate with the Harvard Center on the Developing Child – in partnership with the National Governors' Association and the National Conference of State Legislatures – to focus our work more closely on the critical period from birth to three years as the precursor to preschoolers' readiness for early education.

One national aspect of this work has been to report on the damaging (and long-term) impact of certain chemicals released in stressful circumstances on young children's early brain development, health and learning. In the earliest years of children's development, chronic exposure to toxic stress levels can impair the architecture and functioning of the developing brain.

All children and families experience transitions in the normal course of their lives and development. The circumstances of these events — and the supports that accompany them — determine whether the event will be managed with resilience (and lower levels of biochemical stress) or whether toxic levels of stress will result in a long-term, negative impact on health, behavior and learning. We see a key point of intersection between this new work on early brain development and the need to focus on early educational transitions in the context of preschool through grade three.

## A STATE ROLE IN PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN TRANSITIONS (AND BEYOND)

Connecticut statutes include a number of references to the obligation of our early education providers to prepare children for kindergarten and to work

toward successful transitions from preschool to kindergarten. However, no single place in Connecticut law outlines an intentional Pre-K-K framework. Similarly, nothing in Connecticut law directs elementary schools to reach out to preschools and child care centers to help smooth transitions for children entering kindergarten. Adding further to the need for statewide Pre-K-K policy coordination and guidance is reauthorization of the federal Head Start Act of 2007. This act mandates that all local Head Start programs develop formal agreements with the elementary schools that receive their students.

In Connecticut, a number of activities are underway at community and state levels to build an effective "system" from Pre-K through third grade. First, the State Department of Education has worked with several school districts on a Ready Schools initiative. What has emerged from this work — limited by resources but not intent — is a continued interest from the Connecticut Association of Schools to improve transitions and develop "ready schools" at the local level.

Second, over the past year the State Department of Education has taken a lead role in articulating key components of the Cabinet's "Fine by Nine" framework. This framework requires that all Connecticut children are healthy and successful in school by age nine. Pre-K-K transitions constitute a key "system goal."

Third, Connecticut continues to make significant strides in designing an Early Childhood Information System (ECIS) anchored in unique child identifiers, unique program identifiers and an early education and care workforce registry that allows us to report on the status of individuals who teach in our early education programs. A fully operational ECIS will allow us to examine children's preschool experiences within the context of their knowledge, skills and behaviors at entry to kindergarten. It will also allow us to examine their educational progress through a unified longitudinal data system.

## 2008 Cabinet RBA Presentation to the CT General Assembly: Goal II – Fine by Nine

### Core Principles

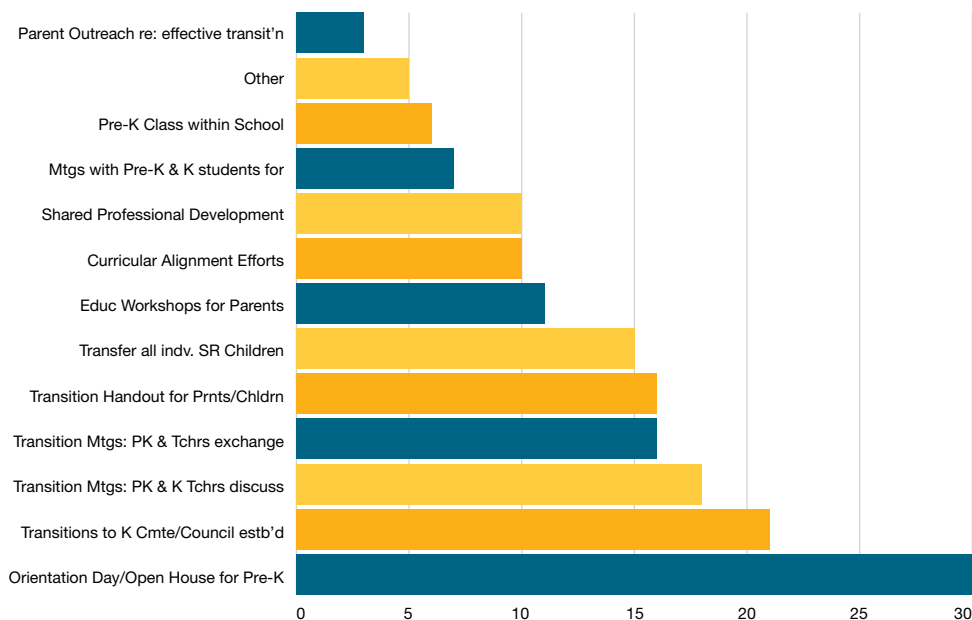
1. A multi-agency effort to building a *system* of services
2. Aimed at addressing the *whole child* as he/she develops
3. Focused by a powerful outcome: Grade 3 literacy attainment for all students
4. Part of a new B-9 paradigm
5. Framed by RBA
6. The missing and antecedent component of NCLB

### K-3 System Goals

1. Effective, formal Pre-K-K transitions
2. Welcoming, strong school cultures
3. Dynamic principals and school leaders
4. Knowledgeable, effective teachers who understand the science of teaching children to read

## What do we know about community Pre-K-K transition activities?

(n=37 towns)



Taken together, this work will support the goal of the commissioner of education to ensure a systematic philosophy and framework for teaching Pre-K through grade three.

### COMMUNITY WORK ON PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN TRANSITIONS

In preparation for Connecticut's September 2008 Governor's Forum: *Linking Ready Children to Ready Schools*, the Office of the Cabinet reviewed materials from the 64 local School Readiness Councils to identify activities to help ease the transition into kindergarten.

Data from 37 towns revealed that few school districts regularly reached out to parents about kindergarten transitions and only about a third had joint preschool-kindergarten teacher professional development, curriculum alignment between Pre-K and kindergarten or educational workshops for parents. About half

reported transferring student records from Pre-K to kindergarten and hosting meetings among teachers at both levels. By contrast, nearly all host one-time kindergarten orientation days or open houses.

To improve understanding about the importance of building effective Pre-K-to-kindergarten transitions, one of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet's partners, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, has been supporting a Kindergarten Transition Institute through the Connecticut Center for School Change.

The purpose of this institute is to provide a group of interested school districts with the opportunity to work and learn together about ways to improve preschool-to-kindergarten transitions and alignment. Material from the U.S. Department of Education and the work of Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education and director of the Center for Advanced Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia, serve as the framework for the institute.

### PLANNING FOR CHANGE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

During the past 18 months, Connecticut has been selected to participate in several national initiatives which, taken together, could bring dramatic change to attitudes toward early childhood education and lead to a public-private approach to building state and local early childhood systems. Connecticut is set to pursue a strong public agenda related to Pre-K-3 policy, program and practice improvement.

Over this same period, however, Connecticut's state budget — like those of many other states — has plummeted from a surplus to a large deficit, resulting in funding challenges at both state and local levels of government. One source of bright light will be the increase in money for education, Head Start and child care from the federal stimulus plan and from expanding federal funds for key information technology and data development efforts.

Fortunately, moving ahead to link ready children to ready schools is not totally dependent upon new funding, and we see significant opportunities to continue our work to improve policy, practice and programs for young children. Our plans involve:

1. Including early childhood system-building and data-development as key components of the governor's newly established P-20 Council, charged with better integrating Connecticut's educational systems from early childhood through postgraduate school to increase interest and achievement in science, technology and other 21st century learning content;
2. Hosting a Research Forum on the implications of early brain neuroscience for the transition from preschool to kindergarten and the early years of elementary school;
3. Continuing development of an Early Childhood Information System capable of tracking children across service sectors, from the beginning



of their lives through their early years of schooling;

4. Continuing to explore ways the State Department of Education can infuse a Pre-K-3 framework into its operating structures and culture;
5. Proposing a statewide method for early education providers to enter into formal written agreements with elementary schools to which they send students;
6. Hosting a meeting with the Ohio Department of Education to explore its Ready Schools initiative; and
7. Finalizing and submitting, for Connecticut State Board of Education adoption, policy guidance on Pre-K-kindergarten transitions and alignment.

*Janice Gruendel and Mark McQuillan are co-chairs of the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet.*



# Policy Recommendations



By Kristie Kauerz and Mimi Howard

No single policy change will have a broad enough impact to smooth every child's transition from early learning into the early grades. Linking children's experience before and after they enter elementary school requires more than establishing new programs that affect only four-year-olds, for example, or requiring high-quality professional development only for kindergarten- through third-grade teachers. High-quality transition and alignment efforts that effectively link ready kids with ready schools require instituting and supporting policies that provide for a *continuous* and *complementary* set of services and supports across early learning and the early grades.

States that have hosted *Governors' Forums: Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools* are on the leading edge of policy reform efforts. These emphasize transition and alignment and support continuity across learning systems — from early learning (early care and education) through the early grades (kindergarten through third grade). Below, we highlight some of the most innovative and promising policy efforts emerging from the states involved in the Governors' Forums. Each one addresses ways to smooth children's *transitions* — from preschool to kindergarten, from home to school, and from grade to grade. Similarly, each policy endeavor addresses ways to *align* policies, programs and practices across early learning and the early grades.

One of the most important findings from the work of these states is that transition and alignment are not discrete, stand-alone policy efforts. They are inherent themes or threads that run through a portfolio of policy initiatives.

Through their work, Arizona, Connecticut, Ohio and Pennsylvania have focused their efforts in three broad areas:

- A. Strengthening the two systems — early learning and early elementary education — that must align to strengthen continuity and create smooth transitions for young children;
- B. Establishing and supporting state-level infrastructure that provides the foundation for sustaining efforts to link and align early learning with the early grades; and
- C. Improving the effectiveness of the people who are central to children's out-of-home learning opportunities.

Based on the work of these four states, several key policy recommendations emerge:

## DEFINE AND SUPPORT THE TWO SYSTEMS

### Early Learning and Early Elementary Education

- 1. Define — then strengthen and support — early learning as a system with multiple pathways and programs that lead to kindergarten.
- 2. Improve the quality of early elementary education so that it clearly supports the success of young children and better aligns and links with early learning.

### Establish Cross-System Infrastructure to Support Alignment, Transition and Continuity

- 3. Establish governance mechanisms and strategies that formalize and institutionalize efforts to link and align across early learning and the early grades.
- 4. Establish early learning standards that span preschool through third grade and serve as the foundation

for alignment among standards, curriculum and assessment.

5. Build, sustain and link data systems that support ongoing improvement to system access, quality and equity.

### Improve the Effectiveness of Teachers/Practitioners and Leaders in Both Systems

6. Improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, assistant teachers and practitioners in both early learning and early elementary settings.
7. Improve the quality and effectiveness of leaders in both early learning and early elementary settings, including district superintendents, assistant superintendents, school principals and early learning directors and administrators.

The remainder of this report details these seven recommendations and provides specific examples of accomplishments from the four Governors' Forum states. These are just a handful of the things the states are doing, a starting point for understanding the breadth and depth of work being done to link ready kids to ready schools.

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### Policy Recommendation #1 — Define an Early Learning System

**Define — then strengthen and support — early learning as a system with multiple pathways and programs that lead to kindergarten.**

Children do not reach the school door by the same pathway. While 98 percent of American children attend kindergarten, some attend half-day programs and others attend full-day kindergarten. At the kindergarten door, children bring a variety of past experiences, including school-based Pre-Kindergarten, Head Start, community- or faith-based preschool, center-based and family child care, or care in their own homes. Each of these experiences is a pathway to first grade

and beyond. It is important to ensure that those involved with both early learning and K-12 education — whether they are policymakers, practitioners or advocates at federal, state, district or local levels — have a common understanding of the various paths children take to school. Across these pathways there should be alignment of transition practices, standards, teachers' professional development and credentialing, parent engagement and partnerships, and quality improvement.

While most states are expanding access to high-quality preschool programs, they are also working to institutionalize partnerships, policies and practices that lead to kindergarten. Successful examples include:

- **Arizona** voters passed a tax on tobacco products that directs \$150 million per year into First Things First (FTF), an initiative that brings together public, private, state and local partners to increase the quality of and access to a comprehensive early childhood development system for children from birth to age five. First Things First leads the state in strategic planning for the long term, setting high-quality standards for all early learning programs, identifying and funding programs with proven practices and positive outcomes, and leveraging public and private resources to support all young children and their families. In addition, FTF established a state-level governor-appointed board that oversees early childhood health and development.
- **Ohio's** Governor Ted Strickland created an Early Childhood Cabinet to unite key state agencies around the common goal of promoting school readiness by setting and coordinating state policy and programs that serve children from prenatal care through six years of age.
- **Pennsylvania** established a formal link between the Departments of Public Welfare and Education in the form of an Office of Child

Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). This brought together state-funded Pre-Kindergarten, state funding for Head Start, child care subsidies, child care facility certification, Keystone STARS (Pennsylvania's child-care quality rating and improvement program), family support programs, early intervention programs and full-day kindergarten. An innovative state-level governance model, OCDEL consolidates staff, planning, accountability and funding from the two state agencies and is led by one deputy secretary who reports to both agency heads. As part of two agencies, OCDEL is able to pursue a unified approach to quality standards, program design, professional development and advocacy in early learning programs.

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### Policy Recommendation #2 — Improve Early Elementary Education

**Improve the quality of early elementary education (kindergarten through third grade) so that it clearly supports the success of young children and better aligns and links with early learning.**

No matter how beneficial early learning experiences are for young children, the benefits are undermined if students are subsequently exposed to early grades (K-3) of systematically lower quality. Getting schools ready to support young children's learning and development, often called focusing on "Ready Schools," is a fundamental strategy in improving continuity and transitions for young children. Ready Schools is not just a faddish label for a short-term initiative but rather a way to understand and support elementary schools as a system that links and aligns with early learning to ensure all young children receive high-quality early education opportunities.

Expanding access to full-day kindergarten is an important component



of this work. However, states are beginning to take a more expansive view of the early grades by establishing and supporting standards for Ready Schools. These standards include, for example, guidelines for districts and schools to create working partnerships with communities, formal plans for transition to kindergarten and strategies to increase the quality of curriculum and instruction in the early grades. Work to strengthen the quality and continuity of curriculum and instruction is just beginning and represents the next frontier of policy and practice for these and other states. Successful state-level examples include:

- **Ohio's** partnership between the State Department of Education and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators created a "Ready School" resource guide that provides goals, plans and detailed suggestions for ways schools can be ready for children and offer seamless transitions.
- **Pennsylvania** has expanded access to full-day kindergarten from 32 percent to 65 percent of children through the creation of a designated funding stream. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning also provides financial support and guidance for Community Engagement Teams that are required to include transition planning and strategies to integrate early education and the early grades into their work.

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### Policy Recommendation #3 — Create Governance Mechanisms

**Establish governance mechanisms and strategies that formalize and institutionalize efforts to link and align across early learning and the early grades.**

The multiplicity of programs and people in early learning and the early grades — often spanning several state agencies and involving different

standards, rules and regulations — makes efforts to improve transitions, strengthen alignment and ensure continuity complicated and uncoordinated. With no centralized locus of decision-making and management to guide and oversee the variety of programs and people, conflicting priorities and standards exist, resources are not used as efficiently as they could be and leadership and political leverage are splintered.

To address these challenges, new coordinating and governing entities are needed to bring together leaders from both the early learning and the early elementary systems to establish common goals and eventually to share and integrate their responsibility and accountability. Successful state-level examples include:

- **Pennsylvania's** Office of Child Development and Early Learning institutionalizes the state's infrastructure to support linking early learning with the early grades.
- **Ohio's** 2010-2011 executive budget will create the Center for Early Childhood Development, which will move staff from the Department of Health (early intervention services) and the Department of Job and Family Services (child care) to the Department of Education (early learning and school readiness) to begin to align policies, standards and practices.
- Two collaborative entities in **Connecticut** have formally structured issues of transition and alignment between early learning and early elementary school. The Early Childhood Education Cabinet formally adopted a birth-to-nine framework — called "Ready by Five, Fine by Nine" — for systems development and alignment. The program has helped streamline fiscal analyses, data use and public accountability anchored in child outcomes through the third grade. The Governor's Early Childhood Research and Policy

Council convened leaders from the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, Association of Boards of Education, the two statewide K-12 teacher unions, the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Departments of Education and Higher Education. This group provided the venue to address key issues related to policy, practice and programs.

- By Executive Order, the **Arizona** P-20 Council was created to improve and align the state's education systems from early childhood through postsecondary education, with an eye toward the expectations of employers. The council adopted 23 recommendations that address early childhood development and education in an effort to align programs for infants through five-year-olds with the early elementary years.

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### Policy Recommendation #4 — Establish Learning Standards

**Establish early learning standards that span preschool through third grade and serve as the foundation for alignment among standards, curriculum and assessment.**

Learning standards are an important way to identify the skills, behaviors and abilities that children need to succeed. Without such standards, teachers, administrators and parents may rely on inappropriate beliefs and practices about what children need to learn and how they should learn it. Nearly every state now has some form of early learning standards for what young children should know and be able to do before they enter kindergarten. Unfortunately, most states' early learning standards are separate in both structure and content from their K-12 standards. To support the continuous and progressive nature of learning and development from early learning into the early grades, standards must be vertically aligned to highlight the

**To support the continuous and progressive nature of learning and development from early learning into the early grades, standards must be vertically aligned to highlight the notion that concepts and experiences build on each other; skill begets skill. Pre-kindergarten learning standards must align with kindergarten standards, which in turn must align with first grade standards, and so on.**

notion that concepts and experiences build on each other; skill begets skill. Pre-Kindergarten learning standards must align with kindergarten standards, which in turn must align with first grade standards, and so on.

Vertically aligned standards can then serve as the basis for alignment between standards (what children should know and be able to do), curriculum (the content of what is taught to children) and assessment (the means for observing student progress) within a single age- or grade-level. Thoughtful alignment results in more effective instruction in both early learning and the early grades and, ultimately, better outcomes for children. Successful state-level examples include:

- **Pennsylvania** has comprehensive learning standards for infants/ toddlers, preschool, kindergarten and first and second grades and is promoting the use of consistent standards across early learning and early elementary systems. Pennsylvania is the first state to undertake a comprehensive alignment effort, ensuring that its learning standards are aligned both horizontally and vertically from birth through third grade. In addition, the state created assessment tools that measure achievement and quantify the educational gains made

by children as they “graduate” into elementary schools.

- **Arizona** has a comprehensive set of early learning standards for children age three to five that are used by parents, caregivers, teachers, instructors and administrators as a quality framework for early learning. The early learning standards are aligned with kindergarten standards and provide a link between early learning expectations and school readiness. The early childhood committee of the P-20 Council recommended that the kindergarten standards also support children’s ongoing social-emotional development.
- **Ohio** has two sets of standards for early learners. Infant and Toddler Guidelines provide information about six areas of development important in the early years. Early Learning Content Standards are aligned to the state’s K-12 system and represent what children should know and be able to demonstrate at the end of the preschool years.

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#### **Policy Recommendation #5 — Build Data-Gathering and Sharing Systems**

**Build, sustain and link data systems that support ongoing improvements to access, quality and equity across the early learning and early elementary systems.**

The issues of data and accountability for young children are complex and controversial. And yet data are the basis for sound decision-making — by teachers, administrators and legislators. Across early learning years and early grades, however, data often are scattershot, incomplete, rarely shared among administrative entities and ineffectively used to improve teaching. To better understand how well children are being prepared to succeed in school and beyond, it is crucial that more comprehensive data be collected on children, teachers and programs during the early childhood years.

The federal government, states and school districts need data management and data reporting systems that can answer questions such as: How well are young children progressing in learning and development? What is the quality of early learning programs? What is the quality and how are children progressing in specific state-funded programs? What are the links between various early education programs and later school success? To answer these questions, it is important to establish and institutionalize mechanisms for the gathering, sharing and reporting of data across state agencies and among administrative levels. Successful state-level examples include:

- **Connecticut** has a unique student identifier system in place for K-12 and, in 2008, began assigning identifiers to all three- and four-year-olds in state-supported early education settings. Preschool-age children in locally funded education classrooms are already entered into a state student database, as are three- and four-year-olds in

a state program for children with developmental delays or disabilities. The Department of Children and Families is exploring its use as well.

- **Ohio** has a cross-agency working group to identify the data needs and requirements of each state agency to advance the use of unique identification numbers for children from birth through grade 16. The numbers would be used to share data and to study their long-term progress.
- **Pennsylvania** established the Early Learning Network initiative — a Web-based system to store data from government agencies, schools and early learning programs. The network allows data to interact enabling users to track children and their progress across multiple delivery systems.

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### **Policy Recommendation #6 — Upgrade Teachers and Practitioners**

**Improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, assistant teachers and practitioners in both early learning and early elementary school settings. This can be done statewide and locally and costs little to develop.**

The most important influence in any classroom is the teacher. Teachers' skills, knowledge, behaviors, emotional responses and pedagogical practices strongly affect the learning environment. Most states have distinct and often disparate quality standards for early learning teachers/practitioners and for elementary school teachers. The formal education, certification and professional development of early learning and K-3 teachers rarely reflect research on how best to support young children's learning and development. Early education teachers and early elementary school teachers are most effective when they understand child development, diverse learning styles, social and emotional development, cultural diversity, effective teaching strategies and ways to engage families.

While energetic debates are current on whether to require early learning teachers to earn bachelor's degrees, equally important conversations are occurring about the preparation and certification of K-3 teachers. Some states and school districts are beginning to address both formal education and ongoing professional development needs of teachers and practitioners in early learning and the early grades by establishing common licensure and certification standards, creating career lattices and offering joint professional development. Successful state-level examples include:

- **Ohio** and **Pennsylvania** have created teacher certifications that span the early learning years and early grades. In Ohio, all teachers from Pre-Kindergarten through third grade must hold the same certification. Pennsylvania recently revised its statewide teacher certification options, eliminating an omnibus K-6 certification and instituting a consolidated certificate for all teachers in Pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade (children ages three through nine). The certifications support greater continuity and teacher effectiveness by aligning teachers' preparation with the developmental stage of the students they will teach.

Ohio has also developed Pre-K-Kindergarten State Institutes for Reading Instruction (Pre-K-K SIRI), comprised of seven unique seminars that focus on the foundational and essential elements of reading. These courses were developed and are taught by higher education reading faculty in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education; they are offered free of charge in 16 regions of the state. The course content is designed to bring preschool and kindergarten teachers together to understand and share teaching strategies for language and early literacy development.

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### **Policy Recommendation #7 — Improve Administrative Leadership**

**Improve the quality and effectiveness of leaders in both early learning and early elementary school settings, including district superintendents, assistant superintendents, school principals and early learning directors and administrators. This can be done at state and district levels at low cost.**

District superintendents, school principals, early learning program directors and other administrators serve crucial roles in establishing the contexts in which links and alignment across early learning and early elementary years can thrive. They have the authority to set and implement policy and the ability to establish high expectations, not only for understanding the various elements of the early learning and early elementary systems but also for creating and sustaining meaningful and innovative ways to link and align them.

District superintendents and elementary school principals are key to establishing relationships and formal partnerships with the array of early learning programs and providers who serve children in their communities. Early learning program directors and administrators are similarly responsible for understanding the elementary school system and implementing policies and practices that help children and families make the transition to school. Involving families in their children's education, engaging communities to be partners and ensuring that teachers are supported in their efforts to implement transition and alignment strategies all require that leaders in the two systems promote strong visions, policies, partnerships and actions. Successful state-level examples include:

- The early childhood ad hoc committee of **Arizona**'s P-20 Council recommends that first, second and third grade teachers and elementary principals enhance their knowledge of early learning by working to attain the state's Early Childhood Certifica-





tion or Endorsement. The state also plans to require all public school preschool and kindergarten teachers to get the same certification.

- **Pennsylvania** is taking steps to incorporate early childhood into its legislatively authorized Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership initiative, a mandatory standards-based continuing education system for all school leaders.

## CONCLUSION

While state leaders and educators break new ground to conceptualize what an aligned system of education from early learning through the early grades looks like — and what policies should be enacted to support it — these four states have collectively identified many key answers. By calling attention to the importance of better links across two learning systems, and implementing strategies to create those links, they are leading the way in efforts to ensure that

children’s positive experience before they enter school can be sustained for years to come.

As other states move forward with similar efforts, three important lessons have emerged from the forums and the work that continues in each state to move the “linking ready kids and ready schools” policy agenda forward:

### **1. Look to the experiences and demonstrated success of community-based efforts.**

While state policy is key to establishing sustainable and scalable connections across early learning and the early grades, the work accomplished at the local level through community-based initiatives and cross-sector councils can go a long way to ensure that those policies can indeed be implemented on the ground with the greatest impact. Some of the best-conceptualized policies have ultimately failed because they did not consider existing local conditions that impeded putting policy into practice.

### **2. Look beyond single, silver-bullet policies to create instead a broad-based foundation for linking systems.**

Individual policies provide the enabling mechanisms that districts, schools and early learning programs need to align programs and practices. However, a true continuum takes more than just putting together adjoining pieces. A continuum approach requires embedding similarities across policies and programs in both the early learning programs and the early grades. It also requires thinking about services and supports as being interconnected.

### **3. Look at the human aspect — consider what policies cannot do.**

Putting policy-enacted links into practice at the school and district levels require both the early learning and school communities to work cooperatively and establish shared accountability.

The four states that conducted Governors’ Forums have been highly successful in bringing to the table two learning communities not traditionally accustomed to working together to explore ways that their collaboration can improve outcomes for children. Creating a more seamless system of learning cannot be viewed as the sole responsibility of either early childhood education or K-12 systems. Rather, it is the willingness and capacity of both sectors to work together and share accountability for student success, supported by strong state policy, that will make a difference in the end.

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Compiled by

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