

ALIGNMENT IN ACTION: PREK-3RD AT DC PREP

A case study about building a seamless PreK-3rd grade experience in a charter school setting

INTRODUCTION

DC Prep: A School with Results

It is easy to identify the challenges facing our young children, particularly those who are Black and come from low-income families. The statistics are devastating – more than 40 percent of Black children born into poverty; 90 percent of Black children on food stamps at some point during childhood; and 85 percent of Black children reading below proficiency in fourth grade, to name only a few.^{i,ii,iii} The implications of these statistics are deeply troubling, not only for these children and families, but also for our communities and country as a whole.

It is harder to identify the solutions to these challenges – and harder still to put those solutions into place. But there are schools and districts across the country, in North Carolina and New Jersey; in Chicago, Illinois, Montgomery County, Maryland, and Seattle, Washington, where something is working. These are places where Black children are supported in their positive development, and are achieving at high levels; where instruction, curriculum, assessments and standards are high-quality and aligned within and between grades; where parents are deeply engaged in the work of the school; where teachers and administrators receive sustained, meaningful professional development; and where students are successfully supported throughout the PreK-3rd continuum.



DC Prep, a public charter school in the District of Columbia, is also one of these schools. Serving primarily low-income, Black students from preschool through eighth grade at three campuses, DC Prep has developed a strong focus on the early years and the early grades.^{iv}

At their Edgewood Elementary Campus, DC Prep provides a “developmentally appropriate, academically challenging education for preschool and elementary children (3-year-olds through 3rd grade).”^v Founded in September 2007, the Edgewood campus has been relentlessly dedicated to developing and implementing a PreK-3rd grade framework where “the key ingredients of high-quality early childhood programs have been incorporated into DC Prep’s proven model, creating a coherent and exciting learning environment that lays the foundation for college preparation and success from the earliest years.”^{vi}

As they refine their framework and learning environments, DC Prep operates as a learning laboratory, constantly seeking to increase achievement and impact. Early evidence of achievement is reflected in the 2010 standardized test scores, where 57.14 percent of third graders (over 99 percent of whom are Black) scored proficient or advanced on the DC-CAS. Although this leaves room for significantly increased success, this nevertheless reflects a 15-point increase from 2009, and is over 20 points above the District’s average of 36.97 percent

proficiency for Black students across the city. DC Prep expects that, as more and more students and teachers are retained each year, scores will continue to increase. In this school year, over one third of third graders were new, which has a severe effect on standardized test scores; as we heard repeatedly from teachers in the upper grades, it was easy to tell who had been at DC Prep since preschool – and indeed, their scores were higher, compared to the newer students.

In the upper grades, DC Prep has already achieved major accomplishments, and will continue to see improvements as students rise from the PreK-3rd education continuum into the middle school, which begins at fourth grade. By eighth grade, DC Prep students are dramatically outscoring their public school counterparts on both reading and math, earning DC Prep the #1 ranking in Math and the #2 ranking in Reading for low-income children in the city (#3 and #4 overall).

What is a PreK-3rd Grade Framework?

The PreK-3rd terminology encompasses a variety of efforts dedicated to improving systems for children birth through age eight; ensuring continuity for children and families through child care, PreK and K-12; and seamlessly connecting high-quality early childhood and PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. The Foundation for Child Development has identified major components of a successful PreK-3rd strategy which make up the structure of a framework and include, at a minimum: voluntary full-school-day PreK and required full-school-day Kindergarten; standards, curriculum, instruction & assessment that are aligned within and across the early childhood to early grades continuum; curriculum that integrates academic and social skills; teachers who are qualified to teach PreK to third grade; and families, schools, and communities who share accountability for student success.

DC Prep’s commitment to a PreK-3rd grade framework is deep and ongoing, embedded not only in the leadership’s dedication to the framework’s elements, but also in the essential fabric of the school. They have already established several core structural elements of PreK-3rd, including full school day PreK and Kindergarten; and aligned standards, curricula and assessments; as well as a strong commitment to data-driven decision-making and professional development opportunities that focus on high-quality instruction. From teachers’ remarks about the difference they see in their third graders who have been with DC Prep since they were three years old; to the leadership’s plans for integrating social-emotional learning and strengthening family engagement practices, it is clear that DC Prep is continuing to set a standard for PreK-3rd grade implementation on the ground in a charter school.

METHODOLOGY

Developing an understanding of how the PreK-3rd grade framework operates in practice

When the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) received support from the Foundation for Child Development to help advance a PreK-3rd grade agenda in the District of Columbia, we turned to a range of partners across public and public charter schools, as well as

early education and care providers, institutions of higher education, and the statewide education agency. We found a landscape in which people were growing increasingly comfortable with the language of PreK-3rd, but continued to struggle with the core tenets of implementation: how, exactly, does this framework operate in practice?

In connecting with DC Prep, we set out to respond to this broad question by answering six specific questions. Through a year-long series of interviews, focus groups and surveys, NBCDI and DC Prep grappled with these questions to help build a reflective understanding about how PreK-3rd is implemented on the ground, in a single school building.

Our goal in this case study is to provide key responses to the six original questions, which allows us to (a) highlight the school's progress; (b) identify areas for future improvement, and (c) help other charter school leaders, as well as leaders of public school districts and early education and care systems, to understand fully the benefits of implementing a PreK-3rd framework in a school.

QUESTION #1: CREATING THE CONDITIONS

What does it take for a school to create the conditions for implementing a PreK-3rd framework?

To successfully take root in a school or district, a PreK-3rd framework requires fertile soil, which – in the story of DC Prep – includes two key elements: (1) strong leadership and (2) the capacity for flexibility.

Strong Leadership

As one DC Prep PreK teacher noted, “Administration is the key to everything.” Research confirms this assessment: principals alone account for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student learning, and are “particularly crucial in PreK-3rd settings, where instructional leaders must align standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment both vertically and horizontally and ensure effective instruction across all PreK through 3rd Grade classrooms.”^{vii}

Overall, 34 percent of DC Prep teachers through third grade identified “shared vision and strong leadership” as a strength of the school, with another 39 percent indicating that the school was “actively working on it.” Across all years, however, teachers indicated that there was strong support around the critical importance of early childhood. “I didn't used to have staff who understood ECE. You have to have a staff and administrators who get it,” said one third grade teacher. In the case of DC Prep, staff and administrators who get it are both hired that way, and developed that way; in other words, they come with a combination of prior commitments to and understanding of early childhood development, and are supported through intensive professional development and partnership opportunities which allow them to deepen, enhance and practice that understanding in their classrooms.

Strong leadership is often viewed as synonymous with consistent leadership; and indeed, constant churning at managerial levels is problematic for any organization, including schools.

Yet DC Prep’s principal is new this year, and thus the respect for the school’s leadership is not generated entirely by longevity. Although the principal did previously serve as part of the school’s administrative team, the basis for the teachers’ assessment of leadership seemed to transcend individuals and become part of the school culture. “Everything is intentional – there are no off-the-cuff decisions here,” said one Kindergarten teacher, echoing similar sentiments across grades. Despite any school’s inherent nature of controlled chaos, DC Prep’s culture of planning and intentionality seemed to pervade both teachers’ and administrators’ understanding of the school.

Capacity for Flexibility

Successful organizations, corporations and individuals learn to balance the need for consistency with the need for flexibility. Planning and intentionality do not inhibit the capacity for creativity and change – and this is another of DC Prep’s foundational strengths, which allow for the successful implementation of a PreK-3rd grade framework. “We’re really a laboratory,” notes a Kindergarten teacher. “We have the ability to try different things, give it time to work, and then if it doesn’t work, we change it.”

This conception of flexibility is tied into effectiveness, and does not imply that the school jumps from one effort or priority to another; rather, the school’s focus on flexibility is the result of thoughtful planning and data analysis that helps drive decision-making. “We do have a couple of hoops to jump through,” said one of DC Prep’s instructional coaches, “but we take time to consult and reflect before we make a big decision. When we do, however, we’re able to implement it quickly. For example, we had no core curriculum for phonics, so we went through a process, which took a couple of months, to order and roll out the curriculum; in other schools, this might have taken 1-2 years.”

Identifying where and how DC Prep differs from other schools was an integral question, and we have been able to identify foundational strengths, such as strong leadership and capacity for flexibility, as well as more targeted strengths in data, professional development and assessment, which we will explore in more detail below. In addition, however, we wanted to look at structural strengths and challenges, in the context of the charter school movement.

QUESTION #2: CHARTER POWER

What characteristics of charter schools in general make PreK-3rd implementation easier or more challenging?

The PreK-3rd grade framework has been successfully implemented across the country in single public schools, in charter schools and across districts. In the District of Columbia, 28,000 (approximately 40 percent) of students attend a public charter school, 87 percent of whom are Black and 65 percent of whom are low-income. Designed, like all charters, as an alternative to traditional public schools, the District’s public charter schools are “free to innovative and are held accountable for improved school performance.” So what does this mean for increased capacity of public charters to implement an aligned and coordinated system across grades?

First, it means more flexibility over professional development priorities. “The first thing we put on the calendar,” says the principal, “are the five data days.” Second, it does mean that parents choose to participate in the school. As one teacher says, “Nobody has to come here. It’s very structured, which can be hard. But if parents don’t feel like this is the school for them, they don’t have to stay.” Third, it provides additional flexibility in hiring; all DC Prep lead teachers are certified to teach at any grade level PreK-5 and meet “high-quality” requirements.

Being a charter school, however, with additional flexibility in scheduling and the organization of the school day, does not mean that DC Prep has been able to develop integrated and joint planning time across grade levels. “Teachers are certainly willing to work with other grade levels,” says one teacher, “but schedules and timing prevent teachers from collaborating across grade levels in most instances,” finishes another. “Within grade levels, the relationships are strong,” adds a 2nd grade teacher. “Much of our planning takes place as a grade-level team. Across grade level cooperation,” however, “could improve.” Having a charter’s structural flexibility has not, in this case, solved what is a difficult issue across most schools and districts.

In addition, a question was raised about whether public schools could be better at focusing on social-emotional learning than charter schools. “Public schools can focus on the whole child, but there’s a focus on achievement at charter schools,” says a preschool teacher. The implication here is that public schools are essentially less constrained by a focus on test scores and academics, because they cannot have their charter revoked – they will continue to exist. This is potentially a difficult case to sustain, given the overarching focus on a test-driven culture, across public and public charter schools, but there is a question of how a focus on achievement leaves room for strong social-emotional learning components, and whether the structure of a charter school makes that space more difficult to find.

Finally, although not inherently a key characteristic of charter schools, DC Prep, like many others, does “tend to attract a lot of young teachers, who can be short-lived.” A youthful staff comes with a range of positive and negative aspects; as one second grade teacher says, “We have a young staff, which has huge benefits in terms of energy – we’re not married, we don’t have families, we don’t have to get home to get the kids from school – so we have more energy to devote to school. On the other hand, we don’t have ‘wise old codgers’ and I miss that. They used to bring calm at my old school.” In addition to “calm,” we know that experienced teachers bring a level of maturity, mastery and instructional strength to a classroom, which means that DC Prep is working on increasing teacher retention. “New teachers,” explains the principal, “focus on the science of teaching. We have to figure out how to incorporate the art, and how to ensure that structures and systems don’t prevent teachers from taking chances and being great.” It’s a challenge: as one (longtime) teacher says, “we’re still trying to figure out how to balance student achievement and teacher burnout,” a challenge faced by charter and traditional public schools across the country.

QUESTION #3: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

What successes and challenges has DC Prep encountered in implementing a PreK-3rd framework?

As we worked through the wide range of elements comprising the PreK-3rd grade framework, we found significant strengths and a number of ongoing challenges. One outstanding element was that, as we analyzed the survey results, we found that across and within grades, teachers were split, often evenly, on whether elements were *strengths*; were *being actively worked on*; or *sometimes happened*. This is indicative of a sense, conveyed both in the surveys and the focus groups, that some elements are not yet systemic, but are experienced as strengths or challenges depending on the individual relationships teachers have with the other teachers in their grades, and across the grade levels. Despite these variances, however, there were some areas in which teachers and administrators overwhelmingly agreed.

Data: Integrated and Infused into Every Aspect of Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction

DC Prep's greatest strength, as identified by a majority of its teachers, is in its use of data; 83 percent say that "sufficient data on student achievement is available to teachers to support data-driven, differentiated instruction." In addition, 57 percent say that the school's "capacity to share data on children and teachers across the PreK-3 years" is a strength, while another 29 percent note that the school is actively working on it. "We are extremely focused on collecting, analyzing and sharing data," notes one Kindergarten teacher. "Essentially every lesson, conference and assessment is tracked and analyzed individually, as a grade level, and as a school."

Using a range of tracking tools, including advanced databases, built-in standardized test assessments and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, teachers are supported in their efforts to collect, analyze and utilize data on macro and micro levels, from the student to the classroom to the grade to the school. Data books from the DC-CAS are "analyzed for a full day," by all teachers working together, and results from the previous year are used to inform the focal areas for the pre-service professional development days. The administration is proud, rightfully so, of its work related to data collection, use and sharing; and teachers, when asked about their comfort levels with the data, laugh easily: if you're not comfortable when you start, you get there fast.

High-Quality Teaching and Professional Development: Strong and Comprehensive With Space for More Vertical Opportunities

Related to the school's support for data collection and use is the overall appreciation that teachers have for DC Prep's high expectations in the areas of high-quality teaching and professional development. Almost half of teachers agreed that one of DC Prep's greatest strength was in this area, driven in part by agreement on the strength of the school's data collection and sharing. "DC Prep is very serious about allowing consistent and constructive PD to all staff," remarks one preschool teacher. In addition, as one first grade teacher remarked, "The PD here is actually effective – I don't think, oh, I've been through this four times already." Teachers also noted and appreciated the school's efforts to incorporate and support new teachers; "there is a lot of PD for new teachers, learning the techniques, expectations and tools to make everything uniform."

Yet, as noted above, DC Prep, like most schools, does continue to struggle with providing joint professional development opportunities and planning time across grades throughout the school year. Forty-three percent of teachers said the school is actively working on ensuring that “administrators and teachers are provided with ongoing professional development, teamwork opportunities and planning time to ensure and strengthen alignment.”

DC Prep tends to “front-load” their professional development, taking advantage of time before the school year begins to pack in a huge range of information about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and, of course, data. In terms of informal relationship-building, however, teachers did note that they have “here-and-there opportunities to connect” and that “teachers ask for opportunities to sit down together, and then leadership makes it happen but they leave it to the teachers to plan.”

Teacher, particularly lead teachers, are provided with a range of opportunities for leadership; when it comes to promoting the ongoing collection, analysis and utilization of data, for example, the administration is looking towards lead teachers to provide structure for the data days at the grade level meetings – in a role different than an instructional coach. Teachers are also asked to lead in terms of the work around alignment; we heard repeatedly about the theme that teachers who had taught other grades were better prepared for the continuum because they understand either where the kids were coming from or where they were moving towards. They also had developed relationships with the teachers above or below them, and were able to use those relationships and the knowledge of what students needed to know and be able to do in that year to further their current grade levels’ strength around alignment and coordination.

Alignment and Coordination: Moving From Good to Great

Almost half of teachers also agreed that, while not yet to the level of a real “strength,” there was significant work being done to move forward in the area of alignment and coordination across standards, curricula and assessments. Sixty-two percent of teachers feel the school is actively working to ensure that “benchmarks have been academically back-mapped from the end point of college and career readiness, and forward-mapped from a developmental perspective.” Says one teacher, “aligning and backwards mapping is making teachers more prepared because we have a better sense of what they’re coming in with, and each year they’re coming in with more and more.”

With a new vertical alignment document recently created with support from an external consultant, DC Prep is moving towards a completely integrated and coordinated system. “There are multiple curricula in use by grade level,” says an instructional coach, “but we have a new principal and a new framework and new ways of thinking about curriculum and assessments.”

- *Standards*

“What’s different about DC Prep,” notes a Kindergarten teacher, “is that we are so standards-based. Discussions happening in kindergarten are also happening – maybe on

a deeper level – in second and third grade. We’re all talking about the same things.” Nevertheless, standards are difficult, and, as another Kindergarten teacher notes, “backwards mapping is hard – from top down and bottom up, instructionally and culturally getting everyone on the same program. For example, understanding what does a hallway and a classroom look like and sound like,” and how does this change and grow from year to year?

- *Curriculum*

Fifty-seven percent of teachers agree that the school is strong in terms of whether its “curriculum is aligned to grade-level standards and frameworks.” Yet the school is “moving towards operating out of a framework and not curriculum, with a focus on standards, and this is sort of a new thing for us.” Interestingly, the District of Columbia Public Schools, which has been operating without a curriculum, in the context of a framework, is now moving in the opposite direction, where, in the next three years, they will be developing curricula for every grade level and subject, such that teachers no longer have to “make it up.”^{viii} DC Prep has been struggling with this balance as well; as one veteran second grade teacher noted, “The curriculum started off very structured, but now there’s no curriculum, and we make up our own. At first, we wanted to make it easy, but the curriculum wasn’t moving kids as fast as it needed to and now we don’t think a commercial curriculum can meet our needs.” So how does this teacher suggest that their needs can be met in an aligned and coordinated manner? “We do need skills to be able to implement a framework; we need to be able to backwards map; we need access to resources like books and manuals; we need expertise in assessment and in using data; and we need to be creative with a positive attitude – that we’re not just here to earn a paycheck.”

- *Assessments*

Teachers are evenly split on how they feel about DC Prep’s approach to assessments – when asked whether assessments are “accurate, ethical, and carried out in ways that benefit children,” approximately one-third each see this area as a strength; as being actively worked on; or as something that sometimes happens. “For the most part,” sums up one first grade teacher, “assessments are accurate and effective. At times there are too many.” And although the earlier grades typically have a strong reaction to assessments, at least one preschool teacher noted that she “thought [the kids] would hate [assessments], but when we help them see it as a game, they get less intimidated by them, and since we do it so often, they get used to it.”

Seamless Transitions: Making Every Year a Smooth Move

Within a successful PreK-3rd grade continuum, typical transition activities give way to a seamless system of supports, where the flow from year to year is natural and supported by aligned and sequenced standards, curriculum, instructions and assessments. Indeed, as a Kindergarten teacher remarks, “Across the board, we make a big deal about moving up – every grade does a visit to the grade above, and adapt it for what’s appropriate for that year, so transition from PreK to K isn’t that special in the PreK-3rd context.”

Yet there are efforts made in each grade to ensure seamless transitions from year to year, based on shared policies and ongoing relationship-building among and between teachers, parents and children. Some of those efforts are focused on the beginning and end of each year; as a kindergarten teacher explains, “before the year begins, each grade level team sits down with a list of all the kids and we have the first role in assigning the kids for next year’s classes. We all know which kids were in classes before, so we know which teachers to ask about any issues we’re having.” But most of the “transitions” have become part of the aligned culture of the school. “We have a strong grasp of 3rd grade,” says a second grade teacher, “and when we plan for 2nd grade, we think about how to prepare them for 3rd grade.” Similarly, a PreK teacher says that “we think about it like this isn’t just for PreK – this is building them up for K.”

One interesting aspect of the transitions, in terms of sharing information across grades, is the administration’s focus on data in that they “stress that we present facts,” as one teacher said, “and not be subjective.” But it is important for the school to consider how this may support or interfere with the sharing of information that is so critical to implementing a successfully aligned system.

Affirming Learning Climates & Social-Emotional Learning: Balancing the Importance of Social-Emotional Development in the Context of an Academic-Driven Culture

Not surprisingly, given the overwhelming culture of testing and achievement, teachers and administrators alike expressed concerns about the drop-off in social-emotional support as children reach the higher grades, as well as concerns about the school’s ability to effectively serve children with a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These challenges meant that the area of “affirming learning climates” received the highest percentages in *sometimes happens* and *doesn’t happen* on the reflective survey, with 30 percent and 5 percent respectively. The concerns began in the youngest grades, with a preschool teacher commenting that her kids “don’t even know each other – can’t even call out each other’s names – because there’s no time to build relationships. Our schedule is so tight and tense this year that we don’t have time to take deep breaths.” Another noted that “I see my former 3-year olds having major behavior problems at 5 and 6 years old because they didn’t get what they needed when they were younger.” And although another preschool teacher did say that “you can do social-emotional learning in a myriad of ways within the classroom,” she also indicated that “it’s not systemic.”

Teachers in the upper elementary grades agreed: in third grade, one teacher noted that “it is an issue – we are more and more focused on standards, and less and less on social-emotional learning.” “In preschool and PreK,” explained a second grade teacher, “character education is an end in and of itself, but in my class, it’s a means to an end. We need it to accomplish what we need to accomplish academically.” Yet from a developmental perspective, social-emotional learning is a key part of the PreK-3rd grade continuum. “Third grade can feel old, but they’re still only 7 or 8 years old, and that can be really hard to remember sometimes,” noted one third grade teacher.

In addition, although couched as a social-emotional issue, the question of talking, which can be a literacy issue as well, came up in a number of grade levels. In preschool, a teacher said that “kids need time to just talk, without constraints,” a feeling echoed in first grade, where a teacher asked, “When do kids get to talk? They have silent halls and silent lunch. They rarely get a chance to speak.”

Family and Community Engagement: Getting on the Same Page

There was a wide range of responses in the area of “family and community engagement,” with some teachers, particularly in the lower grades, identifying this as a strength, and others feeling that there was much more the school could do. Like social-emotional learning, and unlike data, family engagement is not fully systemic. “Engagement,” as one teacher noted, “is really up to the teachers” – and the teachers, within and across grades, feel very differently about families, engagement, and teacher responsibilities.

Many teachers talked about what they and the school needed to do to support parents. “We have to teach the culture to parents too,” teachers said, “especially when they see things like kids in Kindergarten getting three homework assignments a night.” Yet although teachers provide home visits at the beginning of the year, a number of teachers felt that parents did not feel “welcomed...definitely not in the classroom.” “Parents feel that it’s cold and silent...they don’t feel nurtured even when the school is so successful,” said one. “We need to invite parents to more academically-based assemblies,” said another. “Because now, every time we try to explain stuff, we’re in the cafeteria, and kids are screaming and everyone is like, ‘Let’s get to the raffle.’”

Yet many teachers also talked about where families are coming from and what they need to do. “Lots of families say they will come to events and then they don’t,” said one teacher. “Our families aren’t looking for more involvement,” explained another. Yet another noted that, “We assume that if you enrolled your child in a charter school, then you must care enough to do that, meaning you want your child to be successful. But some families are here just because it’s convenient.”

Finally, the relatively high percentage of teachers who did not know about the types of supports offered to families was also striking, and demonstrates a need for more information sharing around the school’s activities and expectations. Establishing meaningful family engagement is very challenging, and DC Prep must determine what type of family engagement the school wants, and what messages it most wants to convey to families – while ensuring that all teachers understand and convey the same message as well.

QUESTION #4: EASY TO TALK ABOUT, HARD TO DO

How do key PreK-3rd concepts and buzzwords become a part of daily practice?

This is the question at the core of this case study – and the core of the PreK-3rd grade agenda. We can begin to answer it by understanding not only what the successes and challenges faced by a school like DC Prep have been, but also why they have been categorized as such, and what

the school has done and can continue to do to sustain the successes and overcome the difficulties.

Develop a Shared Language and Culture

Across grade levels, many teachers said, “We’re all in this together.” “We are a tight-knit group,” said one 3rd grade teacher, “drinking from the same well.” Although we saw differences in how teacher interpreted some of the school’s strengths and challenges, it was clear that DC Prep has a culture, and that teachers and administrators are bought into that culture – predicated, as we indicated earlier, on intentionality, flexibility, planning and achievement. There is also a sense of palpable empowerment among the teachers, who noted “we’re full of squeaky wheels” and “we can actually change things. No one is holding us back.” This kind of culture can account for a wide range of successes and possibilities.

Allow Change to Build Over Time

But of course no culture is created quickly. In fact, some of the more veteran teachers talked about the importance of time, trial and error. As one teacher noted, “We didn’t have a blueprint for DC-CAS four years ago. We started doing standards alignment, and pacing, and then the DC-BAS, but that was ineffective, so we had to find something else. We’ve been through all these mistakes and that allows us to be successful now.”

The ability to serve kids over time also matters, despite the struggles with mobility that DC Prep – along with the majority of urban schools – confronts. “The ability to build year by year really matters,” says one PreK teacher. “There has been a lot of trial and error, but I’m seeing more of DC Prep’s vision every year,” says another 1st grade teacher. “With the preschoolers who are now in 1st grade, you can really see the difference.” This sentiment was echoed repeatedly as well, from PreK all the way through 3rd grade. In PreK, teachers noted that “almost all PreK kids went to PS at DC Prep, which makes a huge difference.” And in 2nd grade, teachers agreed that most of their students “were in PreK when they started, and [we] think it shows. We can tell you which kids haven’t been at DC Prep since PreK.”

Prioritize Elements of the Framework Based on School and Student Needs

Since data collection, analysis and implementation is typically a challenging area for many teachers and schools, it is worth understanding that DC Prep has made this a strength by relentlessly prioritizing data in the way they allocate time, professional development opportunities, resources and support. Teachers understand the school’s emphasis on data, to the point where, when asked how difficult it was to bring everyone on board, one preschool teacher noted that “we don’t have a choice...it doesn’t matter whether we agree with it or not, that’s the way it is.” Comparatively, where social-emotional learning is a challenge, it is partly a result of the fact that, as the principal notes, “as a school, social-emotional learning is not one of the things we beat to death.”

Measure and Assess Elements of the Framework That Need to Be Prioritized

As the principal noted, there is no accountability for social-emotional learning – which is one of the major reasons why it is not a strength of this data-driven school. In order to ensure that an

element of the framework is a part of the daily implementation, it is key to ensure that it is measured and that its progress is assessed. As the principal noted, DC Prep is working to find a “natural” assessment for social-emotional learning; when asked how they would imagine measuring SEL, one preschool teacher said they were already trying – looking at the number of times a child engages in back-and-forth conversations and interactions; tracking how many times they go to the “sit-and-watch” chair, etc. But in a data-driven culture, what gets counted is what gets measured – so it is critical to find a way to measure children’s social-emotional learning and teachers’ ability and capacity to effectively deliver it across the full PreK-3rd grade spectrum.

QUESTION #5: A FRAMEWORK THAT WORKS

Why is PreK-3rd a successful model for Black children and families?

With a nearly all-Black population, it is critical for DC Prep to address questions of race and culture, particularly in terms of student-teacher-family relationships. Although the administration notes that they do attempt to acknowledge race and culture through professional development opportunities, they are clearly limited to the start of the school year and ongoing conversations are not made a priority.

Teachers themselves had varying degrees of comfort with race-based discussions; one White teacher noted that “When [a Black teacher] was my resident teacher, parents would always go to her to talk instead of me,” and another indicated that “If you come in as a White teacher to a Black family, and you assume that you have respect because you’re a teacher, that’s when you have a problem.” Still others refused to acknowledge race or culture as an aspect of their relationship with families: one teacher insisted that it had not ever been an issue – despite having just finished a story about talking to a parent who had told his child that if he were ever hit, he should hit back, without any recognition of how this may manifest as a value with cultural origins.

NBCDI has found that the PreK-3rd framework can be particularly meaningful for Black children and families because it is designed to establish a context for strengthening instructional practices by building on strengths and recognizing cultural patterns. The crucial factors in PreK-3rd education for Black kids include the following six areas:

- ✓ Effective and Aligned Instruction Across Consecutive Years
- ✓ Positive Relationship Development Between Children and Teachers
- ✓ Strong Family and Community Engagement
- ✓ Importance of Social-Emotional Development
- ✓ Access to Full-Day, High-Quality PreK and Kindergarten
- ✓ Successful, Supportive and Seamless Transitions

DC Prep, like many schools, has put several of these elements into place, but the school has not infused them with an open recognition of the impact of race and culture, and must move towards supporting more ongoing formal and informal conversations through professional

development opportunities that stress the importance of cultural expectations of parents; operating with a range of culturally relevant classroom techniques; and promoting positive relationship development through a lens of cultural understanding.

QUESTION #6: LEARNING FROM WHAT WORKS (AND WHAT DOESN'T)

What lessons can be applied to other charter schools and to the public school system?

In summarizing the findings and recommendations from our work with DC Prep, the National Black Child Development Institute offers the following lessons for schools and districts attempting to implement a strong PreK-3rd grade framework, particularly in schools serving primarily Black children and families:

Lesson #1: To ensure that PreK-3rd grade is implemented in a systemic manner, and is not built upon relationships between individual teachers, create a shared culture and language over time through joint professional development opportunities; shared teacher planning time; and by empowering grade-level teachers and instructional coaches.

Lesson #2: To emphasize the importance of PreK-3rd, while recognizing that everything cannot be accomplished at once, identify 1-2 elements of the framework to prioritize based on student and teacher needs – and then demonstrate that it is a priority by allocating time and funding to implement it.

Lesson #3: To recognize and elevate the importance of social-emotional support, develop and utilize social-emotional accountability measures that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

Lesson #4: To strengthen and support meaningful family engagement, ensure that there is a clear, shared concept of what successful family engagement looks like, and that the concept is transparently communicated to all teachers and family members using a wide range of materials and strategies.

Lesson #5: To improve cultural competency among teachers, Black and White, support conversations about race and culture through professional development opportunities and encourage open conversation about difficult issues such as cultural expectations of parents; engaging in different classroom techniques that reflect cultural diversity; code-switching; and relationship development between teachers, parents and children.

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- ⁱⁱ Rank & Hirschl. *Estimating the Risk of Food Stamp Use and Impoverishment During Childhood*. Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine. 163(11): 994-999. 2009
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Nation's Report Card. *Reading Assessment 2009: A National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4 and 8*. Institute of Education Sciences: NCES 2010-458. 2009.
- ^{iv} DC Prep uses the term "preschool" to describe its 3-year old classes and the terms "pre-kindergarten" to describe its 4-year old classes. Though we will use the "PreK-3rd grade" language in this paper, "PreK" includes both "preschool" and "pre-kindergarten" when applied to DC Prep, and we use both "preschool and PreK" in this paper to distinguish between teachers teaching 3 year olds and those teaching 4 year olds.
- ^v www.dcprep.org
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Mead, Sara. *PreK-3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders*. PreK-3rd Policy to Action Brief: Number 7. Foundation for Child Development. April 2011.
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