

PreK–3 Alignment

Challenges and Opportunities in California

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Executive Summary

With the infusion of new funds, Governor Gavin Newsom has placed early childhood education high on California's policy agenda. Yet the state still faces the complicated challenge of sustaining and building on the progress children make in preK. Research has shown that preK–3 alignment—coordinating preK–3 standards, curricula, instructional practices, assessments, and teacher professional development—can be an effective means to this end. A 2019 PACE study designed to better understand the state's preK–3 alignment landscape finds the following:

- One third of the study districts are not engaged at all in alignment efforts; others are engaged to varying degrees;
- Divergent beliefs among district leaders about the role and purpose of preK affects alignment efforts;
- PreK directors who are part of the superintendent's cabinet have broader opportunities for collaborating with district decision makers and increasing acceptance of preK;
- Elementary principals' formal responsibility for preK is limited to administrative or operational oversight;
- Different licensing requirements for preK and elementary teachers as well as different salaries and job expectations limit cooperation; and
- Inconsistent program regulations, multiple funding streams, and competition for scarce state dollars attenuates districts' focus on alignment.

These findings lead to several policy implications:

For the State

- Explicitly prioritize alignment and offer districts incentives to engage in this work;
- Add training about early childhood education to administrative credential requirements; and
- Streamline preK state licensing requirements to eliminate duplication, reduce contradictions, and ensure efficiency.

For Districts

- Offer preK directors a significant place in the district's administrative structure;
- Provide elementary principals with early childhood professional development;
- Align curricula and assessments across preK and early elementary grades;
- Ensure preK–3 teachers have regular opportunities to collaborate and participate together in professional development; and
- Include preK in deliberations about fiscal priorities.

Introduction

Early learning programs represent the initial rung of California’s education ladder. They are designed to create the foundation for kindergarten, promote social and emotional growth, introduce children to an educational environment, and provide the basis for skill development that will hold them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

By investing more than \$2 billion (\$2.4B) in early childhood education (ECE), Governor Gavin Newsom has placed early learning high on California’s education policy agenda. The new dollars will fund an additional 200,000 slots for full-day state-subsidized preschool for low-income 4-year-olds and support training for preK teachers. In addition, new funding includes a \$10 million investment to develop a statewide longitudinal data system that will begin at infancy and extend through higher education.

To be sure, the Governor’s attention to preschool as an essential component of the state’s broader education system, along with the investment of new dollars, gives preK significantly more policy prominence. Yet many important questions remain. One of the most pressing is how to sustain and build on the progress children make in preK as they move through the early elementary grades.

Research has shown that preK–3 alignment—coordinating preK–3 standards, curricula, instructional practices, assessments, and teacher professional development from preK through the early elementary years—can be an effective means to this end. This kind of coordination is seen as a way to launch children on a positive developmental path, with early elementary grades continuing to build on what children learn in preschool (Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016; Stipek et al., 2017).

Proponents of preK–3 alignment note that child development is a continuous process and that later grades must build upon and reinforce the skills developed in previous grades (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). Moreover, assertions about the value of alignment across grades are supported by evidence that providing continuity from preschool through the early elementary grades has resulted in particularly impressive long-term effects on child outcomes (Reynolds et al., 2006).

A frequent challenge to preK–3 alignment, however, arises from the fact that preK often is disconnected from primary grades due to its different curricular materials, instructional strategies, and other necessary educational components. Just as alignment has been shown to enhance the likelihood of positive student outcomes, a disconnect between preK and early elementary grades can compromise student learning and fail to take advantage of children’s preschool gains (Coburn et al., 2018; Engel et al., 2013; Reynolds et al.; Stipek et al., 2017).

California offers many challenges to preK–3 alignment beyond issues of materials, curriculum, and assessment. These include an often confusing web of policies and standards; an array of funding streams that can make building comprehensive and coordinated programs difficult; and substantially divergent preparation and licensing requirements as well as expectations for preschool and elementary teachers that impact rank and pay. These challenges often are magnified by disparate beliefs among preschool and elementary educators about the role and purpose of preschool.

About This Study

In spring and early summer 2019, PACE undertook a study to better understand California school district leaders' views and initiatives related to preK–3 alignment.¹ Where appropriate, researchers included specific questions about transitional kindergarten (TK).²

In interviews with a sample of California school district leaders, researchers sought to better understand preK–3 alignment in the California context. What types of alignment efforts are school districts making? What challenges are they encountering? In what ways does California policy facilitate or hinder alignment efforts? Specifically, we asked about:

- Steps districts have taken to move toward preK–3 alignment;
- Organization of district oversight of preK;
- The role and responsibilities of elementary principals who have preKs on their campuses;
- The nature and scope of cooperation between preK and early grades teachers; and
- Policies (rules, regulations, and funding) that enable or constrain preK–3 alignment.

Data Collection

The interview sample for this study was composed of representatives of 25 districts selected from among those California school districts that have preschools on one or

¹ This research was designed for the Heising-Simons Foundation, the study's funder, to gather information on the status of preK–3 alignment in California, with special attention to efforts in mathematics.

² Begun in California in 2012, TK is a public school program for 4-year-olds who turn 5 between September 2 and December 2; it is designed to be a bridge between preschool and kindergarten.

more of their elementary campuses and in which at least 55 percent of their students are low income, English learners, or foster youth.³

Sample districts reflected the range of California districts—urban, suburban, and rural—and were located throughout the state, as displayed in Table 1. The smallest sample district had 344 students; the largest had more than 75,000. While, as noted, all sample districts had at least 55 percent low-income students, English learners, or foster youth, in nearly two thirds of them (16 of 25, or 64 percent), more than 70 percent of the students fell within these categories.

Table 1. Study Districts

Type of District	Number of Districts	Location of District	Number of Districts
Urban	13	Bay Area	4
Rural	5	Central Valley	1
Suburban	7	Central/South Farm	9
Total	25	North and Mountain	3
		Southern California	8
		Total	25

Sample districts included a variety of combinations of preschool programs. They were funded by the state, the district, the federal government, and private sources. Some were full day, some half day. Two of the sample districts maintained preschools on high school campuses to accommodate parenting teens. One included fee-based slots in its state preschool and another district supported a parent co-op.

Interviews with sample districts were conducted by telephone with a person identified as having the most knowledge related to the study questions during May, June, and early July 2019. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Researchers interviewed 32 individuals: 7 superintendents, 20 preK directors,⁴ 4 deputy or assistant superintendents, and 1 chief administrative officer. In some cases, more than one district representative was interviewed. As a condition of participation, interviewees were promised anonymity for themselves and their districts.

³ Under California’s 2013 Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), districts whose student populations are more than 55 percent low income, English learner, or foster youth are eligible for additional funding in the form of supplemental and concentration grants to address these students’ needs.

⁴ Throughout this report we use “preK director” as an umbrella term to describe interviewees who had responsibility for district early learning programs, including preK.

At the completion of each interview, the interviewer completed a summary sheet with responses to interview questions and notable quotations. Once all interviews and summary sheets were completed, research team members collaboratively reviewed and analyzed the gathered data and drew conclusions and policy implications.

Study Findings

This section provides details on the following topics:

- District alignment efforts and challenges;
- Where district preK leadership resides in district organizational structure;
- Formal roles of elementary principals in preK programs;
- Teacher licensing and professional development; and
- State policies and alignment efforts.

District Alignment Efforts and Challenges

As noted in the introduction to this report, alignment encompasses coordinating standards, curricula, instructional practices, assessments, and teacher professional development from preK through Grade 3. Given the paucity of information about alignment in California districts, researchers did not begin the study's district interviews with particular expectations about what we would find. Interviews, in other words, were reasonably open-ended, offering district leaders an opportunity to provide information about how they view alignment and what alignment looks like in their districts.

Study results reveal considerable variability in districts' approaches to alignment. Two thirds of the districts reported some alignment work, typically along a single dimension of alignment, for example:

- *Curriculum*—Building a specific K–3 math curriculum with an aligned preK curriculum;
- *Standards*—Expanding the state's English Language Arts (ELA) standards, which begin at kindergarten, so they can be used in preschool;
- *Assessment*—Adopting a common assessment for preK and TK aligned with kindergarten Common Core State Standards; and
- *Professional development*—Engaging preK, kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers (not third) to align expectations for teacher professional development.

Interviewees who provided these examples did not indicate that their districts had considered, or were considering, broader or more encompassing alignment efforts. Three additional study districts said they had recently launched or were in the process of initiating fledgling alignment work, such as: (1) using the district’s existing K–12 framework to begin investigating an aligned preK–3 program; (2) beginning a district-wide initiative around early literacy with the goal of aligning curriculum and instructional strategies for preK–3; and (3) using the California Preschool Learning Foundations⁵ in concert with the Common Core kindergarten standards to create a cohesive preK instructional focus on ELA and mathematics. Half a dozen study districts noted that social-emotional learning is the focus of their alignment work.

An important point to note here is that four of the study districts that describe themselves as engaged in alignment said they have been supported in this work by grant funding. “Soft money” dollars have been essential, reported the district leaders, to moving them onto and along the alignment path. This finding is significant and raises two dilemmas. First, many districts do not have the capacity to secure extramural funding for alignment work. Second, even for those districts that have grant funding, relying on these dollars creates a kind of permanent impermanence for alignment, given the real risk that, once this special funding expires, the work will not be sustainable.

One third of the study districts (8 of 25, or 32 percent) acknowledge undertaking virtually no work on alignment. Three of these districts specifically noted they have no funds for alignment. Others noted a variety of reasons they are not focusing on alignment, the most common of which was that they do not understand it to be a state priority—“It’s not required,” said one interviewee—and are concentrating their resources on designated state priorities and demanding local issues.

Study results also reveal that the size of the district makes a difference in whether the district pursues efforts to align preK and early elementary grades. Larger districts have more resources and are able, for example, to hire more senior people with broader, deeper backgrounds in ECE to direct their preK programs. These individuals tend to be better able to be vocal advocates for alignment and help guide the district along the alignment path.

Vision and commitment. We probed in the interviews for circumstances that might impact the level, extent, or depth of local commitment to preK–3 alignment. Study results show that beliefs matter. In other words, what district leaders believe about the role, purpose, and importance of preK significantly affects the district’s commitment to alignment.

⁵ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/psfoundations.asp>

In districts that are engaged in alignment work, interviewees conveyed a stronger belief in the value of preK and saw preK as a kind of extension of the elementary grades. In districts in which alignment efforts were less substantial or did not exist, the prevailing view of district leadership seemed to be that preK is different and appropriately separate from the elementary level.

We heard from some interviewees, especially those whose districts do not consider alignment a priority, that preK should be focused on play and elementary school is where academics begin. In these districts, interviewees did not see a connection between preK and the elementary grades or did not see the value of preK.

In some instances, district leaders valued preK and saw the benefit of linking preK better with the early elementary grades, but creating those links was not a priority among all the other issues with which the district had to contend. Perhaps not surprisingly, if the superintendent did not view preK as essential to the district's overall education program, alignment was less likely to be a district priority.

Sometimes different beliefs about the role and purpose of preK could be traced to different perceptions of preK by elementary teachers. A few of the preK directors we interviewed commented that some elementary teachers see preK primarily as play and tend to denigrate the significance of the work of their preK colleagues. One preK director told researchers: "Kindergarten teachers don't take preschool seriously." Said a deputy superintendent interviewee: "PreK teachers are not always seen as part of the [teaching] staff."

Effects of these beliefs about preK teachers and the purpose of preK programs can be far-reaching, emphasizing the separation of preK and elementary grades. The belief that preK does not play an important role in a district's system of education can lead to siloing, with preK seen as a parallel but separate system from TK and the elementary grades. As one interviewee told researchers: "PreK is really an independent unit." This separation further delimits the prospects for alignment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, districts in which key officials believe preK should have an educational component were more likely to offer more academically focused and more integrated preK programs. In one study district, for example, the school board prioritized early learning, appropriating district funds to develop a preK–early learning framework. In districts in this mold, as one ECE director said: "PreK is considered part of the district."

Reaching the point where “preK is considered part of the district” often is the culmination of considerable and concentrated effort. One district preK director told us: “We [preschool] were considered ‘that program’ or ‘those kids.’ ... It’s taken a long time to get the school district ... to really take hold and claim ownership of early childhood education.”

A few interviewees noted that their districts are making greater efforts to include preK in elementary school activities, for example by inviting preK students and teachers to school assemblies. “They’re at the school site so we want to make them feel part of the [school] community,” explained one district official. This approach, while perhaps progress, clearly falls far short of integrating preK into the school’s overall educational program and furthering the prospect of alignment. Perhaps, though, it is a necessary initial step that can open the alignment door.

Where District PreK Leadership Resides

Where the preK director “sits” in the district’s administrative structure is important. Place in the district hierarchy, implicitly or explicitly, conveys a message about the district’s sense of preK’s significance in the district’s overall education program.

Just 3 of 25 preK directors (12 percent) in study districts are part of the superintendent’s cabinet. The remainder, 22 of 25 (88 percent), attend various types of district leadership meetings with principals and other district officials but are not part of the district’s central decision-making structure.

Officials in the three districts in which preK directors are part of the superintendent’s cabinet reported that this placement has, as one official claimed, “stabilized the relationship between preK and elementary grades.” In these districts, interviewees reported more serious efforts to communicate, collaborate, and align the early elementary grades with preK. PreK directors who held seats on the superintendent’s cabinet said they not only were able to inform their colleagues about preK issues but also were better informed about what was going on at the elementary level more broadly, specifically regarding the district’s programs, priorities, and goals beyond the preK department. The latter turns out to be an unanticipated and important consequence.

PreK directors also noted reciprocal learning—that serving on the cabinet with other key district officials allowed them to convey information about preK programs to their colleagues in elementary grades and beyond: “I think it’s really important that we’re all sitting at the same table so that we’re speaking the same language.”

One preK director described to researchers her initial reluctance to be on the superintendent's cabinet and her subsequent view of having accepted the invitation:

They invited me to be part of the cabinet and, I think, for years I was trying to get out of it. I'm, like, okay—but then, I think, over the past two years I've really come to the conclusion that I am there to represent the interests of preschool and ... that our interests are just as valid and important as the interests of elementary schools.

Study results revealed that, whatever their expertise in early learning, several preK director interviewees who were not on the superintendent's cabinet acknowledged having only limited understanding of elementary education and, in particular, of their district's elementary programs. Four reported, for example, that they had no idea what the TK or kindergarten curriculum was.

One interviewee described why having knowledge of the elementary grades is important:

It's important that we have a good understanding, in the early education department[s], what the goals are of the district and the direction the district is going ... what curriculum is being used, what's happening in [the] bilingual department, what's happening in [the] special education department ... so that we really have a good understanding of the direction of where our kids are going.

Whether or not they serve on the superintendent's cabinet, preK directors in study districts described one of their primary roles as making preK visible as part of the district's educational program. As one interviewee noted: "A lot of the time ... I feel like my biggest role ... at the central office level is just advocacy to remind people that we [preK] are here and we exist."

The Role of Principals in PreK

We wanted to understand the role and responsibilities of elementary principals who have at least one preK classroom on their campus. Do they maintain responsibility, for example, for curricular, instructional, or personnel matters? Or are their roles more narrowly defined?

Interview results show that in all of the study districts, principals' formal responsibility with regard to the preK classroom(s) on their campuses generally was

limited to administrative or operational oversight.⁶ The district's preK director handled matters such as enrollment, curriculum, and instruction.⁷ As one district official noted in unambiguous terms: "Elementary principals do not have jurisdiction over preschool. They work with the [early childhood education] division."

District officials cited two key reasons for principals' limited responsibility for preK: (1) a reluctance on the district's part to create what it saw as an undue burden on elementary principals and (2) elementary principals' limited knowledge of ECE.

In terms of increased burden, one district official explained it this way: "It [would be] very hard for a principal to meet all the [preK] requirements ... on top of their K–6 responsibilities." PreK program supervisors operate under different rules and regulations from elementary principals, including different hours, schedules, standards, assessments, and curriculum. "So," continued this interviewee, "it's important to have someone at the district level who understands [those requirements] and then works with the principals."

Interviewees in three study districts described elementary principals' connection with the preK on their campuses as being visible in preK classrooms—for example, elaborated one interviewee, "doing walk-throughs and getting to know the students." These activities, while providing principals with some familiarity with the on-campus preK, did not seem to give principals much of a stake in or influence over the program.

A second reason offered by district interviewees for limiting the role of principals vis-à-vis preKs on their campuses was that principals often lacked requisite knowledge about preK learners. PreK is neither part of principals' administrative training nor necessarily included in their district-offered professional growth and development. Integrating the preK program into an elementary school, a minimal condition for preK–3 alignment, requires that school leaders have knowledge of the foundational aspects of preK.

A few study districts were aware of this challenge and were taking steps to remedy it. Four districts mentioned training provided by the New Teacher Center to help principals integrate preK with elementary school. A preK director in one study district mentioned that this training had a significant effect on principals' interest in and sense of ownership of the preK program. One study district indicated that it was requiring principals to take courses to qualify them as preK supervisors. Though the principals did not typically supervise preK,

⁶ There are exceptions in California—districts in which the elementary school principal has substantial authority over preK—but we did not find this in the 25 districts included in this study.

⁷ One study district noted that principals may be assuming instructional and related responsibilities for preK but only because the district early childhood education department is being disbanded due to budget cuts.

the district leadership believed this training would equip principals with relevant knowledge and skills about ECE.

An additional complication regarding principals' oversight of preK is worth noting. On some elementary campuses, the preK programs were funded and run by other agencies, such as Head Start, limiting the opportunities for an elementary principal—or the district for that matter—to have significant influence on the program.

Finally, a number of interviewees noted that preK has no attendance boundaries. Thus some preK children may leave a given campus to attend kindergarten at a different school; other children entering kindergarten on that campus will not have attended its preK. This lack of continuity in attendance contributes to principals' reluctance to take part or invest in preK programs on their campuses and heightens the general sense of separateness between preK and the elementary grades. Needless to say, this situation also confounds alignment efforts.

Teacher Licensing and Professional Development

Collaboration among preK–3 teachers is critically important for the kind of common knowledge of students, instructional strategies, and the like that fosters alignment. This section takes up two issues that impact the nature and frequency of preK–3 collaboration: teacher licensing and professional development.

The licensing conundrum. “Our biggest challenge,” one official in a study district told researchers, “is the different expectations for preK teachers [vs.] TK and above.” These divergent expectations are the result of differences in preparation requirements and are reflected in differences in teacher status and pay.⁸

Both preK and TK–12 teachers are licensed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). PreK teachers earn early childhood education permits; TK and elementary teachers must hold a multiple subject teaching credential.

ECE permits, often completed at community colleges, require an associate's degree; 24 units of ECE and child development classes; and some limited experience working in a child development program. In contrast to elementary-level teachers, no subject matter teaching methods courses or supervised practice teaching are required.

⁸ It also should be noted that preK teachers are not part of educator bargaining units and thus neither have union representation nor are covered by collectively bargained contracts that set wages, hours, and terms and conditions of employment.

TK and elementary grade teachers are required to earn multiple subject credentials, issued in two stages. Holders of Stage 1, the preliminary credential, must have a bachelor's degree and complete a CTC-approved teacher preparation program that has a variety of requirements, including demonstration of subject area knowledge; pedagogical skills related to the entire elementary curriculum; and training in instruction of English learners. After completing Stage 1, teachers move to Stage 2, the clear credential. Good for five years (and then renewable), the clear credential requires completing a two-year CTC-approved teacher induction program focused on intensive and individualized support.

California thus requires very different preparation for preK and TK–3 teachers. Differences in preparation are accompanied by differences in status and pay. Elementary educators often view ECE permit holders as “not quite teachers.” This view may contribute to the “TK is just play” view described above.

Pay between the two groups of instructors is vastly different as well. A preschool teacher in California earned an average annual salary of \$37,850 in 2018 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). The average salary of an elementary teacher in the state for 2017–18 was more than \$80,000 (California Department of Education, 2019).⁹ Moreover, elementary teachers are part of the state's education accountability system while preK teachers are not, thus creating different sets of expectations for preK and elementary teachers.¹⁰

Professional development and opportunities for collaboration. To the extent that preK–3 teachers participate in at least some common professional development, they have increased opportunities for communication and cooperation. These opportunities can serve to enhance the likelihood that preK–3 alignment, where it is undertaken, will proceed with greater effectiveness and efficiency.

This study found that very few study districts—4 of 25, or 16 percent—offer any common professional development for preK and TK–3 teachers.¹¹ Those district leaders that reported engaging teachers in some common professional development noted that this professional learning tended to revolve around specific academic or topical areas.

One study district, for example, reported offering common preK–3 professional development focused on ELA and writing, and planned to add mathematics. Another said it offered common professional development around trauma-focused care for

⁹ Teachers holding multiple subjects credentials are authorized to teach preschool. Districts prefer the cheaper alternative of ECE permit holders.

¹⁰ The Smarter Balanced assessment does not begin until third grade. Nevertheless, teachers in lower grades begin to prepare students for the material they will face on the third-grade assessment.

¹¹ We defined “common,” for the purposes of this study, as professional development that is of the same content that teachers experience either at the same time or at different times from one another.

social-emotional learning. A third district, while its efforts do not entirely span preK–3, has worked to help preK, TK, and kindergarten teachers understand evidence of student progress and how to use this data to develop their instructional approach. These districts were not, however, the norm. Most districts omitted preK teachers from elementary teachers’ professional development programs.

Interview results suggest a range of reasons for separating professional development. Some districts believed this separation was necessary and appropriate. Said one district official, “professional development needs to be age and developmentally appropriate,” explaining the district’s belief that preK teachers had different professional learning needs than their TK–3 colleagues.

An official in another study district said that they had tried common professional development but abandoned it: “[We] began training the preschool teachers in conjunction with the elementary school teachers, but soon found out that that wasn’t really getting at the needs of each grade level.”

Some districts that do not currently offer common professional development for preschool and K–3 teachers say they would like to do so. “There’s no reason why we wouldn’t want to,” explained an official in this district. “It’s just the logistics of it all.”

Of these logistical challenges, time looms the largest. Districts run full-day and half-day preschools resulting in some preschool teachers being on different schedules from one another and many on different schedules from their elementary colleagues. In addition, preK teachers sometimes work only half days, or have both morning and afternoon classes, or do wraparound child care, and thus have no time during the day to meet with TK–3 teachers. Interviewees also noted the difficulty of finding preschool substitutes. Moreover, depending on the program’s funding source, paid professional development days are not a given for preK teachers as they are for TK–3 teachers.

While it is common to think of professional development as workshops, professional learning can in fact take a number of forms. Two study districts described having preK and kindergarten teachers visit each other’s classrooms to observe classroom routines and teaching. Officials described these visits as “impactful.” Said one: “Kindergarten teachers were especially surprised about the research base of preschool.”

Regular articulation meetings between preK and elementary teachers to discuss curricular and instructional matters can also constitute opportunities for professional learning and can embed cooperation in teaching practice and further articulation and alignment efforts. In most study districts, however, formal interactions between preK and elementary school teachers were rare.

In several districts, preK, kindergarten, and first grade teachers met occasionally on transition issues to plan how to smooth students' way as they moved from preschool to the early elementary grades. One district reported that preK and kindergarten teachers met annually to discuss students' Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) results.¹² A few districts schedule regular meetings among multigrade-level teachers. PreK teachers, however, often are excluded from these meetings.

Research suggests that coaching is the most effective strategy for improving instruction (Stipek & colleagues, 2019). Using a common coach for preK and the early elementary grades promotes coherence in teaching strategies and can be useful in furthering alignment. Unfortunately, none of the districts we interviewed mentioned using coaches in this way.

Data use and teacher collaboration. For teachers to build effectively and efficiently on what children have learned in the previous year they need to be well informed about children's entering skills. Researchers asked district interviewees about the kinds of data regarding children's skill levels preK–3 teachers had access to and how they used these data. Responses to this question offered a kind of proxy for one form of cross-grade teacher collaboration.

Interview results revealed that preK–3 teachers' access to and use of student data generally was limited. PreK data typically was confined to information collected on the DRDP. Some interviewees reported that their district shares DRDP data with TK and kindergarten teachers; others said it does not.

Elementary teachers typically have access to a broader array of data, such as enrollment and attendance patterns, and assessment scores by subgroups over time, through district, county, or nationally-developed databases. These generally begin at kindergarten (though state assessment data are not available until third grade); preK data are excluded from these data systems.

When asked about how teachers use data, interviewees indicated a range of uses. Several study district leaders noted that teachers use student level data to inform the placement of special education students and decisions about classification (or reclassification) of English learners. A handful of districts said that TK–3 teachers hold formal or informal cross-grade meetings to discuss student data. Two interviewees

¹² The DRDP (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/desiredresults.asp>) is an observation tool for preK teachers to record the progress of individual children toward a specified set of desired results (personal and social competence, being effective learners, and physical and motor competence).

said that, in their district, K–3 teachers use available data for planning purposes or to differentiate instruction. Again, however, preK staff generally is excluded from these discussions.

These results suggest another consequence of the separation of preK and the elementary grades. PreK–3 teachers neither have access to nor discuss collectively relevant information about their students, many of whom will be shared as students advance in grades. A cooperatively developed understanding of student progress and challenges could contribute to a greater appreciation of the need for preK–3 alignment as well as aid the alignment process.

State Policies and Alignment Efforts

We wanted to understand the interaction of state policies and district alignment efforts so asked interviewees: “Are there specific state policies that support or impede preK–3 alignment?” Responses tended to focus on district officials’ frustrations with preschool’s complicated web of rules, especially regarding income eligibility requirements for preK and what interviewees described as still insufficient dollars to accommodate all children who need preschool.

Nearly all study districts reported that they have made efforts in recent years to expand preschool opportunities so as to better prepare children for elementary school. As one superintendent told us: “All children need preschool. You can tell the difference between a child in TK or K who’s attended preschool [and one who hasn’t].”

Despite the value they put on preK, district officials in study districts felt thwarted by overly complicated and sometimes contradictory regulations governing different preschool programs. As mentioned above, districts have multiple kinds of preschools (e.g., Head Start and state preschool, supplemented in some districts with district funds) and sometimes multiple programs on a single school campus. Each program operates with its own set of licensing standards and accountability systems, making it difficult for districts to develop any sort of coherent preschool program.

Interviewees expressed particular frustration with income qualifications for preK programs. To be sure, qualifications vary with programs. District officials were notably vexed by income eligibility rules that have the effect of locking needy low-income families out of preK. One superintendent lamented to the interviewer: “We just had to decline 9 families preschool because they were over the income limit and these are poor families.”

PreK programs also are complicated, as district officials told us, by multiple and fragmented funding streams. Funding is split between federal and state sources with different programs funded by different agencies. Funding for the federal Head Start program, for example, comes from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The California Department of Education funds the state preK program. Study districts described complicated, often arcane efforts to braid or blend funds in order to expand and stretch dollars.

Threading complex regulations to create more coherent preK programs and serve as many children as possible, then, remains a challenge for districts. Efforts to expand preK and develop coherent programs is additionally complicated by the fact that preK and elementary grades receive dramatically different levels of funding.

In 2013 California fundamentally altered the way it finances schools when it adopted the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The new funding formula eliminated all but a handful of state-apportioned categorical funding streams and shifted control of most education dollars from the state to local school districts.

Preschool is one of the few programs that retained its categorical funding status, with a designated pot of money secure for early childhood education regardless of districts' choices about how to allocate newly flexible LCFF dollars. Some districts in the state are spending additional LCFF dollars on preschool but nothing in the funding law requires them to do so. This is a matter of district choice and priority. Most districts do not view preK, which already has targeted dollars, as ripe for additional LCFF funds (Koppich et al., 2015).

Competition for state funding remains keen. In a 2018 statewide survey of California superintendents, more than three quarters (78 percent) reported that they have insufficient funding to accomplish all they are meant to in their elementary (and above) grades programs (Marsh & Koppich, 2018). PreK is in the position of trying to increase its categorically promised dollars by arguing for a greater share of already-in-demand non-targeted LCFF dollars.

Summing Up

This report is an effort to better understand California's preK–3 alignment landscape. Findings reveal that commitment to preK–3 alignment varies considerably among districts. Districts cite lack of resources as among the reasons for limited alignment efforts. Additionally, study results reveal that since preK–3 alignment is not an explicit state priority, districts do not feel obligated to adopt it as a local priority.

Divergent beliefs among districts about the role and purpose of preK affect alignment efforts as well. To the extent that districts view preK as valuable and part of the educational system, they are more inclined toward preK–3 alignment. Viewing preK as different and separate from primary grades can result in the development of separate and parallel systems within a single district.

The roles and place of key staff also impacts the impetus to move toward alignment. When the preK director is part of the superintendent’s cabinet, there are broader opportunities for learning from and collaborating with district decision makers at the highest level, thus signalling acceptance of preK as important and appropriately connected to elementary education. This is more likely to be absent in districts in which the person overseeing preK plays a less visible role.

This study revealed that principals who have preKs on their campuses often have little formal responsibility for or authority over preschool programs. Without district direction, these principals are not likely to make efforts to integrate preK with the elementary grades, thus diminishing prospects for alignment. Even if they had some authority, few elementary school principals have backgrounds in early education sufficient to enable them to provide effective preK leadership.

Different licensing requirements for preK and elementary teachers, which result in different skills, salaries, and job expectations, also result in limited cooperation among preK–3 teachers and thus diminish alignment prospects. Finally, the web of sometimes contradictory regulations governing preK programs, along with multiple preK funding streams and competition between preK and early elementary grades for scarce state dollars, can create an environment in which focus on preK–3 alignment is attenuated.

Policy Implications

These findings lead to a targeted set of policy implications.

For the State

1. If California envisions preK–3 alignment as a state priority and a goal for all districts, state officials will need to be clear about that priority and consider providing districts with incentives. While this study shows that some districts are working toward preK–3 alignment, it seems clear that given the state’s many priorities for districts, making alignment more significant will require an additional state boost.

2. The state (actually the Commission on Teacher Credentialing) should consider including some training about preK (or early childhood education generally) among the requirements for elementary principals to earn their administrative credentials. The state could also offer professional development for principals who have expanded their portfolio to include preK. A few large districts in California have created ECE institutes for principals, but most lack the capacity to do this.
3. Teacher licensing policy is a complex matter. Creating a credentialing system that would narrow the requirements gap between the ECE lead preK teacher permit and elementary teacher credential would likely lead to more similar skills, pay, and expectations for preK–3 teachers. As noted earlier, credentialed elementary teachers are authorized to teach preK but are not assigned to preK classes because of cost. Nonetheless, the state should consider appropriate steps to bring preK teachers into the “teacher fold.”
4. State efforts to connect student data at the preK level with TK–12 data would improve the information teachers have available on children’s entering skills and needs, although having the data is insufficient. The data gathered must be reliable and useful for planning instruction; teachers need support in using the data to plan instruction.
5. Currently state efforts to support quality improvement through Quality Counts¹³ are focused on programs for children 0–5. At least some professional development opportunities could be designed to support preK and early elementary grade teachers together.
6. California cannot control regulations governing federal ECE programs. The state can, however, align standards; monitor program implementation; ensure that rules and regulations attached to state programs are not duplicative; and ensure these programs are efficiently serving the children for whom they are intended.

For Districts

As this study has shown, some districts have made significant strides towards alignment. The strategies they have used offer many avenues for specific policies and practices. To summarize, districts can:

1. Make conscious efforts to reduce siloing of preK in order to ensure that early childhood education programs are integrated into the district’s overall education system. Offering the ECE director a significant place in the district’s

¹³ <https://qualitycountsca.net>

- hierarchy, such as on the superintendent’s cabinet, was a powerful strategy according to district leaders interviewed for this study. Providing elementary principals with relevant professional development in ECE also appeared to be among the most promising approaches, particularly in reinforcing their perceptions of the value of ECE, their sense of ownership of the preK program, and their self-confidence in being able to provide meaningful leadership.
2. Try to align curriculum. This can be achieved by districts adopting commercially available literacy and math curricula that apply to both preK and the early elementary grades; creating their own aligned curricula; or ensuring that the preK curriculum is aligned with the California Preschool Foundations and covers the skills that students need to succeed in kindergarten. Districts can also make sure that teachers in every grade are well informed about the curriculum used in the grade before and after the one they teach.
 3. Align formative assessments across preK and the elementary grades, and make sure that teachers in each grade have access to information about their students’ skills when they enter classrooms as well as opportunities to learn how to adapt instruction to meet all their students’ learning needs.
 4. Ensure preK–3 teachers have regular, scheduled opportunities to cooperate with one another; to access common professional development or coaches, as appropriate; and to participate in common conversations.
 5. Make greater efforts to include preK in deliberations about fiscal priorities. The stronger commitment districts have to well-funded preK programs that are integral to the district’s overall operations, the greater the likelihood that preK–3 alignment will rise on their agendas.

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