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The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education:

**Challenging Myths
about School Reform**

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The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform

No parent would be pleased to sign the *Nation's Report Card*. The most recent report, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), showed few signs of progress. Nearly 60 percent of White and Asian American Fourth Graders are reading below grade level. For Latino, Black, and American Indian children, the figure is close to 85 percent (*Nation's Report Card*, 2007).

Alarming trends are evident as soon as the *Nation's Report Card* begins tracking progress, but by that time children have already had several years of schooling. We must act.

Why, despite decades of well-intentioned reform efforts, have solutions been so elusive? One explanation may lie in widespread belief in big myths about school reform. The solutions pursued by education reformers hinge on

the assumptions they make about how and when underachievement occurs. When those assumptions are wrong, even the best laid plans can go astray.

This Policy to Action Brief challenges three pervasive myths about early and elementary education:

Myth 1: Elementary schools are doing just fine; problems begin later.

Myth 2: Good PreK programs guarantee later success.

Myth 3: Solving the “Fourth-Grade slump” will reverse today’s widespread pattern of underachievement.

This Brief makes the case that a more reasoned, realistic approach to school reform — one that builds a solid foundation for learning by providing coordinated, enhanced learning opportunities every year from Prekindergarten (for three- and four-year-olds) through Third Grade (PreK-3rd) — offers the best chance for raising achievement.

This Policy to Action Brief is also available on the FCD Web Site's Resource Library.

MYTH 1: Elementary schools are doing just fine; problems begin later.

Some of today's most intensive, costly reform efforts focus on middle schools. In many places, middle-school reform tops the educational agenda based on the assumption that learning takes a tumble in Grades Five through Eight. For example, in 2007, the New York City Council Middle-Grades Task Force prefaced its recommendations by calling middle schools "the intractable problem of public schools nationwide."

But achievement data throw this assumption into question. As James Lerman, coordinator of the New Jersey Consortium for Middle Schools, has observed (2007), "This problem [of low achievement] is not isolated to, nor does it originate in, the middle school." He continues, "To isolate the problem of declining achievement as one confined to middle schools is to incorrectly perceive its nature and extent — leading to proposed solutions with little likelihood of significant impact across the entire grade spectrum" (pp. 35-36).



Other efforts target high schools. In recent years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested more than \$1 billion to improve the nation's high schools. Such initiatives respond to high dropout rates; international studies showing that academically, American high school students lag behind peers in other countries; and concerns about workplace readiness and America's competitiveness in a global economy.

Improving middle and high schools is certainly a crucial element in any reform effort, but the *Nation's Report Card* offers powerful evidence that such initiatives

A wide gap has opened up between Americans' view of elementary education and the schools' actual performance.

rest on a shaky foundation. Reinforcing this foundation requires a rigorous focus on the stretch of years from PreK to Third Grade, when children acquire the cognitive, social, and academic skills that undergird later learning.

But these years are often overlooked by education reformers.

Why? One answer is the widely held assumption that children in elementary schools are doing just fine, and that their older brothers and sisters are the ones who need attention.

This view has been documented in annual polls conducted by Phi Delta Kappa and The Gallup Organization, which tell us a lot about public attitudes toward education. Most Americans acknowledge the need for reform, but express confidence in their own local schools. Only one in five of those polled gives the nation's schools an A or B, but nearly half think that schools in their own communities deserve these high marks (Bushaw & Gallup, 2008).

Recent polls show that satisfaction with elementary education is very high. In 2007, 61 percent of Americans gave an A or B to their elementary schools; only 47 percent gave an A or B to their high schools. Over the last 25 years, confidence in elementary schools has risen by 15 percentage points. And yet, as the *Nation's Report Card* shows, alarming underachievement trends are evident by Fourth Grade (Rose & Gallup, 2007).

In short, a wide gap has opened up between Americans' view of elementary education and the schools' actual performance. Only one in 20 Americans polled give elementary schools a failing grade, despite the fact that the schools are letting down most of the children entrusted to them.

Believing in the myth that elementary schools are succeeding may be understandable, but it places children at risk for educational underachievement. The danger is that we are letting children down, just when they need us most — in the stretch of years when they are building a foundation for later learning.

That is why policymakers and educators must act now. They should ensure effective, evidence-based, developmentally informed learning experiences from the moment children enter PreK, and they must focus on the full span of years that lay the groundwork for later achievement.



MYTH 2: Good PreK programs guarantee later achievement.

In recent years, a convergence of research from several disciplines has shown that early learning matters, and increasingly, policymakers have gotten the message. Too often, however, educational decisionmakers have bought into the myth that they can guarantee later achievement by investing in good programs for four-year-olds.

In fact, high-quality Prekindergarten programs have been shown to benefit children, boosting the kinds of learning and thinking skills that are needed for later achievement. But researchers have long known that without sustained follow-up, these gains fade in the elementary grades.

Investments in excellent, research-based PreK programs are part of the answer to lifting student achievement nationwide — but only part. This “fade-out” has been reported for many kinds of programs, including both Head Start and state-funded PreK programs. The evidence is clear: By itself, PreK cannot inoculate children against academic failure.

The good news is: We know how to sustain the gains. Decades of research have shown that high-quality PreK programs (for three- and four-year-olds) can boost later achievement if quality enhancements are carried forward. Moreover, when schools link PreK education with the elementary grades, creating a common organizational structure and coherent sets of academic and social goals, the gains that children make in high-quality PreK programs are more likely to persist.

Beyond the Seven-Percent Solution

When achievement drops, it may seem reasonable to localize the problem and target resources with laser-like precision. But history suggests that efforts confined to a single grade do not lead to lasting change. A well-documented case in point: When policymakers have invested in Prekindergarten programs without sustaining quality enhancements throughout the elementary grades, benefits to participants have tended to fade by Third Grade, if not sooner.

This should not be surprising. We do not expect to achieve a healthier population by fortifying only four-year-olds' meals or adding exercise just for Fourth Graders. We recognize that serious health problems affecting millions of American children arise over time, and are best prevented or addressed over time with sustained, evidence-based policies and programs.

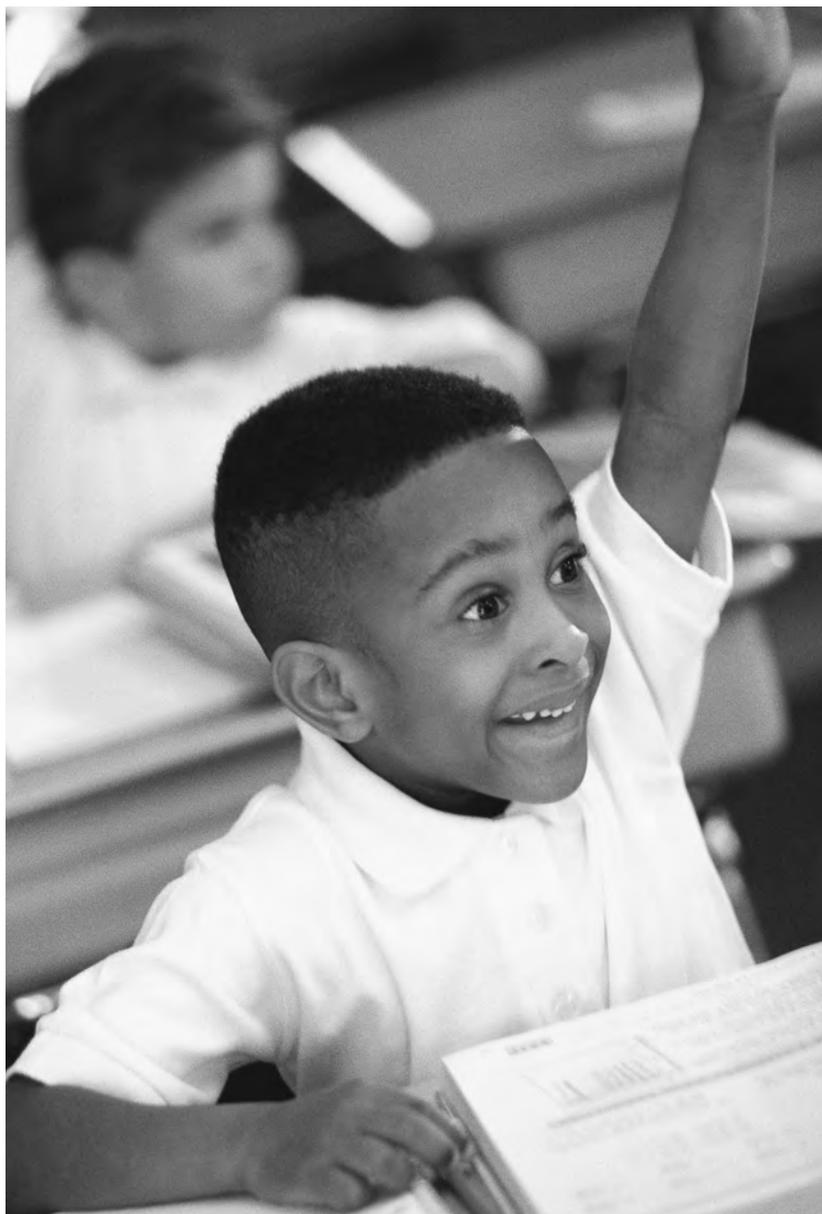
And yet, many states and organizations continue to pin their hopes on educational strategies that target a single year. They do so despite the fact that one year amounts to only seven percent of a typical student's PreK-12th grade education.

Successful PreK-3rd moves beyond the crisis mentality that has repeatedly swung taxpayers' and policymakers' attention from one “problem grade” to another. It calls for a coherent approach designed to sustain high-quality programs and reflects today's best understandings of how children learn in their formative early years.

Two key examples:

- The National Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Demonstration Transition Project showed that the PreK-3rd approach sustains and enhances the achievement gains that are seen in high-quality PreK programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).
- Landmark studies of the Chicago Child Parent Centers followed participants over two decades, and found that children sustain the gains when PreK services are coordinated with high-quality elementary-grade programs (Reynolds et al., 2001).

Investments in excellent, research-based PreK programs are part of the answer to lifting student achievement nationwide — but only part.



MYTH 3: Solving the “Fourth-Grade slump” will reverse today’s widespread pattern of underachievement.

In recent years, the education reform literature has included many references to a “Fourth-Grade slump,” citing disappointing results and flagging motivation as students move into the middle-school grades.

Introduced more than 50 years ago by Harvard University researcher Mary E. Engel to describe an overall “decline in academic achievement, interest in school work and adjustment to the school situation” (New York Times, 1963), the term was used by literacy expert Jean Chall (1983) to describe the difficulties that emerge when children shift from “learning to read” (sounding out words) to “reading to learn” (making sense of the information and ideas presented in a text).

Other reading specialists followed suit, observing that Fourth Grade is when young readers begin to encounter more demanding materials. The texts include less common words, require more background knowledge, and call on students to have a deeper comprehension of the content (Coles, 2007). Fourth Grade is also when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) begins tracking students’ progress nationwide, drawing attention to reading problems that have arisen during the PreK-3rd years.

In recent years, the term Fourth-Grade slump has been used to describe not only reading difficulty, but also a more general problem. School reformers say that many Fourth Graders disengage from school activities, and that this affects many kinds of learning, including mathematics (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Grayson & Betancourt,

Every Year of Schooling Counts

The PreK-3rd approach shows that the simplest aim of education may also be the most crucial: Ensuring that learning builds from one year to the next. The goal of PreK-3rd is to strengthen teaching and learning by connecting the dots — both from one early childhood year to the next and from PreK-3rd to later schooling.

Cognitive and developmental scientists convened by the National Academy of Sciences to review the research on how people learn point to “an impressive body of research show[ing] the potential benefit of early access by students to important conceptual ideas” (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2001, p. 138). They confirm earlier research showing that good teachers not only build on learning that has already happened, but also prepare the ground for learning that may not take place for several years (Bruner, 1966).

Sometimes the connections are evident: A Kindergartner’s fanciful map of her classroom gets her ready for the more sophisticated geographic, spatial, and representational challenges she will meet in subsequent grades. At other times, the dots may be harder to connect. It may be more difficult to see how a Prekindergartener’s water play prepares him for later explorations of the physical world and its underlying principles, such as volume and displacement.

2008). The term has also been used to describe barriers faced by children for whom English is not their home language as they move beyond the elementary grades (James Cummins, cited in Grayson & Betancourt, 2008). The mass media have also picked up the notion of a Fourth-Grade slump. For example, in 2007, *Newsweek* helped to popularize the term, reporting that Fourth Grade is when students lose their “mojo” (Tyre & Springen, 2007).

Nothing in the research suggests that the problem of widespread underachievement begins when children reach the Fourth Grade.

Based on increasing concern about Fourth Graders, the National Institutes of Health have awarded \$30 million over five years to research centers devoted to studying the Fourth-Grade slump. By concentrating resources on this grade, policymakers hope to give a much needed jolt to middle- and high-school performance.

But the phenomenon deserves closer scrutiny. Is it possible that the majority of American children flourish throughout Prekindergarten and the first four years of elementary school — making steady, significant progress — only to lose ground suddenly and en masse in Fourth Grade?

To be sure, educators should support children’s skills and motivation in Fourth Grade and every other year of school. But common sense tells us that a problem this pervasive must have roots in the preceding years. Moreover, nothing in the research suggests that the problem of widespread underachievement begins when children reach the Fourth Grade.

Nevertheless, the notion of the Fourth-Grade slump has encouraged another single-grade solution — one that localizes the problem of underachievement at one grade level and concentrates resources at that juncture. To strengthen teaching and learning across the grades, educators need to challenge the myth that addressing the Fourth-Grade slump (or pursuing any other one-grade solution) can reverse today’s widespread pattern of underachievement.

PreK-3rd and the Long View

A PreK-20 system must pay particular attention to PreK-3rd, because learning during these years lays the foundation for everything that follows.

Some educators have begun to look at education through a wider-angle lens, urging policies and practices geared to PreK-20 learning (PreK-12 plus up to eight years of higher education). New willingness to take the long view reflects studies showing that many crucial competencies develop over a span of years — especially the cognitive and social abilities that undergird such 21st century skills as independent learning, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative innovation. Research also shows that cross-grade and cross-level learning is especially vital when educators seek to influence not only students’ knowledge and skills, but also their attitudes and aspirations (Chamberlin & Plucker, 2008).

Based on such findings, at least 30 states now have formal PreK-20 initiatives, and others are in the process of creating PreK-20 alliances or councils. Typically, these initiatives promote cooperation, smoothing transitions from one level of schooling to the next and aligning standards and accountability, including data-tracking systems.

That would be good news indeed if proponents of PreK-20 focused attention on the crucial, earliest six years of schooling (PreK for three- and four-year-olds and K-3rd). To date, most have concentrated on the “back end” of the learning continuum, emphasizing young adults’ school-to-work transitions.

At the “front end,” there has been more talk than action. Policymakers have paid far less attention to coordinating and consolidating the foundational early years of schooling, or connecting them with what comes later. And yet, as Ruby Takanishi and Kristie Krauerz have written (2008), neglect of the base undermines the PreK-20 structure. They stress that a PreK-20 system must pay particular attention to the PreK-3rd years, “because learning during these years lays the foundation for everything that follows.”

Overcoming Barriers to PreK-3rd

Achieving sustained quality and coherence during the PreK-3rd years will not be easy. The PreK-3rd approach requires major shifts in policy and practice. As things stand, Prekindergarten and elementary-grade teachers tend to work in isolation from one another. Typically, they receive different preparation, work in different buildings, and are held to different accountability structures. They have few (if any) opportunities to work cooperatively. When teachers work together across grades and levels, the links become more explicit and children benefit.

A key point: The goal is not to push down academic work or assessments into the Prekindergarten or Kindergarten years. Rather, it is to identify and enhance the connections between the different activities and expectations that can be found in different grades and classrooms.

Strengthening the PreK-3rd Foundation

The evidence is clear: Children are more likely to grow into independent, able learners, and to succeed in school and beyond, if they have a strong, solid PreK-3rd base that integrates planning, curricula, professional development, and assessment across these six years.

How can state planners, school district leaders, and school principals make this happen? How can parents and community groups take the lead? Which policies and practices have already made a difference in schools that have already launched PreK-3rd initiatives? What are the implications for teacher preparation and support? What are the costs and how can they be met? These are some of the issues we will address in future PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs. Together, this series will constitute a guide that you can use to map out and implement policies and practices intended to strengthen teaching and learning across the years from PreK-3rd.

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Online Resources:

AMERICA'S VANISHING POTENTIAL: THE CASE FOR PREK-3RD EDUCATION
http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=711495

NATION'S REPORT CARD
<http://nationsreportcard.gov/>.

PHI DELTA KAPPA/GALLUP 39TH
http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v89/k0709pol.htm.

PREK-20 INITIATIVES
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/05/40overview.h27.html?qs=pushes>.

NATIONAL HEAD START/PUBLIC SCHOOL EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT
<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/cocoon/PREK3RD/hsts.xml>.

CHICAGO CHILD PARENT CENTERS
<http://www.cps.edu/Schools/Preschools/Pages/Childparentcenter.aspx>.