

# PreK-3 ALIGNMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM:

## Obstacles and Opportunities

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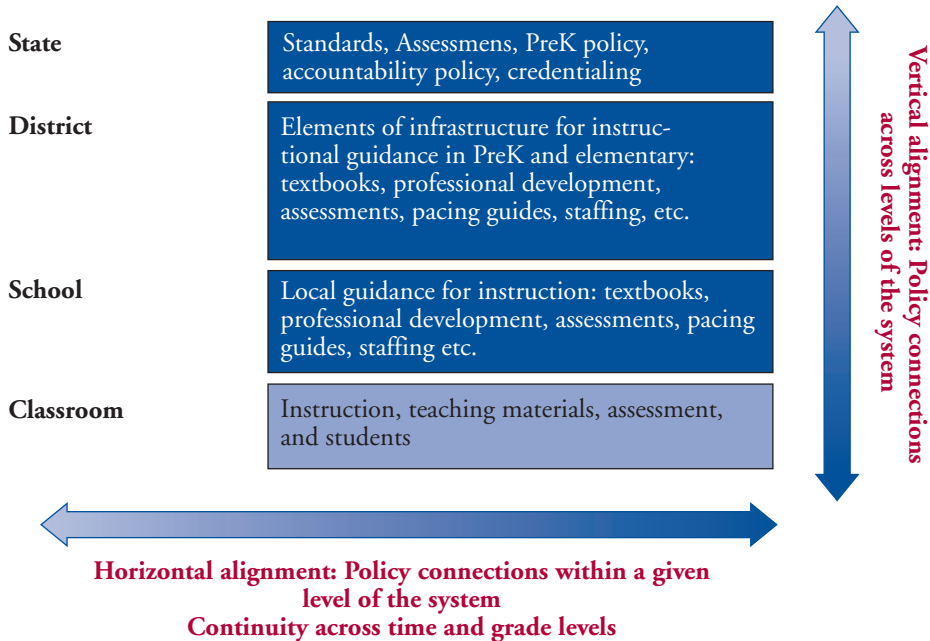
Over the past several years, there has been much attention and advocacy around “PreK-3 Alignment,” both in California and nationwide. The push for alignment comes in the face of a growing body of research documenting the benefits of attending high quality preschool (see Barnett, 2011; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008), along with concerns about the fading of the benefits of preschool by third grade that has been found in many studies (see Kauerz, 2006; see also Lee & Loeb 1995; Magnuson, Ruhm et al., 2007). Supporters of preK-3 alignment note that child development is a continuous process, and that skills developed in one grade must be built upon and reinforced in later grades. Furthermore, in order to sustain gains made in one grade, high quality education must be provided through subsequent grades (PreK Coalition, 2011; see also Magnuson et al., 2007). They claim further that in addition to quality counting at every grade, alignment across grades in such elements as standards, assessments, curricula, and instructional strategies enhances children’s learning and development and helps sustain the gains made in preschool (Kauerz, 2006; Bogard &

Takanishi, 2005; Graves, 2006). Assertions about the value of alignment across grades are supported by evidence that programs providing continuity in services and supports from preschool through the early elementary grades have produced particularly impressive long-term effects in child outcomes (see Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2006).

The literature differentiates between vertical and horizontal alignment. Vertical alignment can generally be conceptualized as alignment of the goals and policies that affect instruction -- standards, funding, assessment, curriculum, and professional development (PD) -- within grades and across levels of implementation: state, district, and school (Polikoff, 2012; Penuel, Fishman, Gallagher, Korbak, & Lopez-Prado, 2009). For example, to be vertically aligned, curricula and assessments used in kindergarten need to be consistent with the state kindergarten standards. We use the term “horizontal alignment” to refer to the degree to which there is coherence and continuity in policies and practice such as standards, assessment, curriculum, and instruction across grades, so that instruction in one grade promotes an optimal trajectory for student growth and development over time (Porter, 2002; Martone & Sireci, 2009). The difference between

vertical and horizontal alignment, and the way these two forms of alignment are interconnected, can be seen in Figure 1 below, recently put forth by Coburn, Stipek, and colleagues (2015) in their work with the Development and Research on Early Math Education (DREME) Network.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of vertical and horizontal alignment



While most education leaders agree that horizontal alignment between early childhood education and elementary school programs has value, this report shows that there is variability in how practitioners and policy makers define alignment, and in which components of alignment they consider most important. Moreover, to date there is not much empirical evidence demonstrating the value of continuity in policies and practices across grades, so research does not provide clear guidance on what aspects of continuity contribute most to children's learning. The research does tell us,

however, that high quality early childhood education is essential for large and sustained benefits for children (Barnett, 2011), and that the long-term effects of early childhood education depend in part on the degree to which high quality instruction is sustained into later grades (Magnuson et al., 2007). There is also some research demonstrating that exposing children to academic content (e.g., math and reading) in preschool that is similar to what they will encounter in kindergarten helps them gain more from instruction in the early elementary grades, which

suggests the benefits of continuity in academic content.

Although there is limited evidence for the direct or causal benefits of horizontal alignment, there are good reasons to expect it to help maintain the benefits of quality preschool and promote better learning. Alignment of standards and curricula across grades, for example, is needed to ensure that children in one grade are prepared for what is to come in the next grade, and that they engage in learning activities across grades that productively build on their prior experiences and knowledge. Such alignment is necessary to prevent re-teaching skills children have already learned, and to minimize gaps between the skills children learn in one grade and the skills they need to succeed in the next. Alignment in assessments from grade to grade can provide teachers with information on where their students fall along a developmental continuum. This information can be used to target instruction so it does not repeat content that their students have already mastered or that is too far beyond their current skill levels. Professional development and communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers and among early elementary grade teachers can contribute to teachers' knowledge of the content of instruction and instructional strategies used previous to or following the grade they teach.

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Alignment in the relative emphasis given to different academic content areas is also likely to be important. If literacy but not math skills are emphasized in the preschool standards, but both figure prominently in standards for the early elementary grades, children may enter kindergarten well prepared to meet the elementary grade standards in literacy but not at all in math.

Differential attention to social-emotional development may also undermine children's success in school. Currently in most states preschool standards and assessments give relatively equal weight to social-emotional and academic development, whereas most elementary standards and assessments are focused entirely on academic skills. Given evidence that social-emotional skills support learning (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, & Pachan, 2008), the absence of standards and assessments related to social-emotional development in the elementary grades could contribute to fade out because teachers in elementary school are not capitalizing on and building on all of the gains that children made in preschool.

Poor vertical alignment can also create problems. For example, California's Preschool Learning Foundations include sections on math and

science, but these academic areas are often nearly absent in preschool teachers' training and opportunities for professional development. They are also often not represented in the curriculum adopted by preschools or in classroom instruction. Achieving continuity across grades (e.g., preschool to kindergarten) thus requires attention to both horizontal alignment in standards and practices across grades, but also to vertical alignment within grades or levels.

Empirical evidence that horizontal alignment of policies and practices from preschool through the early elementary grades sustains the effects of quality preschool and contributes to children's learning is scarce, as discussed above, but there are nevertheless good reasons to expect benefits to such alignment. Moreover, many districts and schools in California and throughout the country are working to strengthen preK-3 alignment. The purpose of this report is to document: 1) how key district and policy leaders in California conceptualize preK-3 alignment; 2) what kinds of policies and practices districts have implemented to achieve alignment; 3) what kinds of efforts and practices have been successful and the critical ingredients of their success; and 4) the main barriers districts and schools have encountered when attempting to achieve horizontal alignment between preschool and the elementary grades. To achieve

this goal, we conducted interviews with individuals across the state.

## **METHODS**

### **Interviewees**

We interviewed 12 individuals who play key roles in early childhood education in California, including foundation representatives and state-, county-, and district-level personnel. Individuals were not randomly selected, but rather were selected through nominations from early childhood experts who were asked about districts that were making significant efforts toward alignment and about policy personnel who were particularly well informed about the topic. Of 16 individuals nominated and contacted, 12 responded to our inquiry and completed the interview. Interviewees represent the following sectors:

1. Four at the state level (Head Start Collaboration Office, California Department of Social Services, California Teacher Credentialing Board, State Board of Education).
2. Five at the district level (San Jose Unified, San Francisco Unified, Fresno Unified, San Diego Unified, Long Beach Unified)
3. Two at the county level (Sacramento County Office, San Mateo County Office)

4. One from a foundation (Marin Community Foundation)

### Interview Questions

Interviews included six broad questions followed by a series of more refined questions. The interview protocol was generally followed closely, but impromptu clarifying or follow-up questions were occasionally asked. Some questions were asked of all interviewees, some were asked just of district or county leaders, and some were asked just of policy makers and/or organization leaders. Interviews took approximately one hour each to complete. The rest of this report presents a qualitative analysis of the interviews identifying trends in responses, along with two district case-studies. Some trends were analyzed for propensity (i.e. was a similar point made by virtually all, many, a few, or one individual). The full set of interview questions is in the appendix. The questions were designed to address six topics:

1. *Definition & Key Components:* How would you define “preK-3 alignment”? What are the key components of a perfectly aligned program? [asked of all respondents]
2. *Value:* What is the value of preK-3 alignment and how might it contribute to student learning? [All]
3. *Practices:* What do you do to improve preK-3 alignment in your district/county? Which policies or practices at the state and district level most contribute to and/or undermined your success? [District/County only]
4. *Best Practices, Barriers, and Need for Change:* Have you seen any specific districts/schools that have done a particularly good job of aligning preK-3rd grade? What have they done? Has anything made it particularly easy for them to be successful? What are the biggest challenges/barriers to achieving greater preK-3 alignment in California? [Policy/Organization leaders only]. Are there changes in policies or practices in California that would make it easier to achieve preK-3 alignment in districts/schools? [All]
5. *Transitional Kindergarten (TK):* If you have a TK program in your schools, is it overseen by the preschool director or elementary school principal? Has it been successful in serving as a bridge between preK and K as a means to promote greater alignment between preK and the early elementary grades? Why or why not? [District only]. What is your sense of whether TK has served as a bridging role? Have some districts/schools been more success-

ful than others to this end? Why or why not? Do you think their strategies would be successful in other districts/schools? [Policy/Organization leaders only].

6. *Local Control:* Are you, or do you know of any districts that are including preK as one of their strategies in their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) and/or are using Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars to enhance preK and/or preK-3 funding?

## FINDINGS

### Definitions & Key Components

As described in the methods section above, interviewees were first asked what “preK-3 alignment” meant to them and how they defined alignment. They were also asked what the most important components of alignment are for facilitating student learning and how to promote those practices. After respondents provided their full responses we shared our own view of alignment as two dimensional – vertical and horizontal – to ensure that for the remaining interview questions the interviewer and interviewees had a consistent understanding of what we meant by alignment.

Respondents spontaneously focused more on horizontal alignment in this early section of the interview.

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Perhaps the phrase “preK-3” used to explain the topic of the interview explains why they focused more on horizontal than on vertical alignment when asked what alignment means to them. A few mentioned, however, that vertical alignment is, in many ways, a prerequisite for horizontal alignment. It is difficult to create alignment across grades if there is not an aligned set of policies and practices within grades.

Nearly all interviewees defined preK-3 alignment as a “continuum” and “having shared goals and expectations” across grades. Nearly all interviewees identified the following four components as important for achieving horizontal alignment:

1. communication between teachers across and within grades
2. professional development and training that brings teachers at different grade levels together
3. strong leadership committed to preK-3 alignment
4. funding and teacher credentialing parity between preschool and elementary school

Some interviewees identified two additional important components:

5. uniform and continuous assessments and data systems
6. alignment of curriculum and standards.

We elaborate below on their comments

about each of these six components.

#### *Communication & Collaboration.*

Most interviewees claimed that communication and collaboration between teachers across grade levels are important to promote instruction that reflects a developmental continuum across grades. As we discuss later, many interviewees pointed out that preschools in California have historically been geographically as well as administratively separate from elementary schools, creating a disconnect between preschool and elementary school teachers. Breaking down this disconnect requires special efforts. Respondents noted that opportunities for communication would allow teachers to learn what other teachers are teaching in the grades before and after theirs. This knowledge, they suggested, would prevent re-teaching of content to students and thus avoid lost time, allowing teachers to build on the knowledge children already have. It would also give teachers the knowledge they need to prepare children to succeed in the next grade.

A few of the interviewees indicated that in order to fully understand their incoming students, communication must extend beyond teachers in other grades to include the families of their students. Parents can provide valuable information on their children’s skills and interests.

In addition, by communicating with families about the ways they can contribute to their children’s academic success, teachers can increase the likelihood that children enter each grade prepared to meet grade-level standards. Enabling parents to provide relevant learning support at home could also help academically underperforming kids catch up to their peers.

#### *Professional Development & Training.*

The majority of interviewees also identified professional development for teachers as a critical way to promote alignment. They explained that teachers need to understand children’s developmental trajectories before and after the grade they teach. They mentioned having teachers across grades receive professional development together as a strategy for promoting consistency and a common understanding of children’s development. Professional development provided jointly to teachers across grades could also promote communication between teachers at different grade levels.

#### *Strong Leadership Committed to PreK-3 Alignment.*

Almost every interviewee, including leaders in all five of the districts, claimed that the superintendent’s and principals’ appreciation of the value of early childhood education, leadership, and training for driving change and preK-3 alignment were critically

important. Superintendents are particularly important because they play a critical role in deciding where local control funds are allocated. Superintendents dedicated to supporting a high quality and well aligned early childhood program will seek to allocate the additional funds needed to make this a reality. Superintendents who convey the importance of alignment are also more likely to promote a sense of cohesion of purpose in the district focused on improving alignment. Respondents pointed out too that principals who are committed to preK-3 alignment are more likely to go out of their way to bring teachers together to foster cross-grade communication.

A number of interviewees – particularly district and county-level individuals – also highlighted the importance of training principals. Since principals evaluate teacher performance and classroom quality both formally and informally, it is important that principals, just as much as teachers, understand what an ideal classroom looks like in preK, TK, K, and early elementary, and how to promote healthy child development. They noted that principals cannot support teachers' knowledge and skill development if they cannot provide informed, useful feedback.

Respondents in Fresno Unified

School District, which has dedicated significant attention and resources to promoting preK-3 alignment, claimed that strong leadership was an important ingredient in their success in promoting alignment. They used a report from the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) on leading preK-3 learning communities as a guide for promoting their principals' skills in leading early childhood programs. This report identifies six key qualities of principals leading early childhood programs: they (1) embrace the preK-3 early learning continuum, (2) ensure developmentally-appropriate teaching, (3) provide personalized learning environments, (4) use multiple assessments to guide student learning growth, (5) build professional capacity across the learning community, and (6) make schools a hub of preK-3 learning for families and communities (NAESP, 2014). District personnel from Fresno Unified reported that when principals are committed to and well educated on these topics, they are better equipped to support their teachers in implementing effective and aligned instruction in the classroom.

*Funding and Teacher Credentialing Parity.* Many respondents expressed concerns about discrepancies in pay and credentialing requirements for preschool and early elementary school teachers, and in funding for

preschools and elementary schools. They mentioned, in particular, the staggering gap between what preK teachers are paid and what TK and elementary school teachers are paid in California. This discrepancy in pay is related to the difference in credentialing requirements. Both TK and elementary school teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential, and they are compensated on the same pay scale. PreK teachers are only required to hold a permit – a far lower educational bar – and are accordingly paid on a much lower pay scale. Some respondents argued that there should be greater parity in both credentialing requirements and pay to promote optimal outcomes in terms of preK quality and ultimately alignment.

In addition to strengthening credentialing requirements for preK teachers, several interviewees (district personnel and policy-makers) went further and argued that having uniform credentialing requirements for preK-3 teachers was necessary to achieve horizontal alignment. They explained that preschool teacher training currently focuses substantially more on social-emotional development and less on academic skill learning than elementary school teacher training, and that teachers in all grades preK-3 should be trained on the full spectrum of development. A uniform credentialing

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system would help teachers across grade levels develop a common understanding of the importance of both dimensions of development, and minimize the discrepancy in what is prioritized across grades. A uniform credentialing system would also give teachers at all grades a broader understanding of the trajectory of young children’s skill development, and of the expectations for children in the grades before and after the grade they teach.

Interviewees identified three reasons for creating funding parity across preK and the elementary school grades. First, they claimed that high expectations should be accompanied by adequate compensation. California expects a great deal of preK as well as elementary school teachers. They are expected to comply with state standards, participate in professional development, communicate with families, be invested in promoting optimal development for the children in their classes, and prepare their students to be successful in elementary school. Respondents reasoned that appropriate pay and benefits are both ethically and practically (e.g., to prevent turnover) necessary to reach the ambitious goals that districts and the state of California are setting for student learning and development. They claimed that preschool teaching roles are as demanding as elementary positions, and that a pay gap of

the current magnitude in California is not justified.

Second, they noted that appropriate teacher compensation is necessary to promote high quality instruction. This claim is supported by research which shows that there is a direct link between preschool teacher compensation and classroom quality (see Barnett, 2003), and that classroom quality and classroom processes have a direct impact on student development (Barnett, 2011; Burchinal et al., 2010; Camilli et al., 2010). A few interviewees pointed out that compensation parity for preK teachers would promote consistent staffing, because low wages and/or poor working conditions trigger high teacher turnover (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Districts faced with training a new set of preK teachers every few years have difficulty promoting quality within preschool as well as continuity of instruction across grades.

Third, some of the interviewees highlighted the importance of both credentialing and compensation parity as a means to professionalize preK teachers’ roles. Parity would help recruit a more highly qualified labor force of preK teachers who are well equipped for the job. They also noted that elementary school teachers, who have a bachelor’s degree and a teaching credential, are sometimes reluctant to work with

preschool teachers because they do not view them as professionals. Greater parity in credentialing and pay would help garner more respect from elementary school teachers and increase their willingness to collaborate with preK teachers.

Almost every interviewee indicated that parity of funding across grades is the most important policy change needed to achieve better alignment; until that change is made, other efforts toward improving alignment will have limited success. Respondents further argued that allocating additional funds to preschool is essential for the success of nearly every other strategy (e.g., professional development for teachers) that might improve horizontal alignment. Aligning the multiple funding streams that support different early childhood and preK programs (e.g., First Five, Head Start, pre-K, and TK) is also important, as we discuss below. It is challenging to align preK and elementary school when there is massive misalignment within the early childhood education system.

*Uniform and continuous assessments and data systems.* Some interviewees with very different policy or practice backgrounds indicated that in order to promote alignment districts need data to monitor the effectiveness of their efforts. They identified two needs related to data. First,



they argued for regular assessments, not just for accountability purposes but also for monitoring students' progress and identifying needs for instructional adaptations. Second, they claimed that the same assessments should be used across grades, and that these assessments should be designed to measure students' academic progress from grade to grade on a continuous scale. Furthermore, scores need to be entered into a common database so that teachers and schools can track student growth (and unique needs) over time.

*Curriculum and standards.* A few interviewees mentioned the importance of aligning curricula within all grades with state standards (vertical alignment) as well as aligning standards and curricula from grade to grade (horizontal alignment). They referred specifically to the need to align the Preschool Early Learning Foundations and the common core state standards (CCSS), but they noted that alignment of standards is not sufficient. Professional development is required for teachers to implement instruction aligned with the standards.

### **Value of Alignment**

We identified three trends in interviewees' responses to our question about the value of alignment. First and by far the most prominent response concerned the potential

value for children's development in both the short- and in the long term. Respondents pointed out that preK-3 alignment meant that educators had clear and common goals and expectations for children and families and would be working towards common objectives. One respondent indicated that if we support alignment we prepare children for the next step in their developmental trajectory. Several respondents indicated that alignment would also ensure that social-emotional skills, not just academic skills, are emphasized in later grades, as they typically already are in preschool. This claim, however, assumes that alignment would combine the best practices in each grade. A less optimistic possibility is that alignment would result in the elementary school focus on academic skills moving to preschool at the expense of attention to social-emotional development. Because alignment could go in either direction, and given the potential benefit of "non-academic" skills for child outcomes (e.g., Mischel et al., 2010; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Stipek & Valentino, 2015), policy makers need to ensure that these skills are emphasized in elementary grade standards and that teachers are given opportunities to learn how to support their development.

All seven district- and county- level but not all policy-level interviewees

mentioned that alignment could help close the achievement gap. For example, an administrator in San Diego described the extreme diversity of their student population; 40 percent of their students are undocumented, and these students enter elementary school underprepared on average relative to their peers. The administrator believed that providing children with a common high-quality preK experience that is aligned across sectors of preK (e.g., Head Start and state preK) and with elementary school would reduce the variation in the skills with which children enter kindergarten, and would improve the chances that economically disadvantaged children are prepared for what is to come in later elementary school. Although there is no hard evidence to support this assumption, it is plausible that better alignment in standards and instruction could reduce the variance in student skills at kindergarten entry. Alignment alone is not likely to narrow the achievement gap, but it may be a helpful tool for guiding instruction and interventions for children who are falling behind.

Finally, more than half of all respondents indicated that alignment is important because it helps to avoid lost time and redundancy. If there is continuity of goals across grades and a progression of standards and accompanying curricula, teachers are better able to predict what skills their

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students have when they enter their classrooms, and are thus less likely to waste valuable time re-teaching skills that children have already learned.

A few interviewees offered a caveat: while alignment is a valuable aspirational goal, meeting children's basic needs overshadows the benefits of alignment, and should take precedence over efforts to promote preK-3 alignment. Children in some districts are chronically hungry, in poor health, and lack basic care and safety. They argued that meeting children's basic needs is critical to supporting their early brain development, and is necessary for children to benefit from high-quality, aligned early childhood education. They did not claim that aligning preK-3 standards, assessments, and curricula was not a valuable goal, but in their view attention and resources should first be used to meet children's basic needs.

### **District Practices, Supports, and Barriers**

District- and county-level interviewees were asked what they are doing to improve preK-3 alignment, which of the policies or practices they have implemented have been more or less successful, and which state- or district-level policies or practices most contributed to or undermined their success. Below is a summary of their responses.

*Practices.* Districts identified three primary methods for promoting preK-3 alignment: professional development, teacher and principal visits to other classrooms, and data collection (both child assessment and classroom quality data). Most districts endeavoring to promote preK-3 alignment offered joint PD sessions for preK and elementary teachers and more informal opportunities (e.g., workshops) for communication among teachers and with parents. A few of the districts included preschool teachers who were not in the district, such as Head Start teachers, in these activities. Fresno has a “friends and neighbors” program that brings together public school personnel, informal care providers, and parents for the purpose of professional development and learning. Optional workshops through the “friends and neighbors” program provide opportunities for teachers from all preK sectors and across preK and elementary school grades as well as parents to learn about ideal learning goals for students, as determined by experienced district personnel and based on research evidence. In Long Beach employees of Head Start, family child care homes, and center-based child care are always invited to the district's public school professional development workshops on curricula and instruction, both in preK and in later grades. A few

districts also reported that they have designated time to bring preK, TK, and elementary teachers together to communicate about practices.

Several districts reported doing teacher and principal classroom walk-throughs, giving teachers and principals an opportunity to observe practices in more than one grade along the developmental continuum. Walk-throughs can be very effective if they are accompanied by discussion of the practices observed, including what was effective in promoting student learning and what was not and why, and the implications of the observed practices for the observing teachers' own classroom.

Several district administrators reported making serious efforts to improve their data systems, both monitoring classroom quality and measuring child outcomes. For example, Elk Grove developed a data system in which preK children have unique student identifiers that follow them into high school. Further, their data identifiers allow the district to disaggregate data for children who experienced different preK programs (e.g., Head Start, preK, or Child Care). Other districts including Fresno are beginning to implement formal classroom quality evaluation tools such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), at least in preK.

Most districts used the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) to track their own effectiveness in improving preschool children's learning over time, but a few district respondents indicated the need for the state to choose a better child assessment instrument for preschool than the DRDP. Most districts use only the DRDP because it is required and time consuming, but respondents noted that it is not a direct assessment of child outcomes and that it is not aligned with any assessment used in the early elementary grades. They also expressed concerns about its validity. In an ideal data system, district respondents said they wanted: (1) child and classroom assessments that measure growth over time and that are consistent and aligned across grades, and (2) a common data system that they can access at any time to analyze their own progress at more micro levels (district-, school-, or even classroom-levels). It was not clear that any district was using a common assessment across grades, and many were not using any formal child assessment in TK-2nd grade.

There was more variability across districts with regard to the implementation of classroom quality evaluation instruments. Some districts, such as San Diego, are dedicated to quality evaluation. Approximately 60-70 percent of all public preK and

Head Start programs in San Diego participate in their Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). All Head Start classrooms are evaluated using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) annually as per Head Start requirements. Participating public preK classrooms alternate between being evaluated by the CLASS and ECERS each year. Observations are conducted by trained and qualified personnel. Other districts reported struggling with classroom quality evaluation; they are trying to implement measures such as the CLASS, but they claim they do not have the knowledge, skills, or personnel to implement them reliably.

CDE recommends that districts use the ECERS to monitor quality, but it is noteworthy that the ECERS does not predict any social-emotional outcomes and is at best weakly correlated to a small set of academic outcomes (see Mashburn et al., 2008). The CLASS is more predictive of student outcomes than the ECERS, although its predictions are still weak.

Districts reported using measures such as the CLASS and ECERS to measure quality in preK, but few mentioned monitoring quality in TK-3 classrooms aside from principal evaluations. There is, to date, no common strategy for ensuring either the quality of instruction preK-3 or

the level of continuity in instruction and other classroom practices. The ECERS is not appropriate if the goal is to promote alignment, because it does not incorporate specific measures of instruction, and it is not available for the elementary grades. The CLASS has an elementary school version, but substantial training is necessary for implementation and even it shows only weak correlations with child outcomes. There is a clear need for the development of reliable and valid tools for assessing classroom instruction preK-3, and for training districts in how to effectively implement such tools.

*Supports.* School administrators identified two critical ingredients to their success in achieving better preK-3 continuity: leadership buy-in and supplemental funding. As noted above, the administrators interviewed for this report (who are in the more successful districts in the state with respect to achieving preK-3 alignment) shared that leaders backed their efforts from the beginning, including (1) superintendents who were dedicated to proving high quality early childhood programs and who recognized the importance of alignment to the early elementary grades, (2) school boards, and (3) principals. Some interviewees indicated that not all principals were initially committed to these efforts, but that with the commitment of

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the superintendent and board, principals eventually came around or are now on their way (through professional development) to seeing the value of alignment.

The second critical support mentioned was funding. Most of the respondents indicated that district leadership committed supplemental district funding for early childhood education. In contrast to the other districts, which rely on district funds, Fresno also receives additional funding from the Packard Foundation. The grant included 10 years of at least \$500,000 per year to support effective early childhood practices in the district. This funding has been instrumental in allowing the district to allocate the personnel, training, and material resources necessary to push the needle on progress in alignment.

*Barriers.* Finally, districts identified several barriers that impeded their success or the efficiency with which they were able to align preK and early elementary programs. First while one district (Fresno) received additional funding from external sources, most districts complained that preK in California is “woefully underfunded,” as an administrator in San Francisco put it. Further, the extremely fragmented and siloed nature of funding streams in early childhood education in California (see Figure 2 in the section on Barriers

for more detail) has created barriers to implementing equally high quality and aligned programs across sectors. Different funding sources (e.g., state preschool, Head Start) bring different sets of standards, accountability requirements, and assessments, making it nearly impossible to create a coherent educational experience for children preK-3.

Second, almost all of the districts interviewed identified teacher contracts or unions as a major barrier to promoting alignment. Currently most efforts toward alignment would require additional time on the part of teachers to attend PD or participate in a districts’ QRIS. Interviewees complained that much district leadership time has been wasted making sure that new preK initiatives and efforts to promote preK-3 alignment do not violate union work rules. Addressing the funding barrier could help address the problems posed by union contracts, because districts would be able to offer additional pay for these additional work requirements.

Third, almost all of the districts identified state licensing requirements applied to their preschools as a major impediment. Interviewees claimed that licensing requirements are very stringent but focus almost exclusively on safety regulations that are in some ways unattainable in

public school settings and are not related to student learning or success. District administrators recognized the importance of safety concerns, but recommended greater attention to factors that more directly affect student outcomes. A more comprehensive monitoring system would need to include measures of instructional quality and classroom environment that are administered by observers who are well trained and qualified to implement them. Some local districts such as San Diego (described above) are supplementing licensing requirements with more comprehensive classroom observations through their QRIS, at least in preschool classrooms. Not all districts use such measures, however, and even in districts like San Diego where QRIS participation is high participation is not required.

Fourth, echoing their comments about the critical components of preK-3 alignment, administrators in every district identified the training and credentialing of teachers – especially preK teachers—to be a serious challenge to preK-3 alignment. They claimed that: (1) credentialing requirements for preK teachers are too low and undermine the quality of programs, and (2) the quality of college programs that prepare preschool teachers is lacking. Interviewees believed that both the quality of the content covered in preschool teacher preparation programs and

the number of courses required was insufficient. Because of the different backgrounds and training of teachers, public preK programs and elementary schools operate in isolation. As one interviewee indicated, however, “in order for preK programs and districts to be successful, preK cannot be run as a side project.” To prevent this, preK teachers must meet the same high standards of training as elementary school teachers.

Finally, two districts identified evaluating classroom quality as a challenge. While these district administrators saw value in implementing state-recommended quality evaluation measures (such as the ECERS), they reported that they did not have the internal capacity nor access to well-qualified outside observers to complete the task. Measuring quality without funding or a network of highly qualified personnel to conduct the observations has proven difficult.

## CASE STUDY & MODEL DISTRICTS

All of the districts where we chose to conduct interviews were selected because they had allocated significant attention and resources toward early childhood education and preK-3 alignment. Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), however, stood out as a well-recognized and com-

mitted district. A second district noteworthy for their commitment and progress is Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). Below we describe some of the highlights of their practices.

### Fresno Unified School District

#### *What does FUSD do that makes it successful?*

FUSD actively promotes alignment, and the district has received substantial additional funding to support that purpose. At the forefront of their success is extensive training provided to both teachers and principals, effective use of TK to create links between preschool and the elementary grades, a commitment to high quality early learning programs, and a willingness to make system-wide changes. All of the policies and practices they have implemented to create preK-3 alignment are integrated with what FUSD identifies as their four pillars:

1. Professional Development, which includes training both for teachers and for principals.
2. Healthy Children, which is a component of their Packard Starting Smart and Strong grant. This pillar is intended to ensure that children are healthy and that their developmental needs are met before age three. FUSD works proactively with public

and private agencies in the district to implement the “Help Me Grow” system.

3. Engaging with informal care providers and parents (“friends and neighborhoods”). This pillar includes initiatives such as “Parent University,” “Literacy/Math Night” and “Opening Doors/Abriendo Puertas,” which are all intended to provide parent education and also support effective parent-child interactions in the home, particularly for children ages 0-5. Further, since 90 percent of children in the district under three years old are in informal licensed and licensed exempt care, FUSD is using Housing Authority data to determine where concentrations of children are cared for, and then informally testing ways to engage community caregivers and help them improve their adult-child interactions.
4. Scaling what works, which includes testing out practices and maintaining those that prove effective.

*Training for Teachers.* Teachers in the district are given opportunities to visit other classrooms, collaborate with colleagues, participate in professional development, and receive support from coaches. Classroom visits are both within grades

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and across grades. Teachers can visit any classroom in the district. Visiting model classrooms provides teachers with an opportunity to learn effective practices that they can implement themselves. Visiting non-model classrooms provides a reference point for teachers to understand what was more effective about the model classrooms, and it can help teachers gain a perspective on their own challenges in implementing high quality and well aligned instruction. After classroom observations, teachers are given time to debrief with their colleagues and a coach, who facilitates this reflection and learning. In addition to classroom visits, teachers receive individualized coaching, professional development workshops, and facilitated meetings among teachers within and between classrooms, grades, and sectors (including informal care providers, Head Start, and families).

*Training for Principals:* Principals also received extensive training, including school visits and professional development workshops. School visits have a similar effect for principals as they do for teachers, with one addition. Any school can be visited by administrators from another school; this creates transparency among schools within the district. Walkthroughs with coaches helped principals see how toddler through second grade classroom content

can be scaffolded across grades (or, in some cases, how misaligned programs do not build on each other). Moreover, because their schools can be observed at any time and they want to perform as well as their fellow high performing schools, principals have an incentive to improve the quality of their own schools. According to district administrators, principals who saw model classrooms swiftly made efforts to improve their own schools. Training for principals was also extensive. The design and content of these trainings are guided by the National Association for Elementary School Principals. FUSD's district administrators believe that it is important for principals to be well educated about what high quality preK and elementary school classrooms look like, as well as knowledgeable about the benefits of alignment, so that they are equipped to coach teachers effectively.

*TK:* FUSD has a strong TK program, with independent (not blended) TK classrooms operating in almost every elementary school. The TK teachers have helped to strengthen communication between preK and elementary school teachers. TK teachers understand the opportunities and challenges of preK and they are credentialed to teach the elementary grades. TK teachers in the district have been eager to adopt the preK best

practices they have observed through their classroom visits, including opportunities for children to engage in free play and an emphasis on social-emotional development.

*Commitment to High Quality Early Learning:* FUSD has shown a strong commitment to supporting the early learning and development of all children in the district, and to making early childhood education a priority more broadly. Specifically, they fund and accept all children in the district who want to attend preK, regardless of income. Further, they have used locally allocated district funds to purchase a district-operated early learning center to serve children from infancy through TK and/or K. Finally, in 2011, Fresno's superintendent commissioned an early learning task force to develop a district-wide, coherent approach for accelerating the academic achievement and social-emotional growth of all young children (see FUSD 2011). The task force included teachers, parents, instructional assistants, and district and site administrators. It was created to make recommendations to the superintendent and board of education on how to ensure that all children in the district have the foundations necessary to meet or exceed district goals. In addition to this task force, FUSD has designated personnel on special assignment whose full-time job is dedicated to



aligning elementary initiatives with early education practices and goals.

In an effort to ensure that all children are receiving high quality classroom experiences and are benefiting from preK the district uses regular child and classroom observational assessments. They measure child progress from the beginning to the end of the school year using the DRDP in preK and K, and then benchmark assessments based on the curriculum used in the classroom in each grade. They use the ECERS to monitor classroom quality. They are not overly impressed with either assessment tool. The DRDP can only measure child progress from the beginning to the end of preK and they do not yet use a consistent assessment that measures growth over time from preK through third grade. They also acknowledge the limitations of the ECERS as an assessment of classroom quality, as well as problems of implementing it with in-house personnel rather than qualified and trained external observers.

*Willingness to Make System Change:* FUSD has paid special attention to prior failings in the district and has taken steps to make administrative and systematic district-wide changes to improve the opportunities of young children. For example, they created a centralized district application process for preK and K

enrollment. Previously, teachers handled enrollment and registration. FUSD administrators noticed that some teachers put children who were behind behaviorally at the bottom of the preK or K enrollment list. As a consequence, many children who would have benefited most from early education were told they were not ready. The centralized application process ensures that any child who wants to enroll in preK or K now can, and that the children who need preK the most are not turned away.

### *What made the above possible for Fresno?*

There are two key drivers behind FUSD's success: (1) strong district leadership and (2) significant and consistent supplementary funding. First, Fresno's superintendent and board members made early childhood education a priority in the district. This included both dedicating significant attention to preschool and allocating over \$7 million of district funds to improve quality and expand access to preschool. Second, with support and guidance from First Five the district wrote a grant proposal to the Packard Foundation and received a \$500,000 per year grant for 10 years to improve quality in early childhood education, test practices that are effective for supporting children and families under the age of four, and to

create systems that support children and families as well as scale those practices. FUSD was one of the first districts to pilot TK, and they have moved from providing TK in two sites to offering it in over 37 schools. District administrators in FUSD reported that this funding was necessary to implement successful preK-3 alignment practices in the district.

### **Long Beach Unified School District**

LBUSD was also considered by many of the people we interviewed to be unusually committed to and successful in creating stronger preK-3 alignment. We identified four strategies that most likely contributed to their success.

1. creating administrative coherence among different funding sources of preK,
2. expanding access to preK,
3. aligning preK through third grade curricula, and
4. promoting communication across sectors and grades and with parents.

*Administrative Coherence in PreK Programs.* Within LBUSD Head Start and district-run preK programs are well integrated and aligned. They have thus found ways to overcome the barriers to alignment that are

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created by different funding streams, standards, goals, and accountability systems. LBUSD overcame this barrier through their “Early Learning Initiative,” a program designed to promote alignment and high quality preschool for children in the district, regardless of the source of funding. LBUSD has one director of Head Start and one director for state preschool. The district is the granting agency for both, and directors from both Head Start and state preK work together under the deputy superintendent of schools. As a part of the working relationship and joint partnership goal under the Early Learning Initiative, Head Start adopts all new curricula and classroom materials agreed to by the district. Head Start must adhere to additional Head Start-specific guidelines and meet their own fiscal responsibilities, but they have nevertheless been able to participate actively in the partnership and to align themselves with district goals, materials, and initiatives. Although the district cannot fund full-time Head Start teachers with district funds, the district has a supplemental fund to help provide Head Start with materials if needed. They report, however, that Head Start has been eager to adopt all new district initiatives to date and has been able to support itself in this process.

An administrator in LBUSD acknowledged that disagreements between sectors (e.g., Head Start and state preK) still arise. Because both agencies serving children in the district are dedicated to the mission of their “Early Learning Initiative,” however, they have been able to work through any divergence of opinion, and to work seamlessly toward the common goal of high quality and well aligned preK-3 programs.

*Aligning PreK-3 Curriculum.* The administrative coherence of preK programs has allowed LBUSD to use the same English Language Arts (ELA) and math curriculum for all grades from preK (including Head Start programs) through the later elementary grades.

*Expanding Access to PreK.* State funding is not sufficient to meet the preK needs of children in LBUSD. To expand access the district uses “general” funds blended with Title I funds to provide a high quality, targeted preK program to all children in the district meeting income eligibility criteria.

*Promoting Cross-sector Communication & Professional Development:* LBUSD uses three primary mechanisms to foster collaboration, learning, and cohesion. First, they have an ECE committee with representatives from preK programs, child care centers, home care providers,

and Head Start programs, which meets monthly to share ideas and plan. Second, the district provides PD workshops jointly for preK and Head Start teachers, which occasionally include K-3 teachers. This kind of coordinated professional development and regular communication among teachers is possible because the majority of preK and many Head Start programs are located on public school campuses in the district. An administrator in LBUSD indicated that many parents are unaware of which classrooms are Head Start and which are public preK because they are so seamlessly connected. Finally, LBUSD is operating an opt-in pilot program to bring family child care providers to professional development workshops. This practice is largely successful because the district has established a network of non-public early childhood programs through their ECE committee. In addition to these three practices LBUSD also facilitates Kindergarten festivals four times per year, which are attended by 20-30 non-profit agencies. The festivals are an opportunity for the community to learn about TK and other early childhood initiatives in the district.

## **BEST PRACTICES ACROSS DISTRICTS**

Administrators from districts other than FUSD and LBUSD also shared practices they implemented



to promote PreK-3 alignment. Looking across all of the interviews, we identified six key practices implemented by districts that respondents believe have contributed to their success.

1. **Parent Involvement:** Connect parents with teachers before children enter school so parents have a vision for preK, TK, and/or K to plan for. Providing information to parents on what children will experience in the next grade integrates parents into the alignment process. It gives them an opportunity to engage in practices at home that are more aligned with the goals and experiences to come when children enter school.
2. **Professional Development and Communication:** Coordinate meetings and professional development sessions between preK, Head Start, Child Care, TK, and K-3 teachers to create a common set of child development goals for children in the district, and to increase teachers' understanding of what precedes and follows their own grade.
3. **Leadership:** Ensure principal buy-in and provide training to principals.
4. **Funding:** Invest local control dollars in preK to reduce the disparity in funding between preK and TK-3 and to increase access to preK.

5. **Longitudinal Data Systems:** Although no districts have yet created linked data systems that use a common assessment across grades to track student progress, a few districts (e.g., Elk Grove) are working with this objective in mind.
6. **Quality Evaluation:** Well aligned programs implement best practices within grades. Although none has fully achieved this goal, most districts aspire to use high quality evaluation measures, administered by qualified external observers, to monitor classroom quality and provide feedback for quality improvement.

### **Biggest challenges/barriers to achieving greater alignment in California**

We asked policy and foundation interviewees what they thought were the biggest challenges or barriers to achieving greater preK-3 alignment in California. There was overlap in responses by districts and policy makers in the key barriers identified: funding, unions, and teacher training. The explanations were similar across the two groups.

All policy and foundation respondents reported that funding is a substantial barrier, including both the discrepancy in funding between child care/preK and TK-3 and the low level of funding for child care/

preK. As we discussed earlier, limited funds and low pay for preK teachers create barriers to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and also preclude ambitious expectations for their work. Even within preK funding streams are extremely fragmented, with different programs funded by different agencies. For example, Child Care is funded by the Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start is funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and public preK is funded by the California Department of Education (CDE). California has a Head Start State Collaboration Office (CHSSCO) that is housed under CDE, and CHSSCO helps bridge communication between Head Start and public schools, but the two are still funded by different sources and thus regulated by different sets of standards and accountability policies. Finally, preK and TK receive dramatically different funding levels of funding, as TK is funded by CDE on the same pay scale as K-12 while preK is funded and managed under an entirely different administrative office. As a result, there is a complete financial and administrative disconnect between preK and the early elementary grades, except in districts that have taken active steps to bridge these two programs and/or supplement preK funding. Figure 2 displays the extraordinarily fragmented funding structure of early

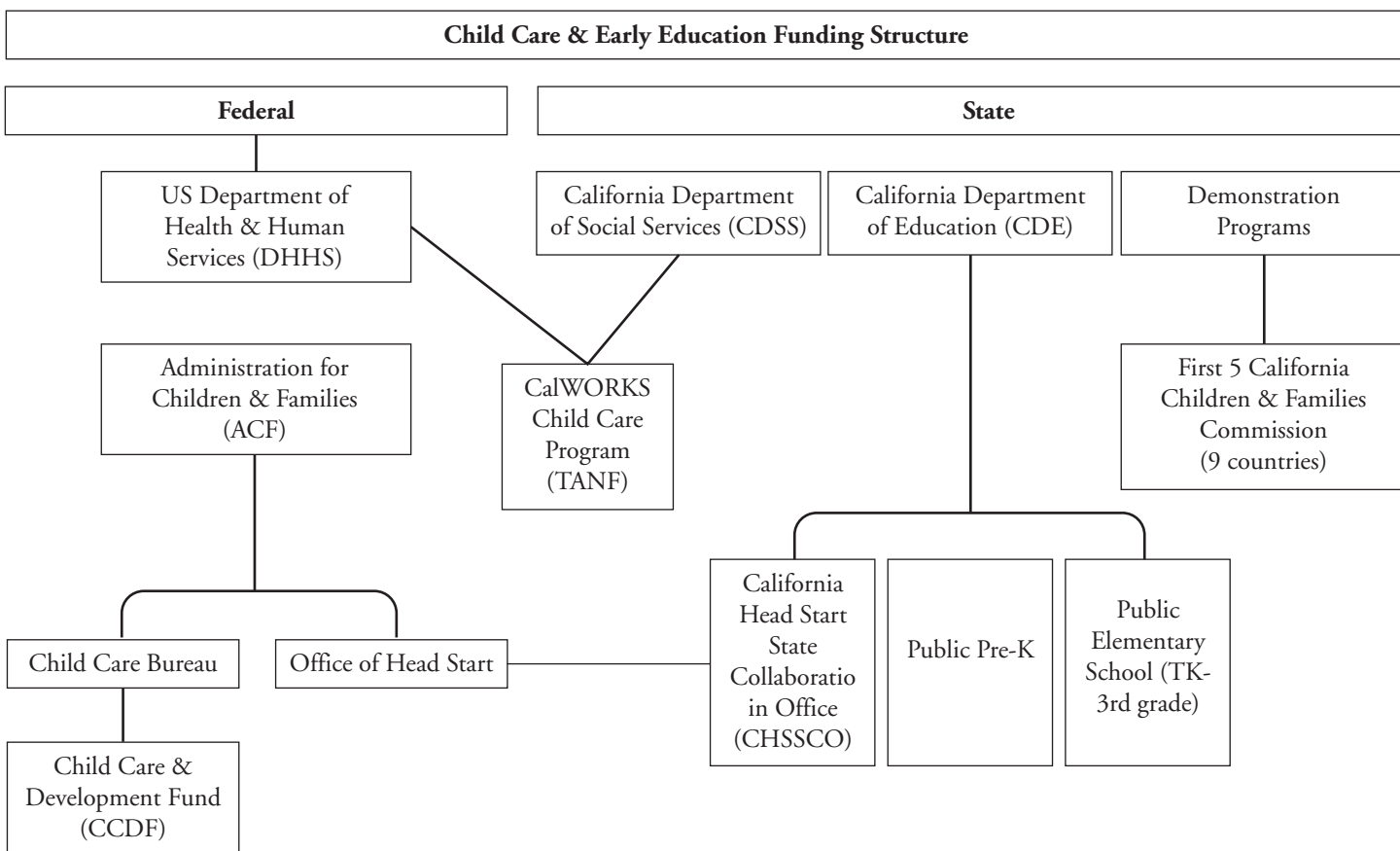
childhood education.

Both district respondents and several policy/organization interviewees indicated that union contracts have impeded progress in preK-3 alignment. Steps to promote alignment require additional time and higher expectations for teachers (e.g., to participate in additional professional development), which are typically

not allowed by teachers' union contracts. In addition to the need for professional development focused on improving the quality of instruction, more than half of the policy-makers interviewed indicated that teachers at all levels (preK and elementary alike) are not sufficiently knowledgeable about standards and instruction in the grades before and after theirs to promote alignment effectively.

Without time dedicated to developing teachers' skills and knowledge of other grades, districts are limited in how effectively they can promote alignment. As mentioned above, additional funds to pay teachers for the time they engage in PD could help address the conflict between additional demands place on teachers and union contracts.

**Figure 2.** California early childhood education organizational and funding structure



Policy/organization respondents identified two additional barriers to preK-3 alignment that were not identified by districts. First, all except one of these interviewees indicated that the mixed delivery system of early care and education is a substantial hurdle. The problem goes beyond the challenges posed by the siloed nature of funding streams in early education. Together, interviewees identified four additional challenges that the mixed delivery system poses.

First, there is much diversity of care. For children below the age of kindergarten eligibility, for example, there are both licensed and licensed-exempt child care providers, state preK programs, private preK providers, and Head Start. Public schools must therefore align with many different sectors of early care and education. Further, because each program is guided by a different set of standards (e.g., licensing, common core, foundations and frameworks, Head Start developmental indicators) it is difficult to ensure equal quality of care and student preparation across programs before children enter the public school system. As mentioned earlier, children entering school with a wide range of skills poses a challenge for elementary school teachers seeking to target instruction, which may explain why studies find that kindergarten teachers often re-teach

what many children already know (Engel, Claessens, & Finch, 2013). Fall academic assessments for children when they enter TK or K is one strategy for reducing re-teaching skills that have been mastered, but entry assessments would not reduce the diversity of student skills upon TK or K entry. The latter can only be addressed through efforts to align goals and content across preK sectors and to link those with goals and content TK and K.

Third, the mixed delivery system poses a communication barrier across programs because preK and TK-3 programs are typically housed in different locations. Geographical separation makes it difficult to bring teachers together across sectors and grades. The distance probably explains why many care providers do not attend meetings or participate in professional development, even when invited, and especially when it is not required of their position.

A final challenge to preK-3 alignment mentioned by policy/organizational respondents concerns individuals' beliefs about the value of preschool and their role in supporting it. Most district personnel identified the importance of strong leaders (superintendent and principals) who support and believe in the value of preK, but policy respondents claimed that the strong support found in the model districts

where we interviewed is rare, and particularly rare in small districts. They indicated that many superintendents either do not value preK or rank it too low among their priorities to be given attention. Some district and school administrators claim that they are “not a preK-12 administrator, [they are] a K-12 administrator.” This attitude makes it difficult to achieve greater preK-3 alignment in California. In a similar vein, respondents claimed that some (but not all) elementary school teachers do not see the value of preschool. They assume that preschool is all play, not learning, and therefore not relevant to goals in elementary school. As a consequence, they see no value in collaborating with preK teachers.

### **Changes to Policies or Practices**

Finally, we asked all interviewees what changes in policies or practices in California would make it easier to achieve preK-3 alignment in districts and schools. Interviewees identified six key changes, which address the barriers and challenges described above.

*Data.* A first step would be to choose a reliable measure of student skills that is coherent and capable of measuring growth over time and across grades. Most interviewees, and especially those working in school districts, reported that the DRDP is

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seriously lacking, in part because it is only relevant at the preschool level. Respondents from many districts reported that they spend a lot of time and effort complying with an assessment that they do not believe is valuable. Respondents believe that state officials should consult with child development experts to choose a more reliable child assessment instrument.

An additional and equally important step would involve linking child assessment data from preK with TK-12 assessment data in a longitudinal data system that has unique student identifiers and follows children over time. Together, the implementation of a reliable measure and the tracking of student progress over time would allow teachers to prepare for the skills of their students arriving from the prior grade. California now has a longitudinal data system called the Child Development Management Information System (CDMIS), but this system is incomplete, as it does not incorporate child learning outcomes. Two district personnel further suggested that districts should have direct access to these online data systems. Districts now receive classroom- and school-specific reports on DRDP, but they cannot monitor individual student progress.

*Unions as Allies.* Two interviewees indicated that unions should

be approached as allies rather than enemies by districts attempting to promote greater preK-3 alignment. Unions are the gatekeepers to negotiating roles and expectations for teachers, and working with rather than against unions is therefore key to making progress in alignment. One interviewee mentioned further that negotiations needed to include other district personnel such as bus drivers. The respondent gave the example of school administrators in Marin being unable to change bus routes to allow children to attend full day kindergarten. Logistical constraints like this also pose challenges to achieving greater alignment. Unions are a potential point of leverage to change this.

*Professional Development, Training, and Organized Meetings.* Four changes to policy/practice in training were recommended by interviewees: (1) provide dedicated time for teachers to participate in PD and collaborate with fellow teachers, both within and across grades, (2) create coherence and consistency of training messages, goals, content, and delivery across sectors (e.g., Head Start and preK), (3) train principals (not just teachers) in the fundamentals of child development, the importance of alignment, and the implementation of high-quality early childhood programs so they are well equipped to coach and mentor teachers, and (4) improve

the preparation of teachers and principals in colleges and universities generally, and specifically include training on content across the preK-3 age span.

*Uniformity/consistency of goals.* More than half of the interviewees affirmed that to make real progress towards preK-3 alignment all districts, preschools, and programs across sectors need to have a similar vision and set of goals for child development. This is not to say that programs have to look identical, but it does suggest that common objectives are critical. Several interviewees indicated that adopting a common curriculum and professional development modules across California would promote greater consistency.

*Funding parity.* As highlighted throughout the report, limitations in funding can pose a significant barrier to progress, particularly in preK. Interviewees recommended three potential changes. First, all interviewees said that the state needs to reimburse preschool programs on a standard per-child or per-hour served rate that is comparable to the funding received for children in TK-3. Equity in funding would allow schools to compensate preschool teachers in line with the state's high expectations, and it would decrease the discrepancy between preschool and TK-3 teachers' pay. Increased pay for preschool teachers would,

in turn, allow California to increase the requirements for preschool teachers so they are more adequately prepared.

Second, a few interviewees who support universal preK believe that the current income-eligibility threshold precludes access for children who would benefit from preK, and that the income ceiling for preK eligibility needs to be raised. They claimed that the failure to serve children just above the income eligibility line reinforces the skills gap related to family income and increases the diversity of skills with which children enter TK or K.

Finally, one interviewee suggested that the per-child reimbursement rate at the state-level be linked to quality, as is done in some states with quality rating improvement systems. The interviewee argued that this would create a fiscal incentive to improve quality and would facilitate outcome-driven decision making. State policy makers would have to reach a consensus on what constitutes quality and choose an instrument that reliably measures it before such a policy could be implemented. Currently California does not currently have a single QRIS system and local QRIS efforts vary in their definitions of quality (Muenchow, Holod, Hawkinson, Gonzalez, Abram, Valentino, & Parrish, 2013).

*Quality evaluation.* Several interviewees at both the policy and district levels indicated that the QRIS needs to incorporate rigorous measures, and cannot be an “add-on.” One interviewee stressed that “high quality has to be the norm, not the exception.” A number of districts are making local efforts towards using rigorous measures of classroom quality to evaluate progress, but many districts are not. More state-level support for efforts to measure and improve both quality and alignment is needed.

### **Transitional Kindergarten**

Respondents were next asked about Transitional Kindergarten (TK). District- and county-level respondents were asked whether they have a TK program, whether it is connected administratively to elementary school, and whether it has been successful in serving a bridging role between preK and the elementary grades. All of the districts where we conducted interviews operated a TK program. Policy makers were similarly asked whether they thought TK had served this bridging role across the state more generally, and if they knew of any districts that had been particularly successful in achieving this linkage. Policy makers identified several districts in addition to those we had spoken with, including Belmont, Redwood Shores, San Mateo, and Foster City. They did

not offer details on these districts’ successes, however.

*Administrative oversight.* Most of the districts interviewed (i.e., San Jose, Fresno, San Diego, and Long Beach) explained that their TK program is administratively connected to their elementary school, and operates under the supervision of a district principal. In San Francisco Unified, in contrast, TK was initially connected administratively to state preK. Over time, however, as TK expanded and performed well in the district, elementary school districts began to submit requests to start TK programs in their schools. Administratively connecting TK to elementary schools minimizes the problems that the geographic isolation of preK programs has traditionally posed, and makes it easier to support horizontal alignment. For example, it is easier to foster professional development and joint planning for continuous learning goals when TK and K-3 programs are in the same building.

Creating administrative connections and co-locating TK with the elementary grades facilitates integration with K-3, but it does not necessarily support connections with preK or allow TK to serve as a link between preK and kindergarten. TK has the potential to serve this bridging role, but in most districts proactive steps need to be taken to

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create links between TK and preK. On the whole, district personnel were mixed in their judgments of how well TK has served this role, while nearly all policy-makers said that it is too soon to tell or that they did not think TK had this effect.

*Successful in serving bridging role.* The district personnel who reported that TK served a bridging role in their district reported that TK increased communication and collaboration among teachers of young children. In LBUSD, for example, TK teachers meet with both preK and K teachers for professional development and collaboration. An administrator in LBUSD reported that they have seen TK teachers adopt a mix of practices from both preK and K as a result, and they have also seen some evidence of K teachers adopting preK-like instructional styles and practices that they had observed.

Several administrators mentioned that TK provides children both with the focus on social development that is typically seen in preK, but also with more rigorous academic preparation for K than is typically found in preK. They see this as a benefit for children.

No policy or organization interviewees indicated that TK had successfully bridged the gap between preK and K-3. At best they indicated that

they were not sure or that it was too soon to tell.

*Unsuccessful in serving bridging role & other challenges.* District administrators claiming that their TK program had not served a bridging role between preK and K all cited one major reason: “It is just K twice.” Many districts reported that TK was built out of K and that TK teachers are simply doing the same thing as kindergarten teachers. Further, although many of the districts have dedicated TK classrooms that serve only TK children, respondents reported that most TK programs throughout the state (and some in their own districts) are blended programs. In blended programs, TK and kindergarten students are assigned to the same classrooms, and are in theory given different instruction. Implementing a blended program makes it difficult for teachers to keep program goals and content separate, however. One district administrator worried that some parents had not been fully informed about their options, or about the pros and cons of preK versus TK. Many parents send their children straight to TK and avoid preK because they perceive TK as “real school.” However, parents may also be making this decision because TK is free and preK is not in their district. This could be problematic if children who could otherwise benefit from preK are now skipping it

all together and simply attending TK in its place.

Several policy-maker/organization personnel asserted that the “potential of TK is under-realized at this point.” Many claimed that initial implementation was haphazard. Staffing has been one of the biggest challenges, and policy respondents reported that many principals just moved their worst K teachers to TK. As a result, TK has become “junior K.” Some TK teachers had previously taught higher elementary grades, and lacked any expertise in early childhood education, especially in promoting social-emotional development. Policy makers reported that getting teachers up to speed on what TK should look like has been a serious challenge, in part because administrators themselves lack a clear sense of what TK should look like.

*“In some ways,” “it depends,” or “not sure.”* District administrators claiming that they were not sure thought TK had been more effective in some ways and less effective in others. For instance, they believed that TK has created greater communication among preK and K teachers. It has given children who need more time to prepare for K the extra time to do so, but otherwise TK has not served as a bridge between preK and K or a tool to promote greater alignment. At most, district administrators

reported that it has stimulated more conversations about early childhood education in elementary schools.

Most policymakers had responses similar to those of district leaders. They were not sure or thought it was too soon to tell whether TK had been successful in serving a bridging role, or was even benefiting students. For example, an administrator in the Head Start Collaboration Office said that we do not yet have data on whether it has improved student outcomes, which is the ultimate goal of alignment. This administrator did, however, indicate that TK has brought about a noticeable change in the conversation at the policy level, drawing attention to questions about how young children should be educated, who should be educating them, and especially about the role of school districts in preK education.

Finally, several responses indicated that TK's success in serving a bridging role depends heavily on the teacher and district. For example, if teachers have experience and training in working with 4-year-olds, TK can be a very effective program. Otherwise, it often is just an extension of K. An extension of K is not necessarily ineffective, but it may create increase the likelihood that children repeat core content that they have already mastered in TK when they get to K. Respondents

also reported that larger districts have had more success promoting alignment through TK because they have a critical mass of children to serve in independent (as opposed to blended) TK classrooms. The smaller districts simply do not have the capacity to implement independent and self-sufficient TK programs, and have thus had less success with TK as a bridge to better alignment.

*Evidence.* To date, there is not much evidence on the effectiveness of TK, but there is a rigorous study of the effectiveness of the TK program in one large urban school district in California. In this study TK students who just made the birthday cutoff to attend TK outperformed their peers who just missed the birthday cutoff on a set of pre-literacy skills, but the difference between the two groups faded within a few months (Doss, 2015).<sup>1</sup> We can speculate that the observed fade-out of results is in part a consequence of poor horizontal alignment. K teachers may either have been unaware of the more advanced skill level of their TK students coming in and thus re-taught content unnecessarily, or else they re-taught content that TK students had already mastered because their students who had not attended TK needed the instruction.

At the end of the day the long-term value of TK, like the long-term value of PreK, may rest to some degree

on the alignment issues discussed in this report. What is needed is research that specifically examines the conditions under which TK has added value for children's learning trajectories.

### Local Control

Finally, we asked districts and policymakers whether they know of any districts (including their own) that include preK as one of their strategies in the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) or that are enhancing preK and/or preK-3 funding with their Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars. The consensus among district respondents was that because state dollars allocated to preK are not nearly sufficient to operate a large high-quality district preK program, LCFF dollars or district "general funds" are necessary.

Specific districts that are using district funds to support preK include (but are certainly not limited to) Los Angeles Unified, Long Beach (they have blended LCFF and Title I dollars to provide preK), San Diego, Fresno, Oakland Unified, San Francisco Unified, Elk Grove, districts under the Santa Clara and San Mateo County Offices of Education, and finally the four "Big Lift"

<sup>1</sup> Note that because many children who do not attend TK instead receive preK, this study may represent a comparison of the effectiveness of TK to preK.

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districts – South San Francisco, Cabrillo, La Honda-Pescadero Unified, and Jefferson.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR CALIFORNIA**

The districts that we identified to interview for this report are making significant progress towards providing increasingly aligned, cohesive, and continuous ECE programs across grades. Most have strong leadership supporting alignment efforts. They have developed or are attempting to develop aligned PD that is offered to preschool teachers across sectors, TK teachers, and elementary school teachers, and in some cases they are implementing consistent curricula across grades along with child and classroom quality assessments across sectors. These steps have been significant, but they remain the exception rather than the norm, and even as exceptions there is still much room for improvement. In all cases, district administrators had to allocate significant local control funds to their preK programs, as state funding for early childhood education is insufficient to implement a comprehensive and well aligned early childhood program. Promoting preK-3 alignment is particularly challenging in small districts given their limited funding and the lack of a critical mass of children to serve in each grade.

There are nevertheless steps that policy makers and institutions can take to reduce or remove the structural barriers that currently make it most difficult for districts to promote preK-3 alignment in California. We organize the implications below into three sections: State policy, district policy, and teacher preparation.

### **State Policy**

*Funding.* Funding is the most substantial barrier to creating better preK-3 alignment currently in California. Without sufficient funding for preK, districts cannot pay teachers on par with their elementary school peers, cannot recruit and retain the best preK teachers, and are limited in their ability to provide joint professional development and other supports necessary to ensure that teachers across grades have the knowledge and skills to promote optimal child development. The fragmentation of preK and the funding and administrative disconnect between preK and elementary schools contribute to the problem. Head Start, child care, preK, and TK each have different funding levels and receive funding from different sources. Each funding stream has its own accountability requirements, which are not aligned with one another.

To overcome this state policy makers need to increase the funding allocated to preK programs. It is

difficult to distinguish public from private preK teacher salaries, because of the often “braided” nature of preK funding. It is also difficult to compare preK teacher salaries to elementary teacher salaries, because some preK teachers work half-days. The available data nevertheless suggest that preK teachers are paid substantially less than their elementary school teaching peers. In fact, estimates suggest that average preK teacher salaries in California are roughly 40 percent lower than elementary school teacher salaries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014; California Department of Education, 2014). Higher compensation is needed to attract and retain effective preK teachers and to make collaboration with elementary school peers possible. Additional funds are also needed to provide ongoing opportunities for preK teachers to develop their skills and collaborate with elementary level teachers.

*Licensing.* Licensing requirements in preK now focus primarily on compliance with safety regulations. For example, some of the most frequent deficiencies and citations in preK programs are given for such problems as expired first aid/CPR certification among staff, insufficient documentation of fire/disaster drills, and accessibility of hazardous materials such as cleaning compounds (CDSS, 2014). Environmental



safety is certainly important when caring for young children, but current licensing requirements do not include quality dimensions that are known to affect children's learning and development outcomes. State licensing requirements should be revised to attend more to children's educational experiences.

*Teacher permitting.* Certification requirements for preschool teachers in California are among the lowest in the country. The state requires only 24 college units, and no supervised field practicum, in contrast to the majority of states where preschool teachers must be trained at a level that is commensurate with elementary school teachers. Teachers with minimal preparation cannot be expected to provide high-quality learning experiences for young children, or to benefit from PD and collaboration with elementary school teacher colleagues. The permit matrix needs to be revised to substantially increase the level of training required of preschool teachers.

*Data.* For K-12, the state currently has the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), which makes it possible for districts to track students' academic performance over time. CALPADS is a great step forward for California, but to realize its full potential it should be expanded to include children's preK data,

and organized around a common child identifier that would make it possible to track children's progress from as early as preK. Having access to longitudinal child outcomes on a common assessment metric over time with a unique child identifier would allow districts to both track the longitudinal effectiveness of their early childhood programs and to provide teachers with accurate information on the skills of their incoming students.

*Aligned assessments* also need to be developed for preK- through the elementary grades. The state requires that districts implement the DRDP child assessment in preK, but this assessment is not aligned to assessments in later grades, nor are K-2 assessments aligned to assessments in 3rd grade and beyond. Moreover, there is not sufficient evidence of reliability and validity of the DRDP to warrant the time and effort required for its use, at least given the current amount of training and time teachers receive to implement it.

### **District Policy**

*Funding.* A number of the districts we spoke with were using LCFF dollars to fund their preK programs. Administrators from these districts indicated that they had to use LCFF and other discretionary district funds because state preK allocations are far from adequate to serve a

considerable portion of age-eligible preschoolers in their district, and are certainly not sufficient to ensure that programs are high in quality. There are compelling reasons to invest local funds, given the benefits of preK, but unfortunately many districts are not aware that LCFF funds can be allocated in this way. Districts should be informed that they can use LCFF dollars to fund preK, and encouraged to do so by the state and other organizations. Even when district administrators are aware that they can use LCFF funds to allocate to preK, however, they may choose not to because they have other urgent uses for those dollars, or because they do not believe they have the skills or knowledge to take on preschool implementation at the district level. Technical assistance and support from the state or counties could alleviate the second concern.

*Data.* While it is ultimately the state's responsibility to implement a longitudinal data system for preK-12 and to provide an interface for districts to track student outcomes and classroom quality over time, districts need to create mechanisms to ensure that data is productively used to improve instruction.

Collecting systematic data on classroom quality is also recommended. The measures of classroom quality that are typically used in preK

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are weakly correlated with student outcomes and are at times administered by untrained internal personnel. Classroom quality is often not systematically assessed at all in the elementary grades. Districts should work to develop or adopt observation measures that assess the degree to which instruction is correlated with student learning, and they should train well-qualified assessors on the measures.

*Leadership.* As districts increase their efforts to provide high-quality preK, they need to ensure that leadership is familiar with the needs of preschool-aged children and the qualities of an effective preschool that is able to provide meaningful support to teachers.

*Unions.* Almost all of the districts interviewed identified teacher contracts or unions as a major barrier to promoting alignment. Additional funding to pay teachers for additional work requirements (e.g., attending PD or participating in a district's QRIS) might reduce union resistance. Even with that, districts should make their efforts to promote preK-3 alignment a priority in their contract negotiations.

### **Teacher Preparation**

As discussed throughout this report, the disconnect between the training and credentialing requirements for preK and elementary school

teachers was often cited as a barrier to promoting collaboration across grades, and to broader preK-3 alignment. There are at least three main implications for teacher preparation in California.

First, preK- and elementary school teachers are currently prepared in entirely separate programs, and often in separate institutions. Most preK teachers receive their preparation in community colleges, and those that are trained in California state universities typically take their courses in a different department from students being trained to be elementary school teachers. Coherence in practice requires greater coherence in training. PreK- and elementary-teacher preparation programs need to move toward an integrated system. Such a move will most likely require changes in the preK permit matrix, as mentioned above, and will certainly require added resources. In the short term efforts should be made to achieve greater coordination and communication between the two types of preparation programs.

Second, there is a need to improve the quality of preK teacher preparation programs in general. Unlike elementary school teacher preparation programs, in California preK preparation provides much less support for the development of pedagogical skills. Courses typically emphasize

foundational background more than practice, and although students preparing to become preK teachers are required to have 175 days of experience in an instructional capacity, supervised student teaching is not required. In addition to being better connected to elementary level preparation, preK teacher preparation programs need to shift their emphasis towards a focus on the practical skills needed to provide high-quality instruction to young children.

### **Conclusion**

The districts we examined have made considerable progress in creating high-quality, continuous educational experiences for young children. They demonstrate what can be accomplished in California, and they put in clear relief the policies that need to change and the tools and practices that need to be developed to expand effective early childhood education throughout the state. The value of preschool and of strong links between preschool and the early elementary grades is now widely recognized. California has made a start in serving as a model for the country in ensuring that young children have the best possible start in their education.

## APPENDIX

### Pre-K-3 Alignment Interview Questions

Questions are formatted to match interviewee:

- A. District and school leaders
- B. *Policy makers, organization leaders (e.g., First 5, foundations) and others who know what is going on in California*
- C. **Both/All**

#### 1. **There is a lot of talk about “preK-3 alignment”**

- a. **What does that mean to you? How would you define alignment?**
- b. **What would a perfectly aligned PK-3 educational program look like? What are the key components?**
- c. **Is alignment in some domains more important than in others?**
- d. **Which of these components are most important (contribute most to student learning**

*The focus in a lot of the literature on preK-3 alignment is primarily on standards, assessment, curriculum and professional development. Keep these (in addition to any others you think are important) in mind as we talk.*

#### 2. **What is the value of preK-3 alignment? How might it contribute to children’s learning and development?**

#### 3. **What do you do to improve preK-3 alignment in your school/district?**

- a. Which of these policies or practices have been successful? Which have been less successful?
- b. What policies /practices at the state- and district-level contributed to your successes?
- c. What policies/practices at the state/district level undermined your success? (challenges/barriers such as different accountability systems)

#### 4. **Have you seen any specific districts/schools that have done a particularly good job of aligning preK-3? (get names)**

- a. What have the successful districts/schools done? How have they achieved alignment? Is there anything unique about the district that makes it particularly easy for them to be successful?
- b. What are the biggest challenges/barriers to achieving greater preK-3 alignment in California?

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- c. **Are there changes in policies or practices in California that would make it easier to achieve preK-3 alignment in districts/schools? What changes would be the most productive?**
- i. **State policies/organization (e.g., standards, oversight offices, accountability)**
  - ii. **District policies/organization (e.g., curriculum, assessments, PD)**
  - iii. **Fiscal/accountability policies (e.g., ways that preK versus K-3 can spend funds)**
  - iv. **Training of teachers and/or principals**
  - v. **Credentialing of teachers**
  - vi. **Availability of curriculum and/or assessments that span preK-3**
  - vii. **Availability of data on student learning that span preK-3 (e.g., what is missing in calpedd?)**
  - viii. **Practical (e.g., time for teachers to collaborate, plan, or become informed of standards and curriculum before and after the grade they teach)**
  - ix. **Differences in beliefs/values (e.g., focus on social-emotional versus academic goals)**
  - x. **Any additional things we missed?**
5. ***Transitional Kindergarten can serve as a bridge between pre-K and K – a strategy for creating greater alignment between preK and the early elementary grades.***
- a. Do you have a TK program in your district/school?
  - b. If yes:
    - i. Is it connected administratively to the preschool or the elementary school or both? (is it overseen by the person in the district who is in charge of preschool or the principal of the elementary school?)
    - ii. Has it been successful in serving a bridging role? Why or why not? (if they say yes, get specifics)
  - c. What is your sense of whether TK has served this bridging role?
  - d. *Have some districts/schools been more successful than others? Why/what have the successful ones done? (get their names)*
  - e. *Do you think their strategies would be successful in other districts/schools?*
6. ***Do you know of any districts that are including preK as one of their strategies in the LCAP and enhancing PK and/or PK-3 funding with their LCFE dollars?***

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Policy Analysis for California Education is an independent, non-partisan research center based at Stanford University, the University of California-Davis, and the University of Southern California. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to post-secondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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