

What Happens Next:

Protecting Our Investment in PreK by Promoting P-3 Strategies in Washington, D.C.

Over the past year in the District of Columbia, P-3 strategies have begun to emerge as critical efforts to sustain and strengthen existing investments in the success of each young child and the collective success of our school system. The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI), along with our partners in the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), have committed to advancing P-3 strategies as a proven, successful way to support young children's achievement. When the Council of the District of Columbia passed the PreK Enhancement and Expansion Act in July 2008, they provided a strong legislative framework to ensure that all three and four year old children would have access to high quality early care and education by 2014. This was cause for celebration – investments in pre-kindergarten are critical to closing achievement gaps, providing strong economic returns, and preparing a new generation for civic and academic success. But they are not enough.

Research demonstrates that “when policymakers have invested in pre-kindergarten programs without sustaining quality enhancements throughout the elementary grades, benefits to participants have tended to fade by 3rd grade.”¹ All of the years from PreK through 3rd grade are critical to the educational success of students, particularly students of color and those who speak languages other than English. These years provide the foundation for all subsequent learning, and we need to protect our investments both by preparing children to enter PreK and by supporting them throughout the early grades.

To address this need, NBCDI convened a group of national and local stakeholders in April 2009, including leading experts Kristie Kauerz, now Project Director of PreK-3rd Education at Harvard's Graduate School of Education; Sara Mead, now at Bellwether Foundation, and Dick Clifford, from UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, to explore how P-3 strategies could support ongoing early childhood and educational reform efforts in the District. Since then, NBCDI has identified current system strengths and opportunities, developed policy and program plans, and continues to build consensus around priorities for moving forward on P-3 strategies as a community.

What is P-3?

The P-3 terminology, which we use in this paper, creates a “big tent” to encompass a variety of efforts (0-5, 0-8, and PreK-3) dedicated to improving systems for children birth through age 8; easing transitions and ensuring continuity for children and families through child care, PreK and K-12; and seamlessly connecting high-quality early childhood and PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. The Foundation for Child Development has identified major components of a successful P-3 strategy. At a minimum, communities should have voluntary full-school-day PreK and required full-school-day kindergarten; standards, curriculum, instruction & assessment that are aligned within and across the early childhood to early grades continuum; curriculum that integrates academic and social skills; teachers qualified to teach PreK to 3rd grade; and families, schools, and communities who share accountability for student success.

Strengths in the System

From having at least one early childhood program in every elementary school to a tiered reimbursement system for child care that was ahead of its time, Washington, DC's early childhood and K-12 systems have achieved a number of fundamental successes related to P-3 strategies. NBCDI has worked with the

early childhood departments within OSSE and DCPS, as well as with community-based and charter school partners, to identify specific areas of success and opportunity in connection with each P-3 component. While significant work remains in terms of consistency, continuity and quality, the District has developed and implemented: Early Learning Standards for infants, toddlers and preschoolers that are aligned with K-12 standards; shared assessments and planning times; supportive programs for teachers and providers pursuing higher education; and a number of efforts around embedded professional development, comprehensive data systems, and meaningful family engagement. The robust charter school sector also has several schools committed to an aligned, integrated P-3 system.

Moving Forward Together

As P-3 movements gain momentum, it is critical for the sometimes disparate communities of early care and education, K-12 education and higher education to come together. NBCDI has identified four priority areas that we believe complement existing initiatives and warrant additional attention from these communities: (1) Transition; (2) Assessments; (3) Professional Development; and (4) Data.

Successfully Managing Transitions Within and Across a Mixed-Delivery System

The concept of transition should not be limited to the first day of school – or even to an open house in the months before. Successful transitions from early childhood settings through elementary school happen because of ongoing relationship-building among teachers, parents, providers and children. Implementing P-3 strategies in the District can contribute to building these relationships by creating expectations, incentives and/or requirements to support:

- Joint professional development for providers, teachers, principals and administrators across a mixed-delivery system, including Head Start, community-based settings, and elementary schools;
- Policies promoting consistently implemented and facilitated shared teacher planning time within and across systems and grade levels;
- Integrated data collection and reporting systems from early education through K-12 and beyond;
- Blended funding strategies that increase the access and availability of high-quality, comprehensive early childhood programs

Developing and Implementing Appropriate Assessments for Young Children

Much has been written in early childhood communities about the importance of developmentally appropriate assessments for young children. NBCDI believes that we need to direct increased attention towards children's abilities and performance in the early grades – though not through NCLB-style assessments. We strongly encourage Washington, DC, as well as other states and the federal government to prioritize the creation of assessments in all domains of development; to rely upon multiple methods and measures of assessment; and to ensure that the primary purpose of assessment for young children is to improve instruction. NBCDI also encourages a stronger focus on the development of assessments that are culturally and linguistically responsive, in addition to being developmentally appropriate. It is important to note that “the majority of research on test bias, particularly cultural bias with minority populations, was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s” – mostly with older children.ⁱⁱ The National Research Council report states that “the lack of current available empirical evidence exploring test bias in early childhood assessment suggests that the subject has become peripheral among both policy makers and researchers.”ⁱⁱⁱ Yet a vast majority of children in DC are non-white, and we live in a country in which the national non-white child population is projected to grow to 47 percent by 2020.^{iv} To address the demographics of our schools and fairly implement assessments across the early grades, we encourage the creation of incentives and support mechanisms to help develop and implement instruments that offer broader observational assessments and are normed on diverse groups of young children, including English language learners.

Strengthening Professional Development for Providers, Teachers, Principals and Administrators

In order to create quality learning experiences for young children, we must provide high levels of education, training, support and compensation for teachers and providers. NBCDI, which recently received the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® license for Washington, DC, will be working in partnership with institutions of higher education and others to strengthen the District's professional development system and support teachers and providers in pursuing degrees. In addition, as more young children enter school settings, we must help district and school personnel create an environment conducive to P-3 alignment and influenced by child development principles. Many principal preparation programs and school systems lack sufficient training and professional learning opportunities to help principals design and implement programs that envision a continuum of learning from the pre-kindergarten years through third grade.^v There are many models for addressing this need – in the Race to the Top application, for example, District officials propose an Educational Leadership degree for principals. We have recommended including a track devoted to P-3 strategies, which might be based on best practice models in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Montgomery County, Maryland.

Gathering, Using and Sharing Longitudinal Data

Much of the success of this work depends on our collective capacity to access and track data within and across systems. While there are significant pockets of information, data from our education and care systems are currently scattered, incomplete and often outdated. A report from 2008, for example, noted that, despite decades-long commitments to understanding and improving quality in early childhood settings, “there is no good baseline data on existing quality levels among current providers in the District.”^{vi} In addition, longitudinal data efforts at OSSE and DCPS have been complicated by delays and competing systems. In order for the District to identify and implement successful P-3 strategies, we must commit to developing and supporting data systems that measure and track children's social-emotional and academic gains from year to year and system to system, which will allow us to improve our programs, evaluate our success and help us chart a course for the future.

NBCDI is committed to addressing these priorities and to collaborating with a range of local and national partners who are also engaged in advancing P-3 strategies to improve school performance and who care deeply about the success of all young children and their families in Washington, DC.

ⁱ Shore, Rima. *The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform*. Policy to Action Brief: FCD. January 2009.

ⁱⁱ National Research Council. *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What and How*. p. 245

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p246

^{iv} Child Trends Data Bank. *Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Child Population*. www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/60_PDF.pdf. Retrieved 3/09.

^v Letter to House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor re: ESEA Reauthorization. Written by New America Foundation and PreK Now; Signed by NBCDI and 9 other organizations. Submitted March 26, 2010.

^{vi} Memo from Natwar Gandhi, Chief Financial Officer to Vincent Gray, Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia. *Fiscal Impact Statement: “Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act of 2008*. May 6, 2008. p.5