

Annual Forum October 20, 2005
Making the Most of our Early Education Investments

Introduction: Gene Maeroff, Senior Fellow, Hechinger Institute on Education, Columbia University

Thank you, Ruby. It's a pleasure to be a part of today's panel. And speaking on behalf of the panel, our hope is to illuminate a topic that FCD has been instrumental in bringing to the fore. This week, I had the occasion to speak with the parents of a five-year old. Their daughter has shown in repeated testing that she can handle the work of the first, second, and third grade levels. But, because she is only five-years old, the school system she's in wants to put her into Kindergarten. In addition, because of where she lives, the state only supports half-day Kindergarten.

Therefore, the regulations are that if she's in a grade other than Kindergarten, she would only be eligible for the kind of support that would come for half-day Kindergarten. After many requests by the parents, the district agreed to put her into first grade. But the parents got billed \$3,000 because that was the difference between what the district was getting from the state and what it cost to educate her. This example shows how the system doesn't necessarily or always respond to the developmental needs of kids. It shows why it's important to have a school with a Prekindergarten through third grade that lets the child move along in her work according to her ability, however quickly or slowly that may take and without regard for grade level or age.

So what is PK-3?

I think we've all heard about PK, UPK, K-12, K-16 or even PK-16, but PK-3 sounds a bit like a secret government project. And soon, I think, it will not be a secret if you follow along on some of those plans that Ruby was just outlining. PK-3 recognizes that this nation's youngest pupils need special attention. The incident I've just cited demonstrates along with others that the current structure doesn't serve pupils adequately.

At two of its previous forums, the Foundation for Child Development focused on full-day Kindergarten and universal Prekindergarten, and indeed, I think the nation is moving forward on that agenda.

But even the realization of universal Prekindergarten and full-day Kindergarten will not represent a complete response to the challenge of building a solid foundation of learning for every child. What happens after Prekindergarten and Kindergarten? Are they enough just by themselves? We know the answers to those questions. The research tells us this: hope can become despair and gains can dissipate. Without a continuum of learning that carries through the primary grades, the gains from PK and K cannot I don't think that gains can always be sustained.

The research tells us this: hope can become despair and gains can dissipate. But what happens after that level?

And so, PK-3 is about carrying through on a promise, constructing a foundation that can withstand education's hurricanes, if you will. I guess I am up here moderating this session today because I've had some time to think about these issues. For almost two years, I've been visiting schools and classrooms, delving into the practices and policies surrounding the education of the youngest school children. It's clear to me that an orderly approach that stacks stone upon stone, carefully aligning them just like a good fence builder, will provide children with the best education through their primary years. As a result of thinking in PK-3 terms, educators can give special standing to this phase of education in at least five ways that I've seen.

One, PK-3 obviously, is that it represents an emphasis on the beginning years, the early years, the foundational years of schooling. Second, PK-3 is it's a natural for staff development. People because you're talking about people working at schools who have a commonality of interests; and what happens among them in staff development often feeds off these mutual interests. Third, PK-3 encourages it also works very well with planning. Educators with these common interests can plan

together and assure the alignment of the work. PK-3 is also Teamwork: it's a natural for vertical teaming and horizontal teaming; involving those who work on the same grade level and those who carry out instruction that's in the best interest of children as they go through the continuum. Grouping is fourth. Proximity allows for grouping and regrouping children, regardless of age or grade so that they can be with peer groups that promote learning. And finally, fifth, inherent in PK-3 part of this is a culminating goalculmination inherent in PK-3. There is a culmination and it says that every child, leaving third grade will, one hopes, be able to go on and be ready to do the work that awaits her in the fourth grade. As some would say, "When they stop learning to read, they start reading to learn."

I found that, at its best, whatever form PK-3 takes, certain common attributes strengthen the approach so far as the pupils are concerned. It leads to alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment. It stresses the primacy of literacy. It promotes articulation within and between grades. It is a model for continuous progress. It provides or should provide more time for learning, overcoming the strictures of a clock and calendar, and, finally, it should contain wrap-around services that acknowledge that the school day is not enough for children or their parents.

Today, you're going to hear from educators from three places: Chicago, Illinois; Union City, New Jersey; and Independence, Missouri. Their stories are different but they attest to the idea that PK-3 can take various forms. Ideally, PK-3 operates in its a freestanding school where people have to face reality about the possibilities immediately. But, And I think it can thrive even in a larger school that has other grades and integrity.

Our first speaker, Edith Allen-Coleman, is the principal of Daniel Webster Lorraine Hansberry Child Parent Center in Chicago. Edith has been the school's principal for eight years. During and during her thirty-six years at the school, she's held teaching positions in the school's pre-school, kindergarten, and primary grade levels. Edith is a life-long resident of Chicago. She and earned her Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and received her MastersMaster's Degree from Roosevelt University. She's been a staff developer for Chicago public schools and holds membership in various organizations and outreach programs.

Following Edith's presentation, Adriana Birne will give a report on given from Union City, New Jersey's PK-3 program. Jersey by Adriana Birne. Adriana is the principal of the Early Childhood Programs for the Union City Board of Education. Adriana is a former second-grade and kindergarten teacher and served as the Executive Director of the Union City Daycare Program. In 1987, she was given the honor of New Jersey's Teacher of the Year by from which she received a proclamation from former New Jersey governor, Christine Todd Whitman. Adriana is also the recipient of the Elena Mederos Award from the National Association of Cuban-American Women in 2002. Arriving in the U.S. from Havana, Cuba at the age of nine, Adriana speaks English, Spanish and Italian and holds degrees from Jersey City State College.

Our last speaker will be Jim Hinson who has come to us from Independence, Missouri. Jim received his degrees from Missouri Southern State College. He received his EDD from St. Louis University. In 2001 and 2003, Jim became the Superintendent of the Independence School District. His accomplishments among others in the district have been to implement nutritional policies based on statistical findings of a task force he organized to review child obesity and health concerns.