



Building State P–3 Systems

Learning from Leading States

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**Influenced by a growing research consensus—
as well as the examples of successful P–3
efforts—communities, states, and the federal
government are all working to improve quality
and coherence across the P–3 continuum.**



Executive Summary

The first eight years of life, beginning before birth and continuing through third grade, are a critical developmental period that sets the stage for future success. Research over the past 15 years has demonstrated the importance of high-quality care and education throughout the prenatal-through-third-grade (P–3) continuum, including prenatal and infant and toddler care, preschool education, and early elementary education. The programs and services provided to young children and their families during these early years are typically highly fragmented in most communities in the United States, the result of a multiplicity of funding streams and the wide variety of early education settings, services, and professional roles that characterize the mixed-delivery system in the United States.

Communities, states, and the federal government are all working to improve quality and coherence across the P–3 continuum. This report provides three case studies to address a central question: How can states support P–3 system building at both state and local levels? The three case-study states—Massachusetts, Oregon, and Pennsylvania—were chosen based on their experience implementing P–3 state policies and developing significant grant programs to fund regional and local P–3 partnerships. A snapshot of each state is provided in the table below.

Summary of Key Elements of P–3 Efforts: Three States

	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Massachusetts
Agency	Early Learning Division of the Oregon Department of Education (director and board appointed by governor)	Office of Early Learning and Development (joint office of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Department of Human Services)	Massachusetts Departments of Early Education and Care, Elementary and Secondary Education, and Higher Education (formally linked within a Secretariat and by a P–3 advisory council)
P–3 Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early learning hubs • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • Career lattice and registry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • P–3 framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • Birth–3rd Foundation document • Comprehensive policy agenda (planned)
P–3 Community Partnership Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten readiness skills and smooth transitions • Family engagement • Professional development for early learning and elementary school professionals • Alignment, connection, and collaboration in the P–3 system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family engagement • Continuity and pathways across the continuum • Data-driven improvement across the continuum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice within eight categories (Coffman & Kauerz, 2012; Kauerz & Coffman, 2013) • Required community-wide leadership alignment team

Summary of P–3 Partnership Themes and Patterns

A number of themes and patterns emerged from the comparison of approaches across the three case-study sites.

- **New State Structures and Collaboration Patterns.** Embracing a P–3 focus has led to increased collaboration across state agencies—specifically across early childhood, K–3 education, and health offices—in all three case-study states. This collaboration is carried out through both new formal structures and informal work arrangements.
- **Two-Pronged Approaches: State Policy and Local Support.** All three case-study states are pursuing a two-pronged approach to P–3 system building that includes both state policy development and programs to encourage local P–3 efforts. Regarding policy, all three states have devoted considerable resources to aligning state standards from pre-Kindergarten through third grade.
- **P–3 System Building at Regional, Community, and Neighborhood Levels.** The three case-study states have funded P–3 work at overlapping, yet nonetheless different, geographic levels: regional, community, and/or neighborhood–feeder system. In effect, they have defined “local” in different ways.
- **Pushing for Impact.** P–3 partnerships in all three states have developed local strategies and implemented them, leading to a great deal of promising programming activity. Leaders across the states also acknowledge that to meaningfully raise student achievement, partnerships will need to deepen their work through system building and sustained coaching and professional learning.
- **Planning, Flexibility, and Emergent Strategies.** Related to the need for system building and impact are a cluster of issues regarding planning, flexibility, and emergent strategies. Across all three states, communities that already had a good sense of their needs and had developed thoughtful, coherent plans in their proposals were able to “hit the ground running.” As expected, communities are finding the need at times to adapt their plans to changing circumstances, and some report taking advantage of unplanned opportunities that emerge in the course of carrying out their work.
- **School–Community Collaboration: Progress and Challenges.** State and community officials agreed that school–community collaboration in early stage P–3 efforts was often challenging, but also that it improved significantly in many communities over time. Participants in all three states emphasized the importance of gradually building trust and relationships as partnership work developed.
- **The Pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten “Seam” as a Common Starting Point.** While all three case-study states define the P–3 continuum as beginning before or at birth, communities typically begin their P–3 initiatives with activities that bring together community-based preschools and elementary schools for collaboration around transitions, family engagement, and joint professional learning.
- **Sustaining Local P–3 Partnerships.** Sustaining grant-funded initiatives is a persistent challenge in state–local funding relationships, and state support for local P–3 partnerships is no exception.
- **Balancing SEA Oversight and Local Flexibility in P–3 System Building.** The three case-study states’ experiences supporting local P–3 partnerships highlight the important role state departments of education play in overseeing P–3 grants, providing technical assistance to grantees, and encouraging learning and networking opportunities across communities.

For additional detail regarding these themes and patterns, see page 21.

Summary of Recommendations

1. States committed to P–3 alignment will need to develop new structures and new working arrangements in order to coordinate state policy and support local and regional P–3 efforts.
2. Building P–3 systems entails both statewide policy direction and support of local initiatives. States engaging in P–3 system building should align these two levels of activity. States should monitor the interaction of their P–3 policy initiatives and their support for local system building in order to maximize the mutually reinforcing impact of both levels of P–3 work.
3. States should be deliberate about the level at which they want to support P–3 alignment and capacity building: regional, community, and/or neighborhood–feeder system. Each has different implications, particularly for creating structures for cross-sector work and sustainability.
4. States should support local P–3 partnerships in crafting coherent strategies and employing disciplined, flexible plan-management approaches, taking advantage of new approaches to developing strategies and managing cross-sector partnerships.
5. States should engage school and district leaders in P–3 efforts by sharing information on the value of improving early learning, providing leadership development opportunities, hosting professional learning networks, and creating incentives for school and district participation.
6. States should differentiate their funding and technical assistance support to local communities, taking both the history of collaboration and community context into account.
7. States can support communities in learning from the considerable experience other communities have developed in aligning learning, teaching, and development across community-based preschools and Kindergarten. They should also support communities in expanding beyond pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten collaboration. Over time, communities should also focus attention on improving the quality of grades 1–3 as well as services for children ages 0–3.
8. States should determine how they will support communities in sustaining their P–3 system-building work. Options include working towards obtaining ongoing legislative support and helping communities in sustainability planning, such as providing technical assistance to communities on reallocating funds to support P–3 work.
9. States should continue to fine-tune, perhaps in communication with like-minded states, how they balance their regulatory roles, their technical assistance functions, and the aim of local flexibility when supporting local P–3 efforts.

For additional explanation of these recommendations, see page 26.

The case studies profiled in this report demonstrate the crucial roles SEAs can play in supporting P–3 system building—both through state policy as well as by supporting local and regional early learning partnerships. Carrying out this work requires that SEAs align their work internally across divisions and units while building the capacity of communities to design and implement quality improvement and alignment activities.

Acronyms and Terms

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)

Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS)

Community Innovation Zone (CIZ)

Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC)

Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI)

Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN)

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system

Prenatal through Third Grade (P–3)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Professional Learning Team (PLT)

Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC)

State Education Agency (SEA)

Introduction

The first eight years of life, beginning before birth and continuing through third grade, are a critical developmental period that sets the stage for future success. Research over the past 15 years has demonstrated the importance of high-quality care and education throughout the prenatal-through-third-grade (P–3) continuum, including prenatal and infant and toddler care, preschool education, and early elementary education. The programs and services provided to young children and their families during these early years are typically highly fragmented in most communities in the United States, the result of a multiplicity of funding streams and the wide variety of early education settings, services, and professional roles that characterize the mixed-delivery system in this country. Improving quality across the entire P–3 continuum requires achieving greater consistency, continuity, and alignment across the fragmented early education and care system.

Influenced by a growing research consensus—as well as the examples of successful P–3 efforts—communities, states, and the federal government are all working to improve quality and coherence across the P–3 continuum. This report provides three in-depth case studies of states that are working to build P–3 systems. These case studies address a central question: How can states support P–3 system building at both state and local levels? In addressing this question, the case studies provide significant detail about each state’s P–3 policies and approaches to local support, yielding a range of examples intended to inform the thinking of state early childhood administrators as they design policies and programs to meet the needs of their specific state contexts.

The P–3 Continuum

Two recent and influential policy reports are indicative of the emergent emphasis on P–3 system building: *The Research Base for a Birth to Age 8 State Policy Framework* (Alliance for Early Success, 2013) and *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Institutes of Medicine [IOM] & the National Research Council [NRC], 2015). Both reports include extensive summaries of the research on child development and early learning and draw on this research to make the case for “continuity of practice and integrated service supports” across the P–3 continuum (Alliance for Early Success, 2013). *Transforming the Workforce* reviews the science of child development in detail and concludes that the “rapid and cumulative” nature of early development requires that families and service providers ensure a high degree of continuity in the care that children experience. Continuity is achieved by aligning care and learning vertically over time as children progress through home visits, infant and toddler care, preschool, and early elementary school. It is achieved horizontally as children and families experience multiple services and supports at each stage of development. Vertical alignment addresses standards, curricula, assessment, instructional strategies, environments, and transitions so that new learning experiences build on competencies developed earlier, and the dosage of high-quality experiences increases over time. Horizontal alignment requires communication and coordination across the providers serving the same children and families so that services are mutually reinforcing and, thus, more effective, again increasing the dosage of high-quality experiences (IOM & NRC, 2015).

This research consensus has informed a conception of high-quality education and care along the P–3 continuum as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The P–3 Continuum

P–3 System Building and the Preschool Development Grant Program

The U.S. Department of Education’s Preschool Development Grant Program included “Alignment within a Birth through Third Grade Continuum” as one of seven selection priorities. Selected states were to set “ambitious and achievable plans that address the creation of a more seamless progression of supports and interventions from birth through third grade, such as high-quality infant and toddler care, home visitation, full-day Kindergarten, and before- and after-care services for, at a minimum, a defined cohort of Eligible Children and their families within each High-Need Community served” (Application for New Awards, 2014).

Developing the Case Studies

The three case-study states—Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts—were chosen based on their experience implementing P–3 state policies and developing significant grant programs to fund regional and local P–3 partnerships. We reviewed relevant documents from these states and conducted semi-structured interviews using a standard interview protocol with experts in six states (the three case-study states plus Hawaii, Michigan, and North Carolina for additional context and perspective). In the case-study states, interviewees included State Education Agency (SEA) staff as well as leaders of at least two regional/local P–3 efforts in each state. The names of all interviewees are listed in the Acknowledgments.

As expected, the context of each state’s P–3 work differs, and the case studies present a range of approaches in how they structure P–3 collaboration across agencies at the state level as well as how they have designed grant programs to support local partnerships. Each of the case studies below concludes with a Reflections on Current Progress section, in which early childhood administrators reflect on early evidence of progress and the challenges that have emerged. Across the three states, we see a number of common patterns, including similar areas of policy focus and similar challenges. Following the case studies, we identify a number of these crosscutting themes and patterns. In the final section, we draw on these themes and patterns to make a number of recommendations for early childhood state administrators to consider as they continue to build and improve P–3 systems in their states.

OREGON: Regional Early Learning Hubs and an Ambitious State P–3 Grant Program

Taking office in 2011, Oregon’s former governor, John Kitzhaber, made early learning a centerpiece of his administration, a priority that has been maintained by Oregon’s current governor, Kate Brown. Under Kitzhaber’s leadership and with the participation of a few key community foundations and nonprofits focused on early learning, Oregon’s legislature authorized the state Early Learning Council in 2013 to create 16 regional early learning hubs across the state. In addition to the priority the governor set for early learning, the hubs reflected his more general commitment to breaking down silos and bureaucratic barriers in order to improve the delivery of all state services. For this reason, the administration funded regional organizations (i.e., hubs) in both education and health designed to bridge traditional organizational boundaries and devolve decision making to the local and regional levels. Underlying these moves towards regionalization was a “tight/loose” philosophy in which the state holds organizations and communities accountable for outcomes (i.e., tight) but allows considerable discretion in achieving those results (i.e., loose).

The early learning hubs are intended to help meet the state’s 40/40/20 goal: by 2025, 40 percent of Oregon adults will earn a BA degree or higher, 40 percent will earn an associate’s degree or postsecondary credential, and 20 percent will earn a high school diploma.

The early learning hubs serve as “backbone” or convening organizations within the collective impact model of community partnerships, in which organizations across a community jointly pursue shared goals using common metrics as they implement mutually reinforcing programs and services.¹ The 2013 legislation (House Bill 2013) specified three goals for the early learning hubs:

- An early learning system that is aligned, coordinated, and family centered
- Children that arrive at Kindergarten ready and supported for success
- Families that are healthy, stable, and attached

A New Early Learning Division’s Focus on P–3

The 2013 legislation also created the state’s Early Learning Division. The Early Learning Division is part of the Oregon Department of Education, but the division has a measure of autonomy within the SEA as its director and board (the Early Learning Council) are appointed by the governor.

The Early Learning Division has embraced the P–3 idea both in its internal work as an agency as well as in its policy and grant programming. As it was established, the division’s P–3 perspective was influenced by the National Governor’s Association 2013 report, *A Governor’s Guide to Early Literacy: Getting All Students Reading by Third Grade*. P–3 activities already underway in Oregon—led by the Oregon Community Foundation, the Ford Family Foundation, and the Children’s Institute, an Oregon nonprofit organization—also influenced the Division’s

¹ The collective impact model of cross-sector collaboration includes five components: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support. For information on the collective impact model and backbone organizations, see <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-shared-resources>.

approach. The Children’s Institute, for instance, administered a pilot P–3 project in two Oregon communities, one urban and one rural, that would serve as a model for one of the division’s major initiatives: the Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation grants discussed below.

The division’s P–3 focus has led to extensive collaboration with the K–3 lead in the department of education as well as with foundations and nonprofit organizations that invest in local P–3 projects. This cross-agency collaborative is guided by a shared vision and plan.

A Three-Part P–3 Approach

The still relatively new Early Learning Division is focusing its P–3 work on three core areas. The first is *aligning state learning standards from pre-Kindergarten through third grade*. The P–3 alignment specialist in the division is collaborating with the K–3 lead in the Oregon Department of Education in leading a standards alignment team. Initially, the process began with a focus on math and reading, but at the recommendation of the team, the state has expanded the project to include social–emotional learning and approaches to learning as well. The team is basing its work on the Head Start Learning Outcomes Framework (Administration for Children and Families, 2015), which serves as Oregon’s standards for learning and development for children ages 3–5 in incorporating these additional domains.

Central to the standards alignment project is the goal of encouraging developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practice across the pre-Kindergarten-through-third-grade continuum. The Early Learning Division is planning an ambitious professional development agenda that will accompany the new standards. These professional development activities, including resources and tools, will be aligned with Oregon’s workforce development career lattice and registry. The professional development activities that support the standards are intended to make connections across the full early learning workforce. For instance, the initial rollout of the standards will include a baseline foundational online training course about the standards for a cross-sector audience of child care providers, community-based preschools, and elementary school teachers.

The second component of Oregon’s overall P–3 strategy is its Kindergarten Assessment. Oregon’s Early Learning Council adopted the Kindergarten Assessment in 2012 and first administered it in 2013. Educators gather information on children’s self-regulation, interpersonal, early literacy, and early math skills in the fall of each year. The early literacy and math portions of the assessment are based on the EasyCBM assessment (www.EasyCBM.com), while the approaches to learning portion is assessed with the Child Behavior Rating Scale (Bronson, Goodson, Layzer, & Love, 1990).

Staff at the Early Learning Division have been intrigued by preliminary analysis of the Kindergarten Assessment suggesting that children who begin Kindergarten with high approaches to learning skills but low academic skills grow academically across the Kindergarten year much faster than children who begin with low academic skills and low approaches to learning skills.

The third component of Oregon’s P–3 strategy is its support of local and regional P–3 efforts through its Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation Program grants, described below.

Supporting Local P–3 Innovation: Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation Program Grants

Informed in part by the Children’s Institute P–3 pilot in two communities, the Oregon legislature approved the Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation grant fund in 2013. Under this fund, the state allocated \$4.5 million to local P–3 partnerships in 2014 and then \$9.1 million in 2015 to support four goals:

1. Supporting Kindergarten readiness skills and smooth transitions to Kindergarten
2. Increasing family engagement in children’s learning, and connecting families and schools
3. Providing professional development to early learning and/or elementary school professionals to improve knowledge and skills
4. Increasing alignment, connection, and collaboration in the P–3 system

The Partnership and Innovation Program is considered part of the state’s equity strategy and is intended to address early opportunity gaps for underrepresented children, including children with disabilities, dual language learners, and/or children from low-income or racial/ethnic minority backgrounds.

Oregon’s Partnership and Innovation grants, thus, differ from the local P–3 strategies of many states, including the other two states discussed in this study, in two important ways: their funding is the result of legislation appropriation, and the funding is distributed through regional intermediaries—the early learning hubs—which then allocate the funds to local communities within each hub’s catchment area.

According to the Early Learning Division’s current director, Megan Irwin, the Partnership and Innovation Program is intended to help the field learn how to do its work differently, and in this sense, it is serving a “proof of concept” purpose. The division hopes that communities will build models that can be scaled and replicated, influencing district and community policy and resource allocation. David Mandell, the division’s director of policy and research, emphasized the complementarity of the state’s broader P–3 policies and the local and regional thrust of the Partnership and Innovation Program:

The Partnership and Innovation Fund was created with the understanding that standards alignment and all the work that happens at the state level can facilitate P–3 system-building, but [it is also critical] to build relationships on the ground, and partnerships on the ground at that local, almost building level. That is where P–3 work has to happen if it is really going to make a difference. This program has the intentional goal of facilitating on-the-ground relationships and improving practice.

The Early Learning Division allows the hubs considerable flexibility in allocating Partnership and Innovation funds within each hub’s service area. Their guidance to the hubs emphasizes the importance of finding the “nexus” between community needs related to underrepresented populations, on the one hand, and demonstrated levels of readiness on the other, especially the readiness of school and community leadership. Some funds have been used to support regional projects; most are distributed to specific schools and their surrounding early learning partners.

Consistent with the four program goals of the Partnership and Innovation Program, the hubs are funding transition to Kindergarten, family engagement, and joint professional development initiatives. Examples include summer

bridge programs for children who have not participated in preschool programs; a variety of family engagement events, multi-session workshop series, and parent education classes; and cross-sector professional learning communities and other shared professional development opportunities.

Partnership and Innovation Examples

A Regional Network of Professional Learning Teams

The Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub in Eastern Oregon serves three very rural counties and has focused most of its Partnership and Innovation funds on supporting local professional learning teams (PLTs). The teams include early learning teachers from family childcare practices, preschool centers (including Head Start programs) and school districts. Many P–3 professional learning communities around the country are specifically for preschool and Kindergarten teachers, and thus inclusion of teachers from grades 1–3 in the Blue Mountain PLTs is somewhat distinctive.

The Blue Mountain hub is currently supporting seven PLTs. It brings all the participating teachers together for a two-day shared professional development session on early learning best practices in the fall and again in the spring. In between, the teams meet monthly for 60–90 minutes. Topics have included assessment, managing centers, reading and math instruction, differentiation, and family engagement. The hub pays travel expenses for the teachers, but the teachers have volunteered their time in order to participate. The hub also encourages participants to visit each other’s classes and pays for travel and substitutes for the visits.

The Blue Mountain PLTs have garnered enthusiastic support from principals and administrators; some are led by school and center leaders, and some principals program around their teachers’ PLT schedules in order to support the opportunity. Teachers across the region have participated in the PLTs with much enthusiasm. The experience has proven to be especially validating for family childcare providers. Attendance is high, and some teachers drive for up to an hour in order to participate, especially teachers who do not have many early learning colleagues to work with in their own buildings. The teachers share a variety of documents and resources through a shared online folder.

The Blue Mountain hub is committed to learning from the work of the communities and sharing best practices across the region. The hub has begun promoting a social–emotional learning program throughout its network based on the successful experience of one of the PLT groups. The program, *Conscious Discipline*, was introduced in the PLT by some Head Start teachers. Likewise, one of its participating communities organized a Parent Café last year, and now the hub is expanding the use of Parent Cafés to other communities.²

Variations on a Theme across a Region

The Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub includes both urban and rural communities. Using four criteria—poverty rates, third-grade reading achievement, Kindergarten assessment data, and diversity demographics—

² As defined by the Strengthening Families Initiative, Parent Cafés are, “a series of structured small group conversations that bring parents together to discuss issues important to them. The goal is to directly engage parents in building the protective factors needed to prevent maltreatment and promote healthy outcomes for their children.”

the hub identified four districts to participate in its Partnership and Innovation initiative. Sixteen schools and neighboring family child care and community preschools participated this year; next year participation will expand to 30 schools. The hub’s focus is on professional learning (shared professional development and/or professional learning communities [PLCs]) and family engagement practices. The participating communities sign an agreement to implement initiatives in these two areas in return for \$9,000–\$11,000 and support from a hub P–3 coordinator, who helps coordinate and facilitate each partnership’s activities. The hub funds one full-time and two part-time coordinators for a total of two full-time positions.

Some communities served by the Marian and Polk hub have organized PLCs that include family childcare, center-based preschool teachers, and Kindergarten teachers. In one community, in a principal-led PLC, teachers use video recordings to document their teaching. The PLC then reviews the videos together and engages in learning conversations around the observed practices. Other PLCs have focused on use of data. One community has organized community-wide professional development on *Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies Gold* (Teaching Strategies for Early Childhood, n.d.).

The family-engagement work has included both one-time events for families as well as workshop series and other parenting education opportunities. The hub has promoted the goal of making parenting education a norm throughout the region and has identified a menu of parenting education programs as options for participating communities. Through a webinar organized by the Early Learning Division, the hub learned about *Ready! for Kindergarten*³ kits for parents and have invested in purchasing these kits for the participating communities.

Year 1 Findings: Progress and Challenges

Portland State University (PSU) is evaluating the Partnership and Innovation Program for the Early Learning Division and has published its Year 1 Report (Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, 2015). With the important caveats that the grantees were still in the start-up phase and that the planning timeline was by all accounts rushed, the evaluation nonetheless provides a rich source of information regarding patterns in Year 1 implementation activities.

The evaluation shows that the partnerships were quite active in implementing both one-off and multi-session family events as well as professional development workshops for teachers. The evaluation includes a number of findings based on teacher and family self-reported data that were collected at the beginning of the year and again at the end:

- Parents and caregivers felt significantly more confident that they could support their children’s learning at home, felt more comfortable at school, and believed that their children would be more ready for school as a result of the Kindergarten transition and family engagement activities they had attended.
- Early learning teachers reported better understanding of Kindergarten teachers’ expectations and increased skills in supporting transitions to Kindergarten.

3 *Ready! for Kindergarten* is a resource of The Children’s Reading Foundation: <https://readingfoundation.org/the-solution/programs/ready-for-kindergarten/>

- K–3 teachers reported “dramatically increased” levels of understanding of childcare environments.
- Participants reported improved P–3 alignment, including cross-sector collaboration and planning, vertical alignment of standards and curricula, and rates of on-time Kindergarten registration.

The PSU evaluation also flagged a number of challenges experienced by the grantees, including the rushed first-year implementation timeline, family recruitment, and especially “the need for more in-depth follow-up, coaching, and mentoring support for the implementation of practice change.” This last finding, discussed further in the Recommendations section (p. 26), is consistent with research on changing instructional practice and, thus, is an important priority in P–3 efforts.

Reflections on Current Progress

Integrating Academic and Social–Emotional Learning. Oregon’s Early Learning Division staff suggest that the three prongs of the state’s P–3 approach—standards alignment, Kindergarten assessment, and the Partnership and Innovation Program—have spurred a larger conversation across the state around establishing a developmentally appropriate continuum of practice across the pre-Kindergarten-through-third-grade spectrum. Central to this discussion is how to, in effect, integrate quality academic teaching and learning with social–emotional learning. The division aims to advance instructional practices that integrate academic and social–emotional learning as it continues to roll out its P–3 initiatives.

Moving Towards Systems-Level Collaboration. Staff at the division recognize the patterns identified by the PSU Year 1 evaluation. They are pleased that communities have begun to bridge gaps between elementary schools and community-based preschools. In some cases, communities have begun with smaller, more narrowly focused projects that have addressed a specific need. In doing so, they have built relationships and “gotten the ball rolling” while family childcare providers, community-based preschools, and elementary schools have begun collaborating. A priority for

the division—and, in turn, for the early learning hubs and the community-level grantees—is to move those communities that began with one-time family engagement events towards deeper school–family partnerships, and more generally to move communities from narrowly targeted projects to more systemic community collaboration.

Fine-Tuning the State’s Role. Finally, Oregon’s early learning state officials are asking how SEAs can fine-tune their role and find the appropriate balance between prescribing community-level change and allowing local flexibility. Finding this balance has implications for how local and regional grantees report on their plans and their activities. The early learning hubs and the Partnership and Innovation grants have already devolved a measure of decision making to local and regional levels, and this step has required a shift in thinking for many in the Oregon policymaking community. Megan Irwin, the Oregon Early Learning Division’s director, points out that the state itself does not educate children—parents, caregivers, and local institutions do—and suggests that the division is working on creating the space for communities to do this work, balancing a regulatory obligation to taxpayers and the need to inspire a vision at the community level.

PENNSYLVANIA: Building Local Leadership Capacity and Community Innovation through RTTT-ELC Funding

Pennsylvania’s P–3 work is led by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). OCDEL was created in 2006–07, bringing services for children ages 0–5 together in one office, including the Childcare Licensing Bureau, early intervention, subsidies, and the Office of Early Learning. OCDEL is jointly overseen by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and its Department of Human Services, and a senior joint executive team meets regularly to coordinate early learning work in the state. As Pennsylvania has embraced P–3 alignment in recent years, relationships between OCDEL and the state’s health and K–12 education offices have strengthened. Collaboration at the mid-management level on specific initiatives (e.g., developmental screening initiatives) has intensified.

Developing a P–3 Orientation

Pennsylvania’s movement towards a P–3 focus has developed in stages and provides important context for OCDEL’s current P–3 strategies. Pennsylvania used American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to support Local Education and Resource Network teams (LEARN)—early childhood community engagement teams that promoted family engagement, transition, and Kindergarten readiness activities and served as local information resources on quality early learning activities. When ARRA funding for the LEARN teams ended, most of the teams stayed active, and OCDEL continued to support them through regular statewide conference calls. Many of the organizations that participated in LEARN teams would eventually apply to become Community Innovation Zones (CIZs), a new P–3 grant opportunity supported by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC), described further below.

Another important step towards P–3 alignment at the state level took place as OCDEL hired a statewide transition coordinator and began to collaborate with colleagues in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education on both transitions and revising infant and toddler, preschool, and K–2 standards. Then, perhaps most critically, a cross-agency team from Pennsylvania participated in the National Governor Association’s (NGA) Policy Academy, “[Building the Foundation for Student Success: State Strategies to Improve Learning Outcomes from Early Childhood through 3rd Grade.](#)” Staff from OCDEL, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Department of Education’s policy office learned about and engaged jointly with research on brain science, social–emotional learning, and related topics. The Policy Academy meeting proved to be both a turning point for a deepening relationship between OCDEL and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education as well as the impetus for an explicit P–3 effort by the state agencies.

Pennsylvania’s participation in the NGA Policy Academy led to a conceptual shift in OCDEL’s focus and orientation as an agency. Rather than thinking of their work as an assemblage of separate initiatives and funding streams, staff now place at the center of their thinking how children and families move across experiences over the years. As a result, OCDEL has become more intentional about promoting and explaining P–3 alignment throughout the state, and explicitly built P–3 work into its RTTT-ELC application, leading to the Governor’s Institutes and CIZs, discussed below.

Over time, OCDEL has developed its own high-level *Prenatal to Third Grade Framework*, which staff share with communities as an introduction to P–3 work. They also use the Kauerz and Coffman (2013) *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK–3rd Grade Approaches* as a guidance document and organizing frame for professional development activities.

Pennsylvania’s Statewide P–3 Policy Initiatives

Like Oregon, Pennsylvania’s statewide P–3 policy work has focused on standards alignment and the state’s Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI). In addition to revising and aligning its standards from infant and toddler through K–2, the state has added interpersonal skills to its entire standards framework from infants and toddlers through grade 12. OCDEL’s recently developed KEI measures cognitive, social–emotional, physical and motor, and language skills, as well as approaches to learning. The KEI, which is in its second full year of implementation, is required for the lowest performing 15 percent of schools and is optional for all others.

OCDEL and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education are now collaborating on developing supporting resources to accompany the K–2 standards. These include a guidance document that for every standard, provides related Concepts and Competencies. The Concepts and Competencies show how a child would display the standard (i.e., “The learner will ...”), and each standard is further elaborated with Supporting Practices (i.e., “The adult will ...”). Teachers can use these practices to support the child in learning the Concepts and Competencies indicated by the standard. This additional guidance includes the state’s K–2 Approaches to Learning through Play standards as well. OCDEL recently released this guidance document (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016), and it is following up on this work with a series of resource kits on instructional practices and family engagement.

Supporting Local P–3 Initiatives: Governor’s Institutes

OCDEL proposed two P–3 grant programs in its RTTT–ELC application: P–3 Governor’s Institutes and Community Innovation Zones (CIZs). These two programs were always intended to be complementary, and in practice they have developed in inter-related ways as the two program officers work closely together.

Pennsylvania has offered a variety of Governor’s Institutes over the years on different professional development topics. OCDEL has revived the concept of the Governor’s Institutes and expanded it to include not only technical content knowledge but also leadership development around systems change. OCDEL sponsors P–3 Governor’s Institutes each summer. Teams from all Pennsylvania communities can apply to attend. The Institutes provide workshops on P–3 strategy and implementation as well as opportunities for offsite strategy design meetings and P–3 networking across communities.

Community teams participating in Governor’s Institutes must include at least one birth-to-age-5 teacher and K–3 teacher and at least one birth-to-age-5 administrator and K–3 administrator. Teams are encouraged to include a family leader, an early intervention partner, a community member, a librarian, a curriculum specialist, a higher education partner, and an out-of-school-time representative. The Institutes are organized around the eight categories of P–3 activities described in the *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK–3rd Grade Approaches* (Kauerz & Coffman, 2013). Teams participate in preparatory activities prior to the Institutes, including P–3 reading and a phone call with a specialist. The Institutes include presentations, workshops, and

team planning time. By the end of the Institutes, each team submits a P–3 priority document that includes their P–3 goals and strategy ideas for the upcoming year. OCDEL plans to begin offering mini-grants to communities that have completed P–3 priority documents. After the Institutes, teams participate in Governor’s Institute cohort activities, including webinars and monthly check-ins.

The first P–3 Institutes were statewide events, but in the summer of 2015, OCDEL instead hosted four regional Governor’s Institutes with the idea of making them smaller and easier to attend, and of building regional networks of support that could help sustain the work after the RTT-ELC funding ends. Teams from 59 communities attended the four regional Institutes.

The Governor’s Institutes serve as an important mechanism for promoting P–3 work and exchanging learning about strategy and implementation across communities. Through their participation in the Governor’s Institutes, for instance, elementary school principals have become much more deliberate and proactive about identifying all of the community-based preschool programs that feed into their schools, including faith-based programs. Further, many principals are now working to get their schools certified as preschool training sites so that they can invite feeder preschools to professional development opportunities.

Supporting Local P–3 Initiatives: Community Innovation Zone Grants

Like the Governor’s Institutes, the goal of CIZs is to reduce achievement gaps. CIZ grants fund 50 communities to implement P–3 strategies to reduce achievement gaps by third grade. CIZs must include a school district serving a high population of at-risk children, an early childhood organization serving children 0–5 years of age, and at least one other community organization, such as a library, early intervention organization, museum, or social service agency. CIZs target a specific student population with the aim of demonstrating improved results over time. While many zones include one school and its feeder early learning programs, some are larger and can include a whole county.

CIZs are required to focus on three of the eight categories in the Kauerz and Coffman *PreK–3rd Framework*:

- Family engagement across the continuum
- Continuity and pathways across the continuum
- Data-driven improvement across the continuum

CIZs may tackle additional categories if they wish. In addition to specifying these three areas of focus, OCDEL has encouraged communities to shift their thinking to focus on serving children’s and families’ movement across systems. While applicants naturally focused on the transition to Kindergarten, OCDEL encouraged applicants to consider both birth through age 3 and K–3, and they assessed applications with the full P–3 continuum in mind.

The original idea for the CIZ grants was to encourage innovation. In their applications, however, communities cited the need for the common but critically important fare of many P–3 efforts: strategies that either the communities have not yet implemented or have not implemented deeply and systematically. Common focus areas for the CIZs include the following:

- Transition plans
- Literacy initiatives
- Shared professional development
- Curriculum alignment
- Social–emotional learning
- Family engagement

CIZs receive up to \$75,000 per year for three years. In addition to the OCDEL program director for the CIZs, the agency has hired four general support staff (one for each of four regions) and two family engagement specialists to provide direct support to the participating communities.

CIZs in Practice

Serving Children with No Preschool Experience. In addition to sponsoring professional development and an asset-mapping initiative, the CIZ in Harrisburg developed a “bridge program” to address an identified need: long waiting lists for pre-Kindergarten slots. Called *Jump Start to Kindergarten*, the five-week Kindergarten-readiness bridge program is for families not receiving any pre-Kindergarten services. Parents participate in workshops on transition and readiness, and the program provides homework kits and starter libraries for children.

Counseling as a Bridge in a Low-Income Rural County. The CIZ in Venango County serves a rural and very low-income region of Pennsylvania. The level of risk factors in the county is among the highest in the state, including high levels of drug use and incarceration. The CIZ is led by the Child Development Center (CDC), which runs five community-based preschools as well as afterschool programs and other services. The agency began proactively working with districts in 2006–07. It began by holding a summer luncheon for preschool and Kindergarten teachers to meet and discuss rising Kindergartners.

This outreach was intended to be responsive to district needs and demonstrate the agency’s capacity to address their needs. Alongside these outreach efforts, CDC launched its own multi-year quality improvement efforts, incorporating district feedback whenever possible. The agency also aligned its preschool curricula with district curricula. Over time, districts noticed that CDC children had higher levels of readiness for Kindergarten and began to regard CDC as a trusted community partner.

Prior to the CIZ grant, CDC had hired a psychologist to support the implementation of a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system throughout its five preschool buildings. The program and the psychologist both proved to be successful, and CDC’s district partners appreciated the psychologist’s expertise. One district began accepting CDC’s special needs assessments and began providing special education services to eligible children at the beginning of Kindergarten rather than waiting six months, as had been the practice in the past.

CDC used its CIZ funds to hire a certified counselor to team up with its psychologist. The idea was to support transitions through expert counseling services. In addition to supporting children and the PBIS program in the five CDC buildings, the duo provides significant transition support for children at its facility in the area’s lowest income district, which again is characterized by deep poverty and very high incarceration rates. The district works closely with CDC’s counseling staff. Some of the elementary school children continue to participate in CDC’s afterschool programs, leading to further opportunities for collaboration. For instance, if a child has a particularly challenging day, the elementary school will call the counselor so he can meet the child at the bus. The psychologist and counselor hold meetings with families at the school in order to “transfer trust” built through long relationships between CDC and families to the school and its counseling personnel.

Reflections on Current Progress

Both community grantees and OCDEL staff articulated a tension common to P–3 efforts: awareness of the extent of the gulf that separates early learning organizations and public schools and appreciation for progress made in bridging that gulf in initial P–3 work.

A Cross-Cultural Learning Cycle. Deborah Wise, OCDEL division chief for standards and professional development, identified a pattern in many local P–3 partnerships in the state, a pattern she refers to as a “cross-cultural learning cycle.” K–3 can support birth-through-age-five organizations in topics like data-driven decision making, and by the same token, it has been an eye opener for K–3 settings that birth through age five is a resource for learning about family engagement practices.

Partnerships and “Spillovers.” Interviewees at both state and community levels also noted a number of unplanned positive developments or “spillovers” that grew out of the local partnerships that the Governor’s Institutes and CIZs supported. One program started using space provided by a career and technical school to run a family engagement program. Once there, however, it ended up providing services to young pregnant mothers who attended the school. Likewise, another program developed a virtual (online) preschool for the children of migrant workers. The program has found another use as a service for medically fragile children.

Finally, in Venango County, CDC’s psychologist and counselor both joined a judge’s roundtable interested in supporting children of incarcerated parents. With the support of the counseling pair, the judges worked with a prison to design a family visitation room so that children and parents could meet in a more suitable environment, for instance,

where they could show affection for each other. The county ended up hiring two staff to work with fathers and mothers on parent-interaction therapy. CDC’s counselors consulted with the prison on the family visitation room. For instance, since the prisoners are not allowed to bring their children’s art back to their cells, the county outfitted the rooms with whiteboards. The families can now make art together while avoiding the no-art-in-cells dilemma.

Fine-Tuning the State’s Role (Again): “There Is No Magic Bullet.” Wise, similar to Megan Irwin of Oregon, goes on to identify a major tension in the work of supporting local partnerships, asking,

What should the state provide, and when should the state sit back and let the communities do their thing? How does the state give enough support but not suggest there is one way to do something?

According to Wise, the state administration has become more flexible in how grants are tracked and monitored. Yet, increasing flexibility has been challenging both for personnel in state departments as well as for community staff who, in some instances, are used to higher levels of regulation. Instead of telling communities what to do, the state allows communities to “do and learn from the doing.”

Wise concludes,

We have learned there is no magic bullet—no one innovation, no one thing. It is complicated and complex to do this work across the whole continuum, in rural and urban settings. You can’t say “I’m going to find these strategies or this checklist.” You have to afford yourself the time and attitude that we are all learning together.

MASSACHUSETTS: Community Alignment Partnerships and a Multi-Pronged Policy Agenda

Massachusetts was one of the first states to begin seeding P–3 work. Massachusetts has three separate departments of education—Early Education and Care, Elementary and Secondary Education, and Higher Education—that play a role in P–3 efforts. The state’s early learning officials are working to develop new linkages across these agencies for P–3 work. Although Massachusetts has funded fewer local P–3 partnerships than Oregon and Pennsylvania, the partnerships have been funded with somewhat higher awards and have a more community-wide orientation.

From a Small Grant Program to a State P–3 Vision and Advisory Body

Laying a Foundation in the Early Days of P–3

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education first seeded P–3 work in the state with a small grant program that began in January 2009 and ran for three years. The PreKindergarten–3rd Curriculum, Instruction, and Alignment program awarded small grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 to over 40 school districts. Early learning officials drew on special education funds to encourage pre-Kindergarten-through-third-grade collaboration that included both general education and special education teachers. Each district convened a pre-Kindergarten-through-third-grade general education/special education vertical team that jointly examined a number of readings. The teams assessed their communities’ needs, identified one or two critical needs, and developed focused strategies to address these needs. Most of the collaboration took place within districts, although a few districts developed joint public–private professional learning communities or sponsored shared professional development workshops.

While the grants were relatively small, for many communities the vertical teams supported by the program were the first opportunities educators had had to meet with early learning colleagues in other grades. The teams were able to choose only one issue to work on, and many were able to identify a clear focus and carry out a plan of work, which encouraged a high level of enthusiasm in many districts as they were able to see a project through to the end. Teams worked on projects such as aligning standards, identifying a curriculum approach to implement across all the grades, social–emotional learning, transitions, inclusion, and family engagement. These early pre-Kindergarten-through-third-grade grants, while primarily used to align work within district classrooms, nonetheless began to engender a P–3 perspective in many communities (Jacobson, 2011).

An Act Relative to Third-Grade Reading Proficiency

In 2009, Massachusetts’ early childhood advocacy organization, Strategies for Children, commissioned Nonie Lesaux, Harvard literacy expert, to write a report assessing the state’s progress in promoting early literacy. The report, published in 2010 and entitled *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*, identified significant literacy achievement gaps and recommended a number of cross-sector strategies to improve reading proficiency, strategies intended to guide literacy development activities beginning at birth and extending to third grade (Lesaux, 2010).

Building on the positive reception of the report, *Strategies for Children* then led efforts to pass a third-grade reading law. *An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading Proficiency* was signed into law in September 2012. The legislation established the Early Literacy Expert Panel, which was commissioned with developing a set of recommendations to align and improve early literacy efforts across the state. The panel, co-chaired by Lesaux and the secretary of education, is slated to come out with its recommendations in 2016. Lesaux was recently appointed as chair of the Board of the Department of Early Education and Care.

The Important Role of the NGA Policy Academy

Like Pennsylvania, Massachusetts participated in the NGA’s early-childhood-to-third-grade Policy Academy. Massachusetts’ team included representatives from the three state education agencies, the Executive Office of Education, and other early learning organizations. As in Pennsylvania, the common experience participating in the Policy Academy helped to strengthen cross-agency relationships and collaboration. Through its participation, Massachusetts produced a comprehensive policy agenda as well as what the participants consider to be an important vision document for the state, *Building the Foundation for Future Success for Children from Birth through Grade Three*. This new document explicitly links to the definition of college and career readiness that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Board of Higher Education approved in 2013. That college and career readiness definition establishes the knowledge, workforce readiness skills, and essential qualities necessary for students to succeed in entry-level college courses and workplace training programs and to enter viable career pathways. The *Building the Foundation* document presents essential P–3 competencies as “precursors” for the knowledge, skills, and qualities of the college and career readiness definition.

The *Building the Foundation* document outlines foundational experiences and essential competencies for five domains: Approaches to Play and Learning, Cognitive Development and General Knowledge, Language and Communication Development, Physical Development and Well-Being, and Social and Emotional Development. The aim of the document is to promote a P–3 whole-child perspective that attends to both learning outcomes *and* learning experiences.

The NGA Policy Academy team in Massachusetts played an important role in establishing a formal mechanism for coordinating early childhood policy across multiple agencies. In 2015, the team was renamed the Birth through Grade Three Advisory Group. The team has been expanded to include a broader range of early education and health stakeholders. The advisory group plays an advisory role for the state’s Preschool Expansion Grant and is continuing to develop components of the comprehensive policy agenda, starting with formative assessment and workforce development.

P–3 Standards and Curriculum Policy

As the Policy Academy team was developing, staff from the Department of Early Education and Care and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education collaborated on a number of standards-alignment initiatives:

- Developed new preschool and Kindergarten standards for social and emotional learning and approaches to play and learning (Mass. Executive Office of Education, 2016).
- Integrated what had been two different academic-standards documents for pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten (issued by two different agencies) into one aligned standards document.

- Issued guidance on the *Elements of High-Quality Kindergarten* and an associated self-assessment tool.
- Released a major early learning/early literacy professional development opportunity that includes professional development on effective K–3 instructional practices based on the principles exemplified by the Boston Public Schools’ Kindergarten curriculum. Boston Public Schools’ Department of Early Childhood is concurrently developing developmentally appropriate curricula for first and second grades, which will likely be included in the state’s professional development opportunity in future years.

Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnerships

The Department of Early Education and Care won an RTT–ELC award in 2011. Like Pennsylvania, Massachusetts included support for local P–3 partnerships in its application. The Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnership grants began late in 2012. They extended the work of earlier PreK–3rd Alignment grants by requiring significant participation by community-based preschool providers, broadening the scope to include infant and toddler care, increasing the size of the awards, and reducing the number of grantees.

Massachusetts’ local P–3 support initiative was somewhat smaller and more targeted than in Oregon and Pennsylvania, although the size of the individual awards was larger (and longer) for some grantees. The Department of Early Education and Care provided up to \$100,000 per year for two fiscal years to five communities in Round 1 of the program.⁴ The state funded the Round 1 communities plus seven new communities in Round 2 for the same amount.

The grantees were required to establish a leadership alignment team that included, among others, community-based early education and care programs and public schools. Partnerships could also include a range of suggested community partners, including Head Start programs, business, higher education, and library/museum partners.

As a leadership development support open to all communities in the state, the Department of Early Education and Care held an Early Educators Leadership Institute for four days over two months that focused on P–3 alignment. The Institute brought together community teams from across the state, including all 12 of the Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnerships.

Community-wide Strategies

Compared with Oregon and Pennsylvania, the Alignment Partnership grants in Massachusetts placed more emphasis on establishing community-wide leadership teams to oversee, guide, and coordinate the P–3 work in their member communities (a cross-sector governance body per the Kauerz and Coffman framework). Communities, rather than schools or neighborhoods, were the recipients of the grants, and their strategies tended to include community-wide initiatives. The community-wide orientation may have also been influenced by the examples set by some of the Round 1 awardees that established community-wide initiatives.

⁴ Two organizations in Boston—the Boston Public Schools and Thrive in 5—each received grants.

Alignment Partnership Examples

Community-wide and Targeted Strategies

Many of the Alignment Partnerships in Massachusetts developed two-pronged approaches that combined community-wide and more-targeted strategies. Springfield supported a cross-sector group of public and private preschool teachers in choosing a preferred city-wide preschool curriculum while convening PLCs for teachers from specific schools and centers. The city of Somerville brought selected representatives from all of its community-based preschools together with Kindergarten teachers for a series of half-day professional development workshops over 18 months, while also conducting an intensive literacy coaching pilot for a small cross-sector group of pre-Kindergarten teachers.

The city of Worcester, a Round 2 grantee, was explicit in implementing this two-pronged approach from the outset of its work. The Partnership joined with a local independent education advocacy organization to sponsor *Worcester: The City that Reads* campaign. In addition to promoting reading, the campaign was intended to engage the city in a common goal and raise awareness and commitment for more-targeted initiatives. The Partnership was also conducting a variety of more targeted efforts for specific audiences on family engagement and social–emotional learning and launching a small data-sharing pilot between a few providers and the district.

A few of the Alignment Partnerships used their funds to continue initiatives already underway. The Berkshire County United Way leads a collective impact initiative, and as is common in rural P–3 initiatives, devoted particular attention to home visiting and collaboration with the health community, especially to support children in families struggling with substance abuse problems. Boston used its Alignment Partnership funding to support 14 community-based classrooms in implementing its research-based pre-Kindergarten curriculum.

A Neighborhood-Based Approach

As a final example, the city of Lowell began with an innovative neighborhood-based strategy that included not only schools and center-based preschool providers, but family childcare providers as well. The initiative then expanded to include a city-wide component.

Lowell’s partnership initially focused on two low-income neighborhoods, each of which included an elementary school, a couple of preschool centers, and a number of family childcare providers. A third neighborhood was added in Round 2. One strand of support for these neighborhoods centered on the use of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS) tool. All of the participating family childcare providers, center-based preschool teachers, and pre-K-through-third-grade teachers in the elementary schools were observed using CLASS and were provided feedback by the observers. Administrators in the centers and schools used the data to inform their improvement plans. The results were compiled in a report that was shared in a general meeting as well as with school and district leaders to inform community-wide professional development programming.

During Round 1, the family childcare and community-based providers in each neighborhood were also supported through communities of practice focused on quality improvement. In Round 2, the Partnership’s focus shifted to family engagement. Teams of family childcare, center-based, and elementary school teachers and administrators

jointly participated in neighborhood-based communities of practice. These communities of practice explored a series of family engagement modules that emphasized the potential of deeper levels of partnerships with families. This professional development was provided to a group of families as well.

In addition to its neighborhood strategy, Lowell’s leadership alignment team determined that the city needed a city-wide school readiness definition and a full-fledged school readiness strategy. Using the familiar “ready educators and school, ready systems, ready city, and ready families” construct, Lowell has developed a city-wide school readiness strategy and garnered support and participation from the city’s health, social services, and government stakeholders. Lowell has developed its capacity to sustain its P–3 work by integrating the Partnership’s work in its long-standing Early Childhood Advisory Council and conducting leadership development for the city’s principals using the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ (NAESP; 2014) pre-K-through-third-grade competencies for principals.

Reflections on Current Progress

RTTT–ELC Director Liz Belsito notes that much of the work of the Birth Through Grade Three Alignment Partnership grants focused on “birth-to-third-grade system building,” consistent with the community-wide initiatives discussed above. According to Carol Nolan, the Department of Early Education and Care’s associate commissioner for programming and grants, the combination of the work of the Massachusetts NGA Policy Academy, the 2015 Early Educators Leadership Institute, and the Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnership grants has elevated P–3 understanding throughout the state and led to more openness and collaboration, especially between school districts and community-based providers. Joint public–private professional development and deeper family engagement partnerships are becoming more common throughout the state.

Donna Traynham, the early learning team lead for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, sums up the Birth through Third Grade Alignment Partnership grants saying they provided

much-needed opportunities for communities both to develop partnerships to improve the quality of services for children ages 0–5 and to align preschool experiences with Kindergarten. She notes that a crucial next step will be for communities to build on this important milestone by expanding their focus up through the early grades of elementary school.

Massachusetts’ Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnership grants ended in December 2015 with the conclusion of the state’s RTTT–ELC grant. Both agency and local leaders point to two challenges that are likely to be relevant to other states’ initiatives to support local P–3 partnerships. The first is how states can best provide guidance and networking opportunities to grantees. The second concerns how states support communities in sustainability planning throughout a grant, a perennial concern in state funding discussions. Both of these issues will be addressed in P–3 Partnership Themes and Patterns (p. 21).

Summary of Key Elements of P–3 Efforts: Three States

	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Massachusetts
Agency	Early Learning Division of the Oregon Department of Education (director and board appointed by governor)	Office of Early Learning and Development (joint office of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Department of Human Services)	Massachusetts Departments of Early Education and Care, Elementary and Secondary Education, and Higher Education (formally linked within a Secretariat and by a Birth through Third Grade Advisory Council).
Agency History and Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governor commitment • Early Learning Council • Early learning hubs • NGA Guide to Literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEARN teams • Transitions coordinator and initiatives • NGA Policy Academy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvard PreK–3rd Institute • PreK–3rd grants • NGA Policy Academy
P–3 Policy Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early learning hubs • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • Career lattice and registry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • P–3 framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned early learning standards • Kindergarten entry assessment • Birth–3rd Foundation document • Comprehensive policy agenda (planned)
Community Grant Program	Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation Program (\$9.1 million to 16 regional early learning hubs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CIZs (50 communities receive up to \$75,000 per year for three years) • Governor’s Institutes 	Birth through Grade Three Alignment Partnership grants (five communities received up to \$100,000 per year over four fiscal years; seven communities received up to \$100,000 per year over two fiscal years)
P–3 Community Partnership Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten readiness skills and smooth transitions • Family engagement • Professional development for early learning and elementary school professionals • Alignment, connection, and collaboration in the P–3 system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family engagement • Continuity and pathways across the continuum • Data-driven improvement across the continuum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice within eight categories (Coffman & Kauerz, 2012; Kauerz & Coffman, 2013) • Required community-wide leadership alignment team

	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Massachusetts
Funded Entity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional early learning hub Targeted allocations within hub region, most frequently to a school feeder system 	Varied, but often a school feeder system	Community partnerships (counties in non-urban areas)
State Supports	State program lead and regional hub system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two state program leads (one for CIZs, one for Governor’s Institutes) Six state-level CIZ facilitators Governor’s Institute events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting relationships with one central and several regional liaisons Leadership Institutes Documentation blog

P–3 Partnership Themes and Patterns

New State Structures and Collaboration Patterns

Embracing a P–3 focus had led to increased collaboration across state agencies—specifically across early childhood, K–3 education, and health offices—in all three case-study states. This collaboration is carried out both through new formal structures and through informal work arrangements. For example, Oregon’s Early Learning Division created a formal work group that includes K–3, and the state works closely with key state philanthropic and nonprofit organizations. Complimenting this formal work group, the staff person who leads the Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation Program and his K–3 counterpart in the Oregon Department of Education have deepened their day-to-day collaboration on P–3 initiatives.

In Pennsylvania, the OCDEL is jointly overseen by the education and human services departments, and the respective secretaries meet regularly on a formal cross-agency cabinet to coordinate high-level policy decisions. As in Oregon, the increasing focus on P–3 work has led OCDEL staff to collaborate with colleagues in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. In Massachusetts, there is increased collaboration between K–3 personnel in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and those in the Department of Early Education and Care. To strengthen the linkages across the agencies, Massachusetts has institutionalized its NGA Policy Academy team by creating a Birth through Third Grade Advisory Council that includes the undersecretary of education.

Despite considerable progress increasing communication and collaboration, all three states nonetheless report that bureaucratic barriers pose significant challenges and that improving inter-agency collaboration is still very much a work in progress.

Two-Pronged Approaches: State Policy and Local Support

All three case-study states are pursuing a two-pronged approach to P–3 system building that includes both state policy development and programs to encourage local P–3 efforts. Regarding policy, all three states have devoted considerable resources to aligning state standards from pre-K through third grade. Pennsylvania has included infant and toddler standards as well. Further, all three states have developed social–emotional learning standards within their standards frameworks for pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Like many states, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts are also developing Kindergarten entry assessments and tying their P–3 standards to professional development and workforce development policies. Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have used RTTT-ELC funding to sponsor P–3 Leadership Institutes as well.

P–3 System Building at Regional, Community, and Neighborhood Levels

The three case-study states have funded P–3 work at overlapping yet nonetheless different geographic levels, in effect defining “local” in different ways. Oregon first funds regional hubs, which then tend to fund areas surrounding a single school—the school and its feeder community-based preschools—although in some instances, the hubs have funded larger entities. Similarly, most of Pennsylvania’s CIZs are schools and their feeder preschools, although

in some cases, entire rural counties were funded. Somewhat in contrast, Massachusetts’ Alignment Partnership grants funded either entire communities or larger rural/small town areas, and thus district participation was key. Both of these levels of P–3 system building—feeder system and community—are found in the approach developed by Lowell, Mass.

The initial and clearly limited experience of the three case-study states preliminarily suggests that funding neighborhoods–feeder systems may result in faster implementation of on-the-ground activities. In contrast, funding at the community level may lead to slower implementation time frames as communities build cross-sector partnerships, conduct needs assessments, and design their strategies. These activities, however, support capacity building and sustainability in the medium to longer term. A third approach is found in Oregon, where the state is attempting to build institutional capacity at the regional level through early learning hubs, which in turn primarily allocate funding to the neighborhood–feeder system level.

Pushing for Impact

P–3 partnerships in all three states have developed local strategies and implemented them, leading to a great deal of programming activity. As mentioned in the case studies, the PSU evaluation in Oregon found that communities implemented many workshops (one-time and multi-session) for both professionals and families. State officials in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts have also been pleased that funded communities have had success carrying through on plans and implementing on-the-ground activities. Across all three states, activities have tended to focus on professional development, PLCs, family engagement, and transitions.

As mentioned before, the PSU evaluation also found a need for “more in-depth follow-up, coaching, and mentoring support” if activities are going to lead to deep changes in practice. As noted above, Oregon’s Early Learning Division staff concur with the PSU evaluation that the initial activities have been productive and are building momentum, but it will be important to deepen the work and make it more systemic in order to achieve the kind of impacts the grants are intended to have. It is likely that this finding in Oregon applies to most early stage P–3 activities. In Massachusetts, a number of communities worked with literacy expert Nonie Lesaux and the state early childhood advocacy organization, Strategies for Children, to move beyond “awareness raising” to “changing adult behavior.”

Planning, Flexibility, and Emergent Strategies

Related to the need for system building and impact are a cluster of issues regarding *planning*, *flexibility*, and *emergent strategies*. Across all three states, communities that already had a good sense of their needs and had developed thoughtful, coherent plans in their proposals were able to “hit the ground running” and begin implementing a mutually reinforcing set of strategies in short order. Most of the community examples cited throughout the case studies, for instance, used coherent, focused plans to guide their work.

Yet, a number of communities also expressed the need for flexibility to make changes to their plans, whether as mid-course corrections in response to data or implementation challenges or as new opportunities arose. Communities also emphasized that through their P–3 work, a number of unplanned “organic” strategies emerged as they were implementing their planned strategies. In one Pennsylvania community, a program found space in a career and technical school and ended up providing support to teenage mothers. Another community developed an online

preschool for migrant families but found an additional audience in medically fragile children. After identifying a need after receiving their grants, both Boston and Lowell used the P–3 platform they had developed to apply for separate funding for professional development focused on mathematics. Lowell began with a plan to focus on specific neighborhoods but, in response to community need and interest, developed a city-wide school readiness strategy as well.

School–Community Collaboration: Progress and Challenges

State and community officials agreed that school–community collaboration in early stage P–3 efforts was often challenging but also improved significantly in many communities over time. In some but definitely not all communities, community-based organizations found it challenging to coax school and district leaders into committing to P–3 efforts—which typically meant collaborating with community-based preschools. Community-based leaders understood the reluctance to be an issue of priority amid competing demands. In some cases, however, once principals and their staffs engaged in P–3 work, they were won over and became key committed boosters of the P–3 initiative in their communities. Even in instances where the turnaround was not as dramatic but school and district commitment nonetheless increased, community and state officials took the increase in buy-in as a significant indication of progress.

Participants in all three states emphasized the importance of, over time, building trust and relationships as partnership work developed, a common yet nonetheless critically important dynamic in P–3 efforts.⁵ Some of the communities that state officials regard as “leading edge” communities doing advanced P–3 work, such as Venango County in Pennsylvania and Lowell, Mass., have long histories of collaboration between school districts and community-based organizations. As a result, both of these communities proposed well-defined strategies for their grants—strategies they have implemented and expanded.

As these examples suggest, communities differ in the extent to which their partners have worked together previously and have developed a sense of their common needs and strategies. Communities at different ends of this continuum will need different types of support. Likewise, low-income rural communities in all three case-study states described common themes in carrying out P–3 work in their contexts: transportation challenges, a paucity of social service partners, rising substance abuse rates, and a need to work closely with the health care system in order to reach families. P–3 efforts in rural settings will, thus, look somewhat different and require technical assistance and networking opportunities that take these differences into account.

The Pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten “Seam” as a Common Starting Point

While all three case-study states define the P–3 continuum as beginning before or at birth, communities typically begin their P–3 initiatives with activities that bring together community-based preschools and elementary schools for collaboration around transitions, family engagement, and joint professional learning. The joint professional learning activities most commonly include pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers, although in some cases teachers from grades 1–3 also participate.

⁵ See *The Potential of Birth–3rd Partnerships: Relationships, Capacity, and Innovation* at *The P–3 Learning Hub* blog (p3learninghub.org).

Communities are developing many different approaches to aligning community-based pre-Kindergarten with district pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten education. These include different configurations of standards alignment, assessment initiatives, cross-site visits, PLC discussion groups, PLC lesson planning groups, and joint professional development. This focus has produced a growing number of models for communities to draw on, as evidenced by the examples in this report.⁶ On the other hand, thus far the ages 0–3 and grades 1–3 ends of the P–3 continuum tend to receive less attention in the first years of partnership efforts.

Sustaining Local P–3 Partnerships

Sustaining grant-funded initiatives is a persistent challenge in state–local funding relationships, and state support for local P–3 partnerships is no exception. The Oregon legislature has addressed this challenge, at least in part, by including funding for the Kindergarten Partnership and Innovation Program in the state budget. These grants are relatively new, and thus the early learning hubs have not yet had to wrestle with how many years they will support the original local applicants and when they will transfer funds to new sites.

Massachusetts and Pennsylvania both funded their P–3 grants with RTTT-ELC monies; consequently, sustainability is a significant concern in both states. Pennsylvania is hoping that cross-community connections made at regional Governor’s Institutes will provide at least a measure of support for sustaining work after the grants end. Massachusetts’ Alignment Partnership grants ended in December 2015, and so this issue has come to the fore for the Massachusetts communities.

At an end-of-grant gathering of the 12 funded partnerships in Massachusetts, community representatives raised their concerns about being able to sustain the work, concerns that were forcefully echoed by the case-study interviewees. They requested more technical assistance during the grant to plan for sustainability, and they also made the case for continued state support. In addition to funding to support collaboration between community-based preschool teachers and district teachers, the partnerships found the P–3 facilitator role that was funded by the Alignment Partnership grants to be critical. According to one interviewee,

To build and sustain [P–3] efforts ... it takes time and a specific person charged with the responsibility to support alignment. It’s a leadership role with rolled-up sleeves. Maintaining focus on alignment work and goals requires a local community-embedded leader. Alignment efforts generally include a diverse and large cast of leaders who are already engaged in their organization/school/program’s core work. To maintain momentum, open new conversations, and inspire new ways of thinking, a specific individual is needed to shape opportunities and knit together initiatives (existing and new) to benefit alignment activities.

Balancing SEA Oversight and Local Flexibility in P–3 System Building

The three case-study states’ experiences supporting local P–3 partnerships highlight the important role state departments of education play in overseeing P–3 grants, providing technical assistance to grantees, and encouraging learning and networking opportunities across communities. Pennsylvania’s Deborah Wise and Oregon’s Megan

⁶ See also *Joint Professional Learning in Somerville and Springfield* (p3learninghub.org)

Irwin both raised the issue of how states best play their assigned regulatory role, ensuring that tax dollars are used appropriately and effectively while also encouraging communities to use funds flexibly in service of innovative work. Wise and Irwin noted how established patterns and habits on the part of both SEA staff and community grantees can impede flexible use of funds to meet local needs, and both noted that figuring out the right balance of oversight and autonomy was work in progress that requires “fine-tuning,” suggesting that this topic is a good candidate for discussion and exchange at SEA networking opportunities.

How states provide technical assistance and networking support emerged as another key consideration in the case-study states. Both SEA staff and community members in Massachusetts suggested that additional technical assistance and networking opportunities may have been helpful to the communities. In Oregon, an alignment specialist works closely with the early learning hubs on the Partnership and Innovation grants. In Pennsylvania, the CIZs and Governor’s Institutes are each staffed with program officers, and six additional staff support the 50 CIZs across four regions. Community leaders confirmed that these supports helped them support their partnerships and, thus, helped them to make better use of their partnership funding.

Community grantees all found the convenings and networking opportunities that states provided to grantees to be helpful. Several noted, however, that due to the wide range of strategies communities in their states pursued, what they could learn from other communities was not always evident, suggesting that states may need to group together communities working on similar strategies and/or identify crosscutting themes or topics that can help communities make connections to work in other P-3 partnerships.

Recommendations

1. States committed to P–3 alignment will need to develop new structures and new working arrangements in order to coordinate state policy and support local and regional P–3 efforts.

States that embrace efforts to improve and align services across the P–3 continuum can expect that they will need to develop formal and informal relationships across state agencies. Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts illustrate a number of models to draw from as states design arrangements to meet their specific organizational needs.

2. Building P–3 systems entails both statewide policy direction and support of local initiatives.

States engaging in P–3 system building should align these two levels of activity. States should monitor the interaction of their P–3 policy initiatives and their support for local system building in order to maximize the mutually reinforcing impact of both levels of P–3 work. The implicit assumption underlying the two-pronged approaches found in the case studies is that the state- and local-level work will be mutually reinforcing, raising important questions regarding how the new standards and assessments are being used at the local level. Are some communities having success using aligned standards and assessments to drive P–3 improvement? What can be learned from the communities that have embraced these resources? States should also examine how the experience of local partnerships can be used to improve statewide policy guidance.

3. States should be deliberate about the level at which they want to support P–3 alignment and capacity building: regional, community, and/or neighborhood–feeder system. Each has different implications, particularly for creating structures for cross-sector work and sustainability.

Clearly, each case-study state funded a range of local entities, and thus there is overlap across the three states' strategies. Yet these differences across the states bring an important question to the fore that has not received much attention within the P–3 literature: What should the locus of P–3 system building be: the neighborhood–feeder system, the district–community level, or the region? Perhaps more accurately, when should states identify one level for funding support rather than another? To the extent that states are interested in building local infrastructure and capacity to maintain P–3 efforts, they should consider which types of organizations—at what level of system building—are most likely to be successful.

4. States should support local P–3 partnerships in crafting coherent strategies and employing disciplined, flexible plan-management approaches, taking advantage of new approaches to developing strategies and managing cross-sector partnerships.

The experiences of P–3 partnerships, including those discussed in this study, suggest that partnerships should design and implement their strategies with these priorities in mind:

- Developing a coherent strategy that includes short-term activities that will build momentum and develop trust and relationships as well as longer term activities that will significantly improve adult practices and lead to systemic improvements.

- Using regular plan-management check-ins to oversee implementation efforts, responding flexibly to early evidence of change and short-term outcomes, and taking advantage of the partnership’s platform to seize new opportunities as they arise.
- States and communities can draw on effective approaches to designing and implementing strategies as well as the collective impact model of cross-sector collaboration to guide the work of P–3 partnerships. A recent paper from the Center for American Progress, *A Different Way of Doing Business: Examples of Pre-K to Third Grade Alignment in Practice* (Ulrich & Adamu, 2016), provides a number of examples of data-driven improvement using short-term benchmarks that can support effective implementation.

5. States should engage school and district leaders in P–3 efforts by sharing information on the value of improving early learning, providing leadership development opportunities, hosting professional learning networks, and creating incentives for school and district participation.

Resources to inform district participation include case studies of Union City, N.J., and Montgomery County, Md. (Marietta, 2010), as well as the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (NAESP, 2014).

6. States should differentiate their funding and technical assistance support to local communities, taking both the history of collaboration and community context into account.

Differentiated support would entail encouraging communities with strong histories of collaboration to lead the way and become “bright star” models for others in the state while supporting early collaborative development for communities that are new to district–community collaboration. Likewise, states should take the different needs of urban, rural, and suburban settings into account as they plan their technical assistance and networking support offerings.

7. States can support communities in learning from the considerable experience other communities have developed in aligning learning, teaching, and development across community-based preschools and Kindergarten. They should also support communities in expanding beyond pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten collaboration. Over time, communities should also focus attention on improving the quality of grades 1–3 as well as services for children ages 0–3.

As the community examples throughout the three case studies demonstrate, communities have developed a wide range of models and approaches for improving and aligning work across the pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten seam (see additional examples from Massachusetts). This growing bank of examples can inform the thinking of early-stage community P–3 leaders as they develop their own P–3 strategies and approaches. Further, while it makes good sense for communities that are just beginning to build their capacity to carry out P–3 work to start at the pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten seam, it will be important for communities, with state support, to gradually expand their improvement and alignment efforts to address both grades 1–3 learning, teaching, and development and ages 0–3 services.

8. States should determine how they will support communities in sustaining their P–3 system-building work. Options include working towards obtaining ongoing legislative support and helping communities in sustainability planning, such as providing technical assistance to communities on reallocating funds to support P–3 work.

A common aspiration in state grant funding is to demonstrate the value of an innovation, such as P–3 system building, in hopes that the local community will reallocate funds to continue support for the innovation when grant funding ends. From the community perspective, such reallocation is either unrealistic or, at least, politically and logistically very challenging. State support could greatly aid such reallocation, perhaps drawing on resources such as *The Strategic School: Making the Most of People, Time, and Money* (Miles & Frank, 2008).

9. States should continue to fine-tune, perhaps in communication with like-minded states, how they balance their regulatory roles, their technical assistance functions, and the aim of local flexibility when supporting local P–3 efforts.

P–3 initiatives have prompted state leaders to reflect on the best way to carry out their regulatory and oversight roles while encouraging local innovation, while community leaders are eager for technical assistance and the opportunity to learn from other communities. States have an opportunity to better exploit the potential of P–3 partnerships by providing high-quality technical guidance and networking opportunities that connect communities through shared strategies and topics. States may want to consider presenting a menu of strategies from which communities can choose when applying for grant funding, which would then ensure that communities shared commonalities and would be able to learn from peers.

Conclusion

The case studies of Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts profiled in this report demonstrate the crucial roles SEAs can play in supporting P–3 system building—both through state policy as well as by supporting local and regional early learning partnerships. Carrying out this work requires that SEAs align their work internally across divisions and units while building the capacity of communities to design and implement quality improvement and alignment activities.

SEAs can support this work through carefully crafted technical assistance and networking activities. Key areas of focus include securing district commitment; encouraging communities to attend not only to the pre-Kindergarten–Kindergarten alignment but also age 0–3 and grades K–3 efforts; and realistic planning for sustainability. States also have a critical role to play in encouraging P–3 learning and exchange across communities, both within their states and across states.

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