

## **POLICIES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE P-3 ASSESSMENT SYSTEM IN NEVADA**

### **PURPOSE**

- *To articulate the benefits of implementing a more comprehensive P-3 assessment system*
- *To define the components of a comprehensive P-3 assessment system*
- *To describe what state policymakers can do to support a comprehensive P-3 assessment system*

#### **The need for a comprehensive assessment system**

Historically, assessments of young children have been the domain of individual institutions and programs rather than the state. As a result, states preparing to move toward comprehensive systems that span from early childhood into the early elementary grades often find that existing practices are somewhat uncoordinated and even haphazard. In Nevada, existing assessment strategies or policies are not coordinated across the state's early childhood education (ECE) programs. Some programs may not have a formal assessment system, which means that ECE providers, communities, and the state may not have information about learning and development for a significant proportion of young children. In the early elementary grades, teachers and principals usually make their own decisions about what to assess, how to do it, and what to do with the data. Compared to ECE programs, K-3 assessments often measure different areas of learning and development, have different purposes for assessment, and use different approaches. As a result, educators, ECE programs, schools, districts, state agencies, and policymakers lack comprehensive data about children's learning and development during the first eight years of their lives, when foundations for critical intellectual and social skills and habits are laid. Without such information, it is difficult to identify needs for more intensive intervention earlier on, adapt curriculum and instruction to better serve all students, and ensure that all children are prepared for preschool, kindergarten, and beyond.

Nevada is striving towards a more systematic approach to assessment from early childhood through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (P-3) that can provide a more coherent and comprehensive picture of children's learning and development during that age span and help P-3 educators and leaders, policymakers, and parents improve the ways in which they support these children. In order to achieve that aim, the state must move toward a coordinated and carefully planned set of assessment strategies and measures that are appropriate for examining students' knowledge and skills.

#### **The components of a comprehensive P-3 assessment system**

To address these challenges, policymakers can support the development of a comprehensive P-3 assessment system. Such a system would have the following characteristics and elements:

- The capacity to assess children from early childhood through third grade on a common set of learning and developmental areas, including language and literacy, cognition, social-emotional development, approaches to learning, and health and motor development;
- A portfolio of assessment tools and methods that provide reliable and valid data for all children for multiple purposes, including screenings, formative assessments, interim progress monitoring, and summative assessment;

- Processes in place to engage families as key informants, consumers of assessment results, and partners in putting data into action;
  - Resources that build stakeholders' (e.g., P-3 educators, directors and administrators, policymakers, parents) capacity to use data effectively and appropriately to make decisions, such as training, professional development, coaches, data systems and tools, time to analyze and apply data; and
  - Assessments of the environments and contexts in which children learn and live, including classroom quality measures, measures of teacher-child interactions and instruction, school/program environment, home and community characteristics, etc.
- ECE and early elementary educators and leaders are more able to collaborate when they have access to comparable data about how children are progressing across a common set of learning and developmental domains.
  - Policymakers have comprehensive data about children, parents, educators, and program and instructional quality to inform their decisions about investments in ECE, educator preparation, professional development, and other reforms and improvement efforts.

### **Policy actions toward a comprehensive P-3 assessment system**

To develop a comprehensive P-3 assessment system, Nevada can take the following policy actions:

#### **Benefits of a comprehensive P-3 assessment system**

Such a system would yield more comprehensive data about children's growth across all domains of learning and development, provide a more coherent picture of their development as they transition from the early childhood years into the public education system, and elevate the relationship between children's development and the quality of their experiences. With a more sophisticated understanding of young children and students, P-3 educators, principals and other public education leaders, ECE program directors, families, and policymakers can all make more informed decisions. For example:

- Families and educators are more able to identify needs for interventions earlier in all areas of learning and development.
- ECE directors, principals, and other K-12 leaders have more robust information about children and their teachers to guide their decisions about curriculum, professional development, additional services to provide, etc.
- ECE educators are able to understand how they can better prepare young children for elementary schools, while early elementary educators are able to adapt their instruction to children's strengths and challenges across all domains of learning and development.

1. ***Align early learning standards with K-12 content standards.*** A P-3 assessment system should focus on a coherent set of learning and developmental domains from early childhood through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade that are critical for later academic success. In addition to core academic areas like literacy and math, this may also include social-emotional development and children's dispositions toward learning (e.g., curiosity, motivation, persistence). Also, the indicators of progress within each domain should reflect a smooth developmental trajectory from early childhood through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, such that there are no significant overlaps or gaps in expectations between grade levels or age groups.
2. ***Define the core competencies that P-3 educators need to assess children effectively.*** P-3 educators face common challenges when assessing children: They can't rely on getting data from standardized tests that students can take on their own. These educators need a distinct set of competencies related to assessment, even if specific assessment methods may differ for children of varying age groups within the P-3 age span. Such competencies may include knowledge of child development in all critical areas; developmentally appropriate assessment methods; observation and documentation; data interpretation and use; assessing children from diverse cultural, linguistic, and learning backgrounds; engaging families in the assessment process; communicating and collaborating with peers and

other professionals; and knowledge about different screening and assessment tools.<sup>28</sup>

3. ***Support P-3 professional preparation and ongoing learning experiences that are aligned with core competencies.*** Through levers like professional certification, licensure requirements, and program accreditation for teacher preparation programs, state policymakers can ensure that aspiring P-3 educators' coursework and field experiences are aligned with core competencies for early childhood assessment. Similarly, state leaders can also set parameters for professional development opportunities so that they focus on critical competencies and are effective in improving assessment practices. For example, state leaders can allocate resources for not only workshops, but strategies like data/assessment coaches and professional learning communities that have demonstrated impact on improving practice – and help P-3 educators find the time needed to participate in these activities.<sup>29</sup> Finally, policymakers should ensure that principals' and ECE directors' preparation and professional development experiences equip them with the early learning knowledge and skills necessary to support effective and appropriate early childhood assessment in P-3 settings.
4. ***Identify appropriate assessment tools for districts and ECE programs.*** More so than local administrators, educators, and ECE providers, state leaders are well-positioned to engage experts to identify appropriate assessment tools that produce reliable and valid data for different age groups, different learning and developmental domains, and different linguistic, cultural, and ability groups. Also, instead of allowing idiosyncratic choices by local schools, programs, and educators, which makes it difficult to have a coherent perspective of children's growth and development at the

district, regional, or state level, state leaders can promote a more systematic approach by providing consistent guidance and incentives to adopt common assessments.

5. ***Develop a coordinated ECE data system that links to the state's longitudinal data system.*** To facilitate communication about children's learning and development across different ECE programs and between ECE programs and the public education system, policymakers can invest in an ECE data system that (1) allows sharing of child-level data among programs, including child care, state pre-k, Head Start, early intervention, and special education preschool and (2) links child-level data from ECE programs to the K-12 system.<sup>30</sup> Also, linking child-level data with program quality data (e.g., from Silver State Stars) and educator-level data (e.g., teacher evaluation, ECE registries) can help researchers and policymakers better understand what contributes to children's learning and growth.
6. ***Integrate families' perspectives and involvement in the assessment system.*** Family members possess unique insights about children's growth and development. A comprehensive P-3 assessment system would engage family members as both a source of additional data about students and as partners in using assessment data to support students' learning and development. States like Delaware and Washington, for example, have integrated a family engagement component in their kindergarten entry assessment system through requiring home visits, conferences, or surveys that facilitate such teacher-parent interactions.<sup>31</sup> Such strategies can be applied to the other elementary grades. Some states and school districts implement programs that help preschool children make a successful transition into kindergarten. Policymakers can require or support districts to ensure that data about

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<sup>28</sup> For sample core competencies in assessments, see: [NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation](#) and the [National Board of Professional Teaching Standards' Early Childhood Generalist Standards](#).

<sup>29</sup> Clare McCann and Jennifer Cohen Kabaker, [Promoting Data in the Classroom](#), Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2013. See also [Learning](#)

[Forward](#) for research on best practices in professional development.

<sup>30</sup> See [2013 State of States' Early Childhood Data Systems](#) by the Early Childhood Data Collaborative for promising state strategies to implement data linkages.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Bruner, et al., [Families Know Best](#), Denver, CO: BUILD Initiative, 2013.

children’s development, including family members’ perspectives, are part of these transition activities.

7. ***Expand access to early learning programs that are part of a comprehensive assessment system.***

Nevada cannot maximize the utility of a comprehensive P-3 assessment system if children are not in early learning programs that provide developmentally-appropriate instruction and systematic, ongoing assessment of children’s growth. Currently, only 3 percent of four-year-olds are enrolled in the state pre-k program and 4 percent in Head Start programs.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of children at this age are in child care programs that typically don’t systematically assess children. The state also has limited data about Head Start children. This means that, even with the most comprehensive P-3 assessment system, Nevada’s districts and schools would have minimal information about the developmental status of their students before kindergarten. Policymakers should consider strategies to boost enrollment in state pre-k and work with Head Start to integrate their data into school systems.

8. ***Use the Silver State KIDS pilot as a platform for building a comprehensive P-3 assessment system.***

State leaders should consider how Nevada’s kindergarten entry assessment pilot, Silver State KIDS, can inform the design and development of a comprehensive P-3 assessment

system. Silver State KIDS attends to all of the research-based domains of learning and development that are critical for success not only for kindergartners, but all students in the P-3 grade span. It also uses assessment methods that are appropriate and effective for this age group. These attributes, if applied to preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, can provide educators and instructional leaders more holistic information about their students’ strengths and weaknesses and help them improve classroom instruction and decisions about policies at the school and district levels. State leaders can support not only expanding the pilot, but aligning the initiative with assessment at the pre-k level, while extending it through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, as North Carolina is planning to do.<sup>33</sup> Also, the pilot will result in valuable lessons about how to increase P-3 educators’ capacity to conduct and use assessment effectively, which will help policymakers improve the state’s policies for P-3 educator preparation and professional development.

**P-3 REFERS TO THE CONTINUUM OF LEARNING FROM BEFORE KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE. THIS INCLUDES ALL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND SERVICES THAT FOCUS ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS (BIRTH THROUGH AGE 8).**

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<sup>32</sup> Steve W. Barnett, et al., *The State of Preschool Yearbook 2013*, New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> *Assessment for Learning and Development in K-3*, Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2013.