

It is about New Money. The Bridge to Savings and Innovation that will create the 21st Century Learning without the Gaps.

Above Comment By Tom Wolfgram

PreK-3 movement seeks to revolutionize early education



A parent works with children at a community center in Carpinteria, California. | The Hechinger Report/MCT

By Sarah Garland | The Hechinger Report

SANTA MARIA, Calif. — A few years ago, preschool teachers in Santa Maria, a low-income, mostly Hispanic city about 50 miles northwest of Santa Barbara, attended a series of meetings with kindergarten teachers in the district.

Most had never met. The teachers had little idea what happened in one another's classrooms.

What they discovered changed the course of early education in this small city and is at the heart of a new national reform movement known as PreK-3.

Among the revelations: The kindergarten teachers told the preschool teachers that their 5-year-olds, many of them immigrants, struggled with stories covered in the kindergarten reading curriculum. They weren't hearing American classics like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" or "Humpty Dumpty" at home. So the preschools began incorporating those stories into their classrooms.

"Preschool and kindergarten were operating differently," said Karin Dominguez, a former teacher who initiated the meetings. "It was important for them to learn from each other."

The PreK-3 movement, which refers to the years spanning pre-kindergarten to third grade, wants to revolutionize early education through an ambitious list of connected initiatives, including universal access to free public preschool, mandatory full-day kindergarten and a curriculum that is seamlessly connected from preschool to third grade. Increasing parental involvement is also a major focus.

But some educators and experts have questioned how feasible and replicable the agenda is, especially as the financial crisis has forced states to cut preschool and full-day kindergarten. And critics and advocates alike have acknowledged that evidence supporting the collective reforms is scarce. The few schools and districts that have implemented parts or all of the PreK-3 agenda have shown mixed results so far.

"There are a lot of reasons why it should work, and why it would work," said Robert Pianta, the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. "We just haven't been able to pin the model down to evaluate it in a way to say that it's proven effective in improving achievement."

Nevertheless, the PreK-3 movement has gathered increasing attention and private money over the past five years. Proponents say their ideas could help reduce gaps in achievement between disadvantaged and advantaged children before they start, and save money on interventions for older students.

A handful of foundations — including the Foundation for Child Development, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the New Schools Foundation — together are spending millions to support the movement. (Disclosure: the Foundation for Child Development and the Gates Foundation are among The Hechinger Report's many former and current funders.) At the same time, an increasing number of schools, districts and even whole states, including Nevada, Wyoming and Washington, are in the process of implementing the reforms.

"There isn't anybody in education now that doesn't understand if you can get it right, preschool to kindergarten through third grade, that kid is going to succeed," Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire said in a radio interview last year.

The growing momentum behind PreK-3 is less than five years old, but the ideas fueling its agenda can be traced back to the 1960s, when researchers were first examining the diminishing effects of Head Start, the federally funded preschool program for low-income children.

Since then, projects to ease the transition from early education to elementary school have been tried, with mixed results. There have been successes, however.

One recent example is the South Shore K-8 School in Seattle. The school was opened in 2001 with the help of a private foundation as a model for PreK-3 reforms. It has implemented a research-tested curriculum that extends from preschool through elementary school, as well as small classes and intensive teacher training.

A 2010 report by ECONorthwest, a research company, found that students at the school scored higher than expected on state reading and math tests. The school didn't close the achievement gap for its African-American students, but they did perform better than their peers at other Seattle schools.

Still, the broad nature of the PreK-3 reforms has led to concerns that it is too vague. "I think there are common perimeters," Pianta said. "But I don't think there's a lot of clarity."

Another critique of the PreK-3 model, by Ron Haskins, co-director of the Brookings Center on Children and Families in Washington, "can be summarized in one word: money."

Many schools and districts have relied on foundation funding to implement elements of the PreK-3 reforms, but private money is scarce and usually time-limited.

In Santa Maria, lack of money is one of the problems administrators and teachers have encountered. Even as they work to improve connections between preschool and the elementary grades, many children still do not have access to early education at all. So far, the city's efforts have corresponded with only small test-score gains.

But down the road, Santa Maria's ideas are being carried on, and expanded. In the California seaside town of Carpinteria, educators borrowing from Santa Maria are trying to create an educational path that extends from "cradle to college" for every child in the district.

The local school district is working to improve the quality of teaching in its elementary schools. Using private grants, the town has created a community center that includes preschool classes, English classes for adults, and even classrooms where stay-at-home moms can bring their toddlers for a preschool-like environment.

There's no evidence yet that the project leads to better results, but town officials, just like their counterparts in the national PreK-3 movement, are hopeful that in the next few years, more definitive research will show their approach is working.

"It used to be the idea that if everybody completed preschool, they were going to be fine. But that may not cut it," said Paul Cordero, the Carpinteria superintendent. "It's like a 30-cylinder engine. All the parts have to work."

Others remain skeptical.

"I don't think that there's good evidence that if we could somehow shape the preschools to be more consistent with the public schools, or vice versa, that it would have a major impact," said Haskins. "But it's still a good idea. Education ought to be organized."

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