

COMMENTARY

Pre-K Policymakers Need to Wake from Nap Time

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I never understood nap time. As a kindergarten student, I refused to nap. My teacher, Ms. G, allowed me to read books in the corner library while the rest of my class napped.

Early childhood education has since changed in California. Now, every child transitioning from early learning education to kindergarten needs to wake up from nap time and start meeting [state standards](#). And to help them, state policy makers need to wake up, too.

California provides early learning to children below the age of kindergarten eligibility through a variety of providers, some licensed and some not, including state Pre-K programs, private Pre-K providers, and Head Start. The mixed delivery system creates barriers for communication and obstacles for quality in early childhood education.

ALIGNMENT EQUALS IMPACT

The most recent research on the effects of Pre-K education suggests that the lasting value of preschool is found in how well preschool is aligned with later grades. In other words, there are benefits of developing an education system that provides students with a coherent and sequenced set of learning experiences from preschool through 12th grade.

Gov. Jerry Brown proposed to address PreK-3 alignment in the 2016-2017 May Revision of the budget. Under the [early education revisions](#) Brown proposed to, "enhance alignment of pre-kindergarten and K-12 programs through the development of a regional early learning plan that considers input from school districts, county offices of education, families, teachers, and other community stakeholders." The final budget signed by Governor Brown on June 27 did not include the alignment of Pre-K to later grades, but Gov. Brown has two more opportunities to propose the idea to the legislature.

Even without legislative support, several districts in California are already working to promote consistency of standards and assessments between Pre-K and later grades. So, what do we know about the benefits of PreK-3 alignment? And in this new era of local control, who should take the lead in creating an aligned education system in California?

NEW PACE REPORT

The [Policy Analysis for California Education](#) (PACE) report, *"PreK-3 Alignment in California's Education System: Obstacles and Opportunities"* by Rachel Valentino and Deborah J. Stipek, reviews the opportunities and challenges that must be addressed to better align PreK-3 education in California. The report describes policies and practices that districts have implemented to

strengthen alignment, and identifies the main barriers that districts and schools encounter when attempting to align preschool and the elementary grades. These barriers signal to the state and local level policy changes that are needed to promote greater cohesion in California's education system.

The mixed delivery system of early education creates a communication barrier across systems, but Valentino and Stipek find that "funding is the most substantial barrier to creating better PreK-3 alignment currently in California." Without additional state funding, districts are challenged to provide access to Pre-K or recruit and retain the best early learning teachers.

SOME DISTRICTS STEP UP

But some districts (for example, LAUSD, Long Beach, San Diego, Oakland Unified, San Francisco Unified, Elk Grove, and South San Francisco) include Pre-K as a strategy in their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), which means they are using Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) or district "general fund" dollars to support Pre-K needs. Other districts either don't know that LCFF dollars can be used in this way or they have other priorities. In any case, districts can be informed that using LCFF dollars to fund Pre-K is allowed and then be encouraged to do so by their local community.

The state also needs to attend to California's preschool teacher certification standards, which are among the lowest in the nation, and also to its Pre-K licensing requirements, which focus primarily on compliance with environmental safety regulations. If we want high quality learning experiences and teacher collaboration across grades, then teachers will need proper preparation and professional development.

IT'S NEGOTIABLE

Local districts can't solve this problem entirely, but there are several policy options that local leaders can promote. Valentino and Stipek recommend that "districts should make their efforts to promote PreK-3 alignment a priority in their contract negotiations." For example, joint professional development sessions between Pre-K, Head Start, Child Care, TK, and K-3 teachers can provide teachers the opportunity to develop continuous learning goals for students and promote better communication. For districts, compensation for additional teacher time spent on professional development and district Quality Rating Improvement Systems will need to be a part of the negotiated process to support greater coherence across grades.

District leaders and principals will also need training on the qualities of an effective preschool education. If we are going to demand quality programs and continuity of standards and assessments across grades, school leadership has to be familiar with the needs of this student population and the benchmarks of an effective education.

While California's 2016-2017 budget investments strengthened early childhood, there is room for improvement and a need for state leadership. Consistency of standards and assessments between early childhood education and later grades will help us prepare children for the next grade. Until the state wakes up, however, local level leadership in California's school and districts must continue to make high quality early childhood education a central element of their strategy to ensure long-term student success.

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