

P-3 REFORM: WHY AND HOW

PURPOSE

- *To elevate the discussion of the 0-8 age span as a more prominent part of the state's education reform strategy*
- *To describe how such a focus will enhance the state's reform strategy and policies to improve education outcomes*

Almost half of Nevada's child population is under the age of 8, the age range in which thoughtful policy has the potential to make the largest long-term impact on education achievement. P-3 policy initiatives can best support early literacy and math development with the largest benefits going to children with the most to gain: English-language-learners, children with IEP's, and children at risk of school failure. Policy that drives a high-quality learning continuum from pre-K through the 3rd grade can provide children with the strong foundation needed for college and career readiness.

The Rationale

Of the 661,605 children under age 18 in Nevada, 47% are below the age of eight, with 27% under age five.¹ Research indicates that early experiences impact the formation of basic neural structures and learning pathways that influence language, cognitive, and social skill mastery, often beginning at birth with the basic architecture in place by age five.² Once pathways are formed, they become increasingly difficult to change as children grow. This research, along with growing evidence that high-quality early learning opportunities have long-

term benefits and that achievement gaps appear well before the start of kindergarten, particularly for special populations, makes it clearer than ever that Nevada's future hinges on the state's will and ability to recognize and address the unique needs of children in this age group.³

Quality educational experiences in the early years have the greatest potential to bolster academic and social achievement particularly for children at risk of school failure. Children entering school as English-language-learners (ELL) or with individual-education plans (IEP) can also benefit from early education and consistent, high-quality classrooms². Moreover, because of the impact early experiences have on brain development, children often acquire their dispositions toward learning and education before entering kindergarten. This, coupled with varying experiences with poverty and high or low quality teaching, influences the current achievement gap that begins well before kindergarten entrance. The achievement gap that exists between children coming from families with low and middle-high income can be seen as early as 18 months and is evident in language, math, and self-regulation

¹ Kids Count data center. *Nevada Indicators*. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

² Sharon E. Fox, Pat Levitt, and Charles A. Nelson. *How the Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Influence the Development of Brain Architecture*. Child Development 81(2010): 28-40; National Research Council: Institute of Medicine. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, ed. Jack P. Shankoff and Deborah A.

Phillips (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

³ G. M. Crawford, C. T. Cobb, R. M. Clifford, and S. Ritchie. *The Groundswell of Transforming Prekindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, ed. S. Ritchie and L. Gutmann (New York, NY: Teacher College Press, 2013).

abilities.⁴ These early gaps continue to widen as children progress through the school system and have inconsistent experiences with quality. The abrupt shifts in practice between pre-K and K-12 schools, as well as between classrooms in the K-3rd system, fails to provide children with consistent, integrated experiences from grade to grade.

One promising strategy for Nevada to address the above challenges is P-3 reform, which refers to the continuum of learning that happens from birth through the 3rd grade. P-3 aims to apply developmental science to early care and education environments in order to transform how children learn from infancy through 3rd grade, enhance their development and achievement, and smooth the gaps that exist in current practice between early childhood and the K-3 grades.⁵ Current evidence from brain and developmental science can provide guidance in the creation of Nevada education policy that best supports children of all developmental levels: to match what we know with what we do.⁶

National data on literacy achievement finds that only 25% of Nevada's 4th graders read at or above *Proficient*, while the national level is 32%.⁷ Several states are pursuing read-by-three initiatives with the goal that children read at or above grade level by the third grade. P-3 efforts fundamentally support this goal by advocating continuous support and high-quality instruction for children beginning in pre-K and continuing through the 3rd grade. High quality maintained through this continuum correlates to lower rates of placement in special education and higher literacy and math scores in the 3rd grade.⁸

⁴ A. Fernald, V. A. Marchman, and A. Weisleder. *SES Differences In Language Processing Skill and Vocabulary are Evident At 18 Months*. *Developmental Science* 16, no. 2 (2013): 234-248.; Prentice Starkey, and Alice Klein. *Sociocultural Influences on Young Children's Mathematical Knowledge*, ed. Olivia N. Saracho and Bernard Spodek (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008).

⁵ "PreK-3rd Education", Foundation for Child Development, accessed April 2nd, 2014, <http://fcd-us.org/our-work/prek-3rd-education>.

⁶ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. *The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do*. (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Developing Child, 2007).

Addressing the gap in experiences and achievement is in line with current Nevada education policy goals that aim to elevate student achievement and bolster college and career readiness.⁹ High-quality early experiences for children can increase levels of school readiness, and improve social and academic outcomes for children of all developmental levels, particularly when high quality is maintained through the early grades. While abundant research supports the importance of quality pre-K experiences to address the achievement gap, recent research also shows that these early gains are more likely to be sustained if high quality instruction is continued through the third and fourth grade.¹⁰ Recognizing that early childhood encompasses children in early primary grades points to the need for continued focus on developmentally appropriate practice in all classrooms.

What This Means for State Policy

Nevada's state policymakers can take the following steps to address the above challenges:

1. ***Improve access to and quality of opportunities to learn before kindergarten.***
 - Expand access to state-funded pre-kindergarten programs. Currently, only approximately 3% of Nevada's 4-year-olds have access to a state-funded pre-kindergarten program, despite the fact that children who attend Nevada's state-funded pre-K programs are better prepared for kindergarten.¹¹ In order to have a larger impact on the school readiness of all of Nevada's

⁷ National Center for Educational Statistics. *NAEP 2011 Reading Report for Nevada*.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Nevada Department of Education. *State Education Goals: 2020*. Accessed April 3rd, 2014, http://www.doe.nv.gov?ABOUT_NDE/.

¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹¹ National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), *State Preschool Yearbook*. (NIEER, 2012); Nevada Department of Education. *Nevada Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program: Building a Foundation for School Readiness and Success in PreK-12 and Beyond*. (NDE, Office of Educational Opportunity, 2013).

children, state-funded pre-K program funding should be expanded.

- Improve access to screenings and appropriate services to ensure that children and families in need of early intervention are being reached before kindergarten entry. Additionally, home-visiting programs emphasizing family engagement can provide a bridge from the home to the school and encourage parental involvement, in turn bolstering academic and social outcomes for children.
- Foster communication, shared professional development, and quality improvement across the landscape of pre-K environments (e.g., private, non-profit, federally funded, state funded). Currently, children attend programs that do not have a consistent system of funding, implementation, standards, or accountability.¹² This system results in few children benefiting from high quality early learning environments. In Nevada, 54% of children age 3-5 are not enrolled in any preschool, kindergarten, or nursery school, while the national level is 40%.¹³ This number does not include care provided in private homes, making it more difficult to reach Nevada's children under age 5.
- Support for Nevada's emerging Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), or Silver State Stars, can facilitate common standards for early care and education by helping to define quality and providing a common roadmap for ECE providers for program improvement. The rating system also provides families with easy access to information on program quality. Currently, 18 states use QRIS system for operation of early learning programs.¹⁴

2. Improve quality of learning opportunities in K-3 classrooms.

- Research on quality within classrooms indicates that the quality of teaching practices varies

immensely, with teachers differing in their understanding of what constitutes good teaching, and with abrupt shifts in children's experiences both between grades and between classrooms of the same level.¹⁵ There is also an increasing concern that adequate attention is not being paid to the latest research on how our youngest students learn and develop across all domains. Thus, policy makers can support teaching quality by promoting access to professional development for K-3 teachers on developmentally appropriate teaching and learning environments that support academic achievement.

- Teacher preparation and professional development programs that are collaborative both across and within K-3 grades, as well as between pre-K and early elementary grades will support the creation of common language and expectations to support our youngest learners.
- The Nevada Educator Performance Framework (NEPF) presents another opportunity to identify specific professional development needs among K-3 teachers and provide the necessary supports to improve instruction. However, this may require reviewing early learning research and best practices to identify the adaptations that need to be made to NEPF's student assessment strategies and teacher observation tools, so that it more effectively supports high-quality instruction in the early elementary grades.
- One challenge involves aligning the developmental needs of young children with Nevada's adoption of the more rigorous Nevada Academic Content Standards (NVACS), those based on the Common Core and on the Next Generation Science Standards. The NVACS powerfully addresses learning in English-language arts, mathematics, and science for children in K-12, but may be enhanced to address other domains of learning proven to impact student achievement for children in the

¹² National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Foundation Taskforce on Early Learning. *Building and Supporting an Aligned System: A Vision for Transforming Education Across the Pre-K-Grade Three Years*. (NAESP Foundation, 2011).

¹³ Ibid, 1.

¹⁴ Nevada Silver State Stars QRIS. Accessed April 3rd, 2014, <http://www.nvsilverstatestars.org/>.

¹⁵ Rima Shore. *PreK-3rd: Teacher Quality Matter, Policy Brief no. 3*, Foundation for Child Development, accessed April 2nd, 2014, <http://fcd-us.org/resources/prek-3rd-teacher-quality-matters>.

developmental years of early childhood. Including emphasis on social-emotional and physical development in addition to cognitive and language learning would wholly support the children in this age range.

- The state can increase access to full-day kindergarten in order to help children meet more rigorous academic standards. Nevada currently provides full-day kindergarten for 128 at-risk schools. Students in these programs outperform their equally at-risk peers in both reading and math through the 4th grade.¹⁶
- Expanding the capacity of principals and other K-12 administrators to support early learning can be addressed through changes to licensure requirements (e.g., adding early childhood content to licensure requirements for administrators), and funding of professional development initiatives related to early childhood for in-service principals.

3. *Alignment of goals, policies, and approaches to teaching and learning between early childhood education (ECE) and K.*

Improving ECE and K-3 independently may not be enough to improve outcomes because the two systems tend to have different goals and beliefs about teaching and learning. Alignment of goals and policies can bridge the gap between children's experiences and vastly differing levels of quality.

- Establish cross-sector and cross-organizational committees and governance structures that support decision-making and responsibilities between stakeholders supporting P-3 efforts.¹⁷ The new Division of Early Learning and Development was created to address this issue,

and represents a promising start toward accomplishing these goals.

- Build meaningful connections between preschools and elementary schools with opportunities for communication, collaboration, and shared professional development between teachers. This can foster shared expectations and smoother transitions for children, families, and teachers, thereby addressing the conflicting expectations and practices that lead to the abrupt transition children and families tend to experience currently. Such cross-sector practices can be incorporated into accountability and continuous improvement policies in both ECE and K-12.
- Align learning standards, assessment strategies, and professional development opportunities.
 - A crosswalk has been done between the state's pre-K standards and the NVACS to support common language and expectations between pre-K and K-3.
 - Review the state's licensure and preparation structure for pre-K and K-3 teachers and administrators to address the discrepancy in training and preparation.
 - Promote development of high quality professional development opportunities that focus on practices important to early childhood, such as observational child assessment and the use of formative assessment in creating responsive curriculum.

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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¹⁶ Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau. *Research Brief on Full-Day Kindergarten*. (2012).

¹⁷ Kristie Kauerz and Julia Coffman. *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade*

Approaches. (Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington, 2013).