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# PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: How Superintendents Lead Change

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PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>  
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## **PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: How Superintendents Lead Change**

**The superintendent is held accountable for the performance of all students, regardless of the skills and experiences they bring to school.**

In three years, the Kindergartener who could not write his name on the first day is expected to reach the same achievement benchmarks as the one who was already reading. The pressure to raise performance is also personal. In a position where the average tenure lasts less than 42 months, the superintendent's job literally depends on her ability to integrate successfully a diverse early learning program into a coherent PreK through 12<sup>th</sup> Grade system.

The research and real-world results are unambiguous; high-quality early learning is an exceptional investment that leads to improved later learning and life outcomes.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, school districts with integrated PreK to Grade Three systems have demonstrated strong growth in student achievement, a narrowing achievement gap between African Americans, Latinos, and their peers, and significant benefits for English Language Learners.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, superintendents still hesitate to become involved in the “messy” world of Head Start, and center-, family-, and faith-based early learning programs. To confront the major educational challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, superintendents no longer have the choice to remain on the sidelines.

Leading change to create an integrated PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> education and connect early learning programs with the K-12 system is not easy.<sup>3</sup> Superintendents require courage to take the first step, persistence and political skills to encourage organizational and community engagement, and a relentless focus on results to measure progress and build momentum. As a growing number of districts initiate and implement PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> efforts, how should superintendents lead the change? What are their key challenges? What is the pivotal role of the superintendent? How long does it take to show results?

## Courage to Lead



*Jerry Weast*



*Bette Hyde*



*Mark Johnson*

The disciplined leadership of three superintendents – Jerry Weast, Bette Hyde, and Mark Johnson – from three very different school districts – Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, Bremerton School District, in the state of Washington, and Nooksack Valley School District, also in Washington – answer these questions. Weast, Hyde, and Johnson all work with different constituents, school boards, and communities, yet their courage, persistence, and focus in building integrated and excellent PreK-Grade 12 systems are producing similarly exceptional outcomes.

With over 141,000 students on the outskirts of the nation’s capital, Montgomery County Public Schools boasts 90 percent of exiting Kindergartners ready to learn, 89 percent of Third Graders reading proficiently, 86 percent of high school graduates going to college, and a double-digit narrowing of achievement gaps in every grade.<sup>4</sup> In the midsized Bremerton School District, located across Puget Sound from Seattle, Hyde saw the percentage of Fourth Graders meeting state reading standards rise every year up from 59 percent in 2003, to 74 percent by 2009; that same year, 66 percent of entering Kindergartners knew their letters – an increase of 62 percentage points in eight years.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in rural Nooksack Valley, Johnson’s decade-long leadership resulted in 77 percent of Fourth Graders and 88 percent of Tenth Graders reading at state standard by 2009.<sup>6</sup>

	Bremerton	Montgomery County	Nooksack Valley
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>5,187</b>	<b>141,777</b>	<b>1,737</b>
African American	10.0%	23.2%	1.3%
American Indian	3.8%	0.3%	7.8%
Asian American	7.5%	15.6%	1.4%
Latino/Hispanic	7.2%	22.7%	23.6%
Multi-racial	9.9%	-	2.1%
Pacific Islander	2.4%	-	0.7%
White	59.0%	38.1%	64.7%
Free and/or Reduced Lunch	59.3%	29.2%	53.1%
English Language Learners	2.5%	12.5%	10.4%
Special Education	14.3%	11.2%	17.6%

Sources: State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, “State Report Card,” Retrieved from <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>; Montgomery County Public Schools, “MCPS By the Numbers.” Retrieved from <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/about/statistics.aspx>.

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## **Three Key Steps for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Leadership**

### **1. Getting Started: Keep it Simple and Focused**

“The biggest mistake superintendents make in getting involved in early learning,” says Hyde, the former Bremerton Superintendent and now the state of Washington’s Director of Early Learning, “is they try to do too much too fast.” For Hyde, Johnson, and Weast, the first step in developing momentum around an integrated PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> system was to build on the dedication of those already active in early learning efforts. This initial approach involves a small upfront financial investment and still allows the superintendent to concentrate on the district’s K-12 efforts. At the same time, by organizing a small group of leaders focused on the needs of the youngest learners, the superintendent sends a signal about the importance of early learning, thereby facilitating deeper trust among all partners.

In Montgomery County, Weast partnered with the early learning leaders from the local Health and Human Services Department, Department of Social Services, and other public and private agencies through a state-established coordinating council for children, youth, and families. The group met monthly, eventually crafting a birth-to-age-five community-wide plan for early learning, with a common vision around which Weast and other leaders could align their actions.

Johnson used a similar approach in Nooksack Valley, initially reaching out to other agencies and organizations that could support or enhance the district-wide theory of action. The pursuit of partners naturally led Johnson to connect with community leaders in early learning, particularly the local Head Start coordinating agency. In the beginning, meetings involved only three or four key people sitting at a table asking simple, but important, questions: “What do you do? What do we do? Where are our missions in common, and how can we better serve kids and families in our community?”

In Bremerton, Hyde started small and kept it simple, but took a slightly different path. Over the course of a year, she led a series of meetings among several elementary school teachers, a central office administrator, and staff from preschools in the district. The group gathered after school over coffee and cookies to discuss how the school district and preschools could work better together. “Through the process,” Hyde said, “You get to know each other; people get to trust each other.”

By bringing together a committed group of early learning leaders, the superintendents created a strong foundation of trust on which the partners could build reciprocal relationships. This foundation was essential for the next two steps.

## **2. Making PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Work: Support Joint Professional Development**

Changing the instructional practices of teachers to improve student learning is a superintendent's most difficult task. It is even harder to influence the actions of early learning professionals outside the district. To meet these challenges, the three superintendents first implemented ambitious, intensive professional development in their own districts, then shared that support with staff at early-learning-focused public and private organizations. Not only did student achievement improve, but Hyde, Weast, and Johnson also saw the formation of stronger partnerships with their communities' early learning agencies. This had the added benefit of neutralizing criticism from school board members, teacher union leaders, and community members that the district was overstepping its boundaries.

In Nooksack Valley, Johnson brought together PreK and elementary school teachers to work on the district's instructional core – the key interactions among the teacher, student, and content that form daily instructional routines. Johnson explained: “We went away from ‘parallel play’ to work on the instructional core together. There was a natural entry point to work on the language about questions like what do we mean by good teaching? How do we assess? What curriculum do we use?” The joint professional development partnership between the school district and early learning providers has now evolved to a point where the two are nearly indistinguishable. As Johnson says, “Our services are their services, our employees are their employees, our bus routes are their bus routes.”



Like Nooksack Valley, Montgomery County also offers its intensive professional support system to the more than 1,000 home-based and nearly 450 center-based providers serving families and children in the community. Staff members from the early childhood department regularly visit these and other providers to conduct training on the district's curricula, assessments, and early learning standards. At the district-wide level, district staff offers resources and support to community-wide early learning efforts such as the more than 20-member Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress – an early-learning-focused collaborative involving the district, county agencies, nonprofits, and businesses. All these efforts are reinforced by the district's comprehensive professional development system, which includes ongoing training on data-driven instruction, a peer-assistance-and-review system, and rigorous accountability mechanisms.

In Bremerton, Hyde opened the district's professional development sessions to the staff at all local early learning facilities, including the early childhood specialists and directors at center- and family-based providers. This enabled key players in early learning outside the district to attend training on the district's curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment. As an added incentive, providers who attended a certain number of sessions received a sticker indicating that they were "district-endorsed," which they could then place in the front window of the centers and use in marketing materials. The sticker sent the message to parents that the program's staff members knew how to prepare children to succeed in Kindergarten and beyond.

### **3. Sustaining PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Focus on Results**

There will be pushback from some when the superintendent begins to take a leadership role in early learning. To win opponents over and convince skeptics, the superintendent must show that the integration of PreK and K-12 education leads to concrete results. The best way to do this, according to the three leaders, is to establish clear measurable targets that link teaching and learning in PreK to outcomes in Grade Three and beyond.

Since literacy is the building block of so many important academic milestones, the three superintendents each used measurements of key literacy skills to set their districts' initial PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> goals. In Bremerton, the short-term goals included raising the percentage of entering Kindergarteners who could identify all the letters of the alphabet. Montgomery County uses a combination of a state Kindergarten-readiness assessment and its own standards-based literacy assessment. Long-term goals for all three districts included the critical benchmark of Third Grade reading proficiency. Weast extends his district's indicators all the way through high school; the key objective for Montgomery County is that 80 percent of its students leave high school college-ready. The district then connected this ambitious goal to research-based indicators at each grade level all the way back to PreK.

With measurable outcomes in place, the superintendent can then show community partners, such as the school board, unions, and early learning advocates, that PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> efforts are paying off. And as Hyde says, once the school board and others see improved student outcomes, "there is no backing away from early learning."

**A Foundation for Child Development case study on early learning in Montgomery County and a video highlighting Hyde's work in Bremerton offer additional guidance on leading in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>. These resources and others can help superintendents with details of implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> approaches.<sup>7</sup>**

## What it Takes: Courage, Focus, and Results

It is ironic that superintendents are least involved in children's learning during the period of their most rapid brain development. Superintendents can change this pattern by working together with community leaders to establish a clear district goal to guide teaching and learning, starting with recognizing the importance of early learning. The outcomes that Hyde, Johnson, and Weast achieved in their school districts did not happen overnight; change required at least three years and closer to ten.

But, their success all started with a small and focused investment in integrating the fragmented early learning and K-12 systems to meet a clear and compelling district-wide goal. A small initial cost can start the superintendent on the right path. As the district implements ambitious joint professional development, starting with PreK, more resources must be invested. This does not necessarily require additional funds, but it does require a more focused use of them. Bremerton and Montgomery County reallocated existing dollars from less effective programs to their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> efforts with great success.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, courage is what it takes to make the first step in gathering community leaders around a system-wide goal that integrates PreK teaching and learning with the K-12 grades. Courage, supported by intensive investment in instruction, and a focus on results are key to a superintendent's success in leading PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> efforts.

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### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Rolnick, A. & Grunewald, R. "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return," *Fedgazette* (March 2003). <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm>, (accessed May 2010); Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000); Cooke, R. "Early Childhood Stress Affects Developing Brain," *Harvard Science*.(February 15, 2008). <http://harvardscience.harvard.edu/culture-society/articles/early-childhood-stress-affects-developing-brain>. (accessed May 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools, and Maryland State Department of Education, <http://mdk12.org/data/index.aspx?Nav=1.2>, accessed May 2010; State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Washington State Report Card," Retrieved May 2010 from <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/DataDownload.aspx>
- <sup>3</sup> Council of the Great City Schools, "Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary," *Urban Indicator* (Winter 2008-2009). Retrieved May 2010 from [http://www.cgcs.org/Pubs/Urban\\_Indicator\\_08-09.pdf](http://www.cgcs.org/Pubs/Urban_Indicator_08-09.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools, and Maryland State Department of Education, <http://mdk12.org/data/index.aspx?Nav=1.2>, accessed May 2010
- <sup>5</sup> State of Washington Department of Early Learning, "Starting Strong in Washington State: Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories," Retrieved May 2009 from <http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/starting-strong-washington-state-early-learning-lessons-and-success-stories>; State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "State Report Card," Retrieved May 2010 from <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/DataDownload.aspx>
- <sup>6</sup> State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "State Report Card."
- <sup>7</sup> Marietta, G. & Foundation for Child Development. "Lessons for PreK-3rd in Montgomery County Public Schools". Foundation for Child Development & New School Foundation. "PreKindergarten-3rd Grade: A New Beginning for American Education," Retrieved June 2010 from <http://www.prek-3rd.org/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Shore, R. "Prek-3rd: What is the Price Tag?" Foundation for Child Development Policy to Action Brief, April 2009.



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## Online PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources

These key resources aim to inform policymakers, educators, researchers, and others about PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> issues. For more in-depth resources, visit our Resource Library web page (<http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/>) which houses all materials published by FCD and our grantees.

This document provides direct links to the materials by accessing the FCD web site at: [http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>\\_Resources.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>_Resources.pdf).

### The Case for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Kristie Kauerz (2010). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle](#)
- Lisa Guernsey & Sara Mead, New America Foundation (2010). [A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education](#)
- New School Foundation & Foundation for Child Development (2010). [PreKindergarten - 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade: A New Beginning for American Education](#) (Eight-minute video)
- New America Foundation (2009). [Fighting Fade-Out Through PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Reform](#) (Seven-minute video)
- Rima Shore (2009). [The Case for Investing in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2008). [America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education](#)
- Ruby Takanishi & Kristie Kauerz (2008). [PK Inclusion: Getting Serious About a P-16 Education System](#), *Phi Delta Kappan*
- Grantmakers for Education (GFE) (2007). [Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start](#)

### Financing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Rima Shore (2009). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: What is the Price Tag?](#)
- Lawrence O. Picus, Allan Odden & Michael Goetz (2009). [An Evidence-Based Approach to Estimating the National and State Costs of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>](#)

### Implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Linda Sullivan-Dudzic, Donna K. Gearns, & Kelli Leavell (2010). [Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System](#)
- Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle & David A. Thomas (2009). [Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools](#)
- Michael Sadowski (2006). [Core Knowledge for PK-3 Teaching: Ten Components of Effective Instruction](#)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAEYC) (2005). [Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do](#)

### Teacher Preparation/Professional Development

- Rima Shore (2010). [PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Teacher Quality Matters](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2007). [Teacher Education and PK Outcomes: Are We Asking the Right Questions?](#), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*
- Cynthia Rice & Jill McLaughlin, Association for the Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2007). [Providing Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2006). [Ready to Teach? Providing Children with the Teachers They Deserve](#)

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## Online PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources

### Leadership by Educators

- Ruby Takanishi (2010). [PreK-Third Grade: A Paradigm Shift](#). *Children of 2020: Creating a Better Tomorrow*
- Stacie G. Goffin & Valora Washington (2007). [Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education](#)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2006). [Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results](#)

### Federal Policy

- New America Foundation (ongoing). [The Early Ed Watch Blog](#)
- New America Foundation (2007). [Ten New Ideas for Early Education in the NCLB Reauthorization](#)
- Danielle Ewen & Hannah Matthews, Center for Law and Social Policy (2007). [Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era](#)

### State Policy

- Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010). [Starting Strong in Washington State: Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories](#)
- Sara Mead (2009). [Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Reform](#)
- Linda Jacobsen (2009). [On the Cusp in California: How PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Strategies Could Improve Education in the Golden State](#)
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) (2008). [Promoting a Pre-K to Three Vision for Early Learning](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Seizing the Opportunity: Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Inside and Out: Developing an Advocacy Strategy for New Jersey's PK-3 Agenda](#)

### School District Policy

- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Seizing the Opportunity: Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2007). [Embracing the Big Picture: The State of New Jersey's Road Toward a PK3 Continuum](#)

### Research Basis for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

- Arthur Reynolds, et al. (2007). [Effects of a Preschool and School-Age Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being: Evidence from the Chicago Longitudinal Study](#)
- Ruby Takanishi & Kimber Bogard (2007). [Effective Educational Programs for Young Children: What We Need to Know](#), *Child Development Perspectives*