



THE NAESP FOUNDATION TASK FORCE ON EARLY LEARNING

Building & Supporting an Aligned System:
**A Vision for Transforming
Education Across the
Pre-K-Grade Three Years**



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As our nation struggles with an unacceptably high dropout rate, stakeholders are increasingly recognizing early learning as an essential solution to reversing the trend. The benefits of high-quality early learning programs are irrefutable, particularly for our neediest children. However, the United States has yet to fully commit and align policy, funding, and practice.

Recognizing this gap, in 2010, the National Association of Elementary School Principals Foundation convened a Task Force of leading researchers, advocates, policymakers, and practitioners to examine how to promote efforts to provide high-quality learning experiences for our youngest children. With generous support from the ING Foundation, the Task Force convened over a 6-month period to examine the continuum of early learning from ages 3 through 8 and how to better connect resources to meet the needs of children. This report details the results of those rich conversations.

The work of this Task Force builds upon past efforts by NAESP to help build knowledge and understanding of best practices. In 2005, NAESP developed *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, a guide that outlines the six standards for what principals should know and be able to do as leaders of early childhood learning communities:

Embrace early childhood learning

Engage families and communities

Promote appropriate learning environments for young children

Ensure quality teaching

Use multiple assessments to strengthen learning

Advocate for high-quality, universal early childhood education

NAESP is a strong advocate of strengthening early childhood education. Our members know firsthand how imperative those early years can be for a child's success. How our young children develop in the early years from age 3 to age 8 will impact our nation for generations to come in educational outcomes and in the strength of our economy and our democracy. NAESP is dedicated to helping to build an aligned system of early learning for children from pre-kindergarten through third grade to achieve these goals.

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The impact of high-quality early learning experiences is well established, particularly for children at risk for underachievement. Yet by and large, communities, states, and the country as a whole have made only marginal strides in creating and supporting an infrastructure that provides all children and families with access to these crucial early learning opportunities that are so vital to our nation's education, civic, and economic prosperity.

In the fall of 2010, the National Association of Elementary School Principals Foundation convened a task force of leading researchers, policymakers, community organizers, and practitioners to examine strategies for building an aligned system for early learning. Recognizing that principals are increasingly responsible for young children in preschool, as well as kindergarten and the early grades, the Foundation charged the Task Force with looking across the entire early learning landscape to better inform the work of principals and other stakeholders.

Given its role as the foundation for all future learning and success in school, the need for quality early learning has never been greater. Nationwide, only 69 percent of students earn their high school diplomas. Among students of color, the figures are even more troubling: only 56 percent of Hispanic and 54 percent of African-American students graduate with a diploma, compared with 77 percent of Caucasian students.ⁱ Roughly 70 percent of all entering ninth graders read below grade level, a trend that begins much earlier.ⁱⁱ The most recent NAEP results for the fourth grade found 67 percent of students scoring “below proficient” in reading.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, there is a growing body of research that shows the achievement gap begins before children even enter kindergarten.

The current state of pre-K through third grade education reflects a complicated web of federal, state, and local policies and practices. In pre-kindergarten, children participate on a voluntary basis in programs that do not have a coherent structure for governance, funding, or implementation. As a result, too few children benefit from a robust early learning experience, the programs themselves are not supported with coherent standards



DEFINING THE EARLY LEARNING CONTINUUM

Task Force members embrace the full continuum of early learning from birth through grade three. However, the Task Force focused recommendations specifically on children **ages 3-8**—or pre-kindergarten through grade three—to highlight the need for public school engagement with early childhood programs and parents of young children to enhance early school success for all children.

“Now if we are to prevent the achievement gap and develop a cradle-to-career educational pipeline, early learning programs are going to have to be better integrated with the K-12 system.”

**U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan,
National Association for the Education of
Young Children Annual Conference,
November 18, 2009, Washington, D.C.**

and quality-improvement mechanisms, and governance is fragmented. The availability of kindergarten is also highly variable, with unstable funding in many districts and parents paying for full-day programs. The older years on the spectrum—first through third grades—stand in stark contrast to the earlier years, as they are embedded in the highly structured public school system.

Moreover, federal policy, guidance, and funding for young children is housed in many different federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of Defense. To remove these barriers, many federal policies must be addressed, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and Child Care and Head Start statutes and regulations. IDEA, for example, contains Part B and Part C—one to address children ages 0-2, the other from ages 3-21. ESEA, which outlines the federal government’s vision for education, lacks a focus on the early years, thus encouraging states and districts to continue with the old mindset that “education” begins in elementary school.

This creates a siloed approach to addressing the developmental needs of young children that continues to the state level, where agencies and administrative oversight often mirror the federal infrastructure, with

the exception of a few states where leaders have worked to break down the silos. At the community level, the picture is even more complex. Many of the pockets of innovation and excellence in existence rely on “superhero” community leaders who learn to navigate the muddy federal and state policy waters to build effective programs.

For example, the Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS) in Maryland is recognized nationwide for its systemic, integrated, high-quality early learning strategy.^{iv} As part of the overall strategy for improving student outcomes, MCPS integrated Title I funds with Head Start funds to provide full-day pre-kindergarten. The school system has built a seamless stair-stepping system for young children from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten and beyond. The result: 90 percent of kindergartners enter first grade ready to learn.

Research shows that high-quality early learning can substantially increase the likelihood of academic success. For example, studies show that children who attend high quality pre-kindergarten programs are “less likely to be held back a grade, less likely to need special education, and more likely to graduate high school”.^v However, there is widespread acknowledgement among the Task Force members that much more is needed to move from those pockets of excellence to the fully aligned systems needed to support all of our youngest learners.

This report describes a vision to guide the hard work involved in aligning early childhood and elementary education.

A Vision for an Aligned System of Pre-K–Grade Three Learning

The Task Force envisions a carefully planned, standards-based and well-resourced pre-K-grade three system in which all children and families have access to high-quality learning and care. Policy, funding, and practice are aligned to provide communities with the necessary infrastructure to ensure positive early learning experiences. Programs are based on a strong foundation of evidence and data. Teachers and leaders are trained, compensated, and supported in the classroom. And expectations for children and for educators include all aspects of early child development and learning, rather than only subjects addressed in standardized achievement tests.^{vi}

To achieve this vision, the Task Force recommends 10 action steps for policymakers and other stakeholders:

ACTION STEPS

- 1.** Better integrate and align federal policy, regulation, and funding to enable states and communities to build a coherent system of early learning from pre-K through third grade.
- 2.** Coordinate and streamline state and local governance.
- 3.** Expand funding for pre-kindergarten through third grade learning to ensure that all children—particularly the most at-risk children—have access to high-quality, full-day learning experiences.
- 4.** Ensure that funding for the full continuum of pre-K through third grade learning is directed to programs of high quality.
- 5.** Leverage and integrate private funding with public resources.
- 6.** Create an aligned continuum of research-based, age-appropriate standards for young children that include a focus on social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, and creative learning, as well as school-related skills.
- 7.** Develop and support an effective, well-compensated workforce with high-quality teacher and administrator preparation programs, professional development, and continuing education. These educators should be versed in the full continuum of early childhood education.
- 8.** Develop and administer age-appropriate assessments that include both formative and summative evaluations to help guide teaching and learning and to inform program effectiveness.
- 9.** Develop state and local longitudinal data systems that include pre-K student and program information.
- 10.** Evaluate models of early learning integration and alignment through research.

As communities, state leaders, and federal policymakers struggle with the most challenging economic outlook in nearly 80 years, the Task Force urges stakeholders to invest in building a strong early-learning continuum now to ensure a generation of successful learners, workers, and citizens.



1. Better integrate and align federal policy, regulation, and funding to enable states and communities to build a coherent system of early learning from pre-K through third grade.

The Task Force recommends that all levels of government work together to build a coherent approach to high-quality early-learning experiences for all children. The Task Force commends recent federal leadership to coordinate the early childhood efforts of the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, as well as leadership to develop and provide initial funding for State Early Childhood Advisory Councils to promote collaboration across the early childhood-grade three continuum. The Task Force also supports recent federal efforts to direct funding to early learning. The Early Learning Challenge Fund proposed in

President Barack Obama's budget for fiscal year 2012 and a bill introduced by U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) promote incentives to states to develop model systems of early learning. In addition, there have been large investments in competitive grants to spur innovation, both at the state and community level, in Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation (i3), and Promise Neighborhoods. The Task Force recommends that the administration continue to promote, recognize, and reward in future competitive grants and other funding those states and districts that develop model systems of early learning that extend through third grade.

2. Coordinate and streamline state and local governance.

Early childhood education up to age 5 exists outside of any cohesive governance structure. In elementary schools (as in middle and high schools), there is a full spectrum of governance: state boards of education, a state superintendent, local school boards, district superintendents and administrators, principals, and teachers. Until programs for children up to age 5 are strategically linked with schooling for children in kindergarten and up through the early grades, there will inevitably be only marginal improvements in outcomes for our children.

States are an important partner in building a more coherent and effective governance system for young children 3-8 years of age. Two examples of recent efforts to better align systems are Maryland and Pennsylvania. Maryland, through its state department of education, has fully integrated several programs for children up to age 5 into an early childhood office at the state Department of Education and has stressed the linkage of those programs to K-12 services. Pennsylvania presents another option, with one early childhood office and staff that sets funding and policy and which also oversees program implementation for all early learning programs from birth to age 5, regardless of the department where the program is housed. The continuum of early learning includes child care, Head Start (when state funded), pre-kindergarten, birth-to-5 early intervention, and home visiting in order to focus on providing high quality services to as many at-risk children as possible and to build an integrated approach to support quality as the baseline for all public spending.

Elected and civic leaders at the municipal and county levels must also know and understand the importance of early learning. They should participate in community-based coalitions, advocate for appropriate resources, and include financing for early learning when setting budget priorities. It is important that community leaders strive for a unified vertical and horizontal local approach that includes meaningful planning and implementation involving the early childhood stakeholders. Among them are providers of pre-k and other preschool programs, providers of K-12 programs, health and human services providers, parents, and civic leaders who work on public policy.

"PreK-3rd educational systems operate in a culture of shared responsibility and accountability for child outcomes: All the adults involved in children's PreK-3rd experiences—pre-k teachers in both community- and school-based settings, elementary grades teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents—hold themselves collectively responsible for ensuring that students acquire grade-level reading, math, and social-emotional skills by the end of third grade."

Lisa Guernsey and Sara Mead, *A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education*, New America Foundation, 2010.

Collaboration between families, communities, educators and policymakers is critical to building alignment for early learning. Parents and community partners are assets—facilitate their engagement in young children’s successful learning. Schools and early childhood providers should develop specific strategies for engaging parents and identify intermediaries to help build relationships with families.



Leaders should work collaboratively on the following:

- Develop a community-wide master plan that includes and prioritizes services for children in pre-K through third grade and that spans human services and education components, outlining authority, priority, and resources.
- Secure funding for coalitions of stakeholders to implement the master plan.

Beyond the city- or county-level support and leadership, school and early childhood providers must make a concerted effort to connect, develop, and share a common strategy for early learning from pre-K through third grade with the larger community. Elementary school principals and leaders of programs for children up to age 5 have key roles to play in these efforts. And community stakeholders should also look beyond their borders to outside communities and states to help them develop strategies and strong programs.

At the school level, principals should:

- Establish a school culture that encourages the connection of families and community resources with the formal school environment (parents and community partners are assets—educators should welcome and support their engagement in young children’s learning);
- Establish relationships with providers in the community that serve children up to age 5;
- Share data about children’s achievement with those providers and parents of current students;
- Help those children and families new to the formal school environment transition; and
- Become instructional leaders who foster a continuum approach to learning, with curriculum, standards, and assessments aligned to help teachers enrich and build upon their students’ learning year after year.

Community-based early-childhood providers and leaders should:

- Establish a relationship with schools and school districts to ensure that children and families are able to transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten programs without a disruption to their learning;
- Work with districts in establishing standards of instructional practice and expectations for children’s development; and
- Share data about children’s strengths and vulnerabilities with schools and parents.

Both schools and early childhood programs need to:

- Develop an organized instructional plan for each grade level beginning with pre-kindergarten that connects early learning with public schools;
- Convene joint meetings so that all stakeholders can share what children are learning and ensure that their learning is being sustained and built upon, year after year, in grade after grade; and
- Collaborate with parents and community members in developing and sharing strategies.

Finally, community-based partners can increase public awareness of the benefits of these strategies by leveraging public and private resources to support the pre-K through third grade strategies.

3. Expand funding for pre-kindergarten through third grade learning to ensure that all children—particularly the most at-risk children—have access to high-quality, full-day learning experiences.

There is a broad range of funding mechanisms that include consumers and the government, and an even broader range of costs, associated with different age groups and programs. The core funding that helps to enroll children includes the following funding streams:

- Head Start (federal to grantee);
- Child care (federal to state);
- Early childhood services for young children with disabilities (federal to state);
- Pre-K (state generated, at the discretion of the state); and
- ESEA, Title I (at the discretion of the local school district)

Parents play the most significant role in financing early learning services. Of the public funds invested, the federal government contributes the lion's share of public dollars. Early childhood programs for children up to age 5, as well as many kindergartens, are generally funded at much lower levels than services for children in first through twelfth grade: not all children are covered to participate and the state funding formulas rarely cover either full-day kindergarten or preschool programming.

Young learners, particularly those most at risk of failure, benefit academically and socially from participation in a high-quality learning program in the years prior to kindergarten. Unfortunately, this option remains limited for many families, with access depending on the child's state or zip code. Full-day kindergarten is also not available to many students. In contrast, students in the elementary grades have access to public schooling by law in each of the 50 states.

Oklahoma has a long-standing history of expanding access to pre-K programming. The state first set out to provide universal access to all 4-year-olds, and recently expanded efforts to 3-year-olds. As a result, Oklahoma ranks first in the nation in the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in publicly funded pre-K, with 90 percent enrolled.^{vii}

The Task Force encourages public investment to ensure that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten learning experiences are provided for all children. However, given the difficult economic outlook for many states and communities, the Task Force encourages policymakers to prioritize efforts for our most at-risk children.

4. Ensure that funding for the full continuum of pre-K through third grade learning is directed to programs of high quality.

The benefits of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and the early grades of elementary school depend on the delivery of high-quality programs. An unrelenting focus on quality is needed for each and every year. The core components needed to drive quality for the early years include an integrated approach that takes into account standards, assessment, curriculum, professional preparation and development,

ongoing quality improvement, and family engagement. Dedicated resources are needed to meet these needs and should be considered a collective priority for leaders at the federal, state, and local levels. A commitment to quality improvement and outcomes is necessary for the development of the services prior to school entry but also for quality reform in the K-3 grades.

5. Leverage and integrate private funding with public resources.

Private funding can play an important role in advancing the creation and sustainability of a pre-K through third grade continuum. When private resources are available, they should be leveraged and integrated with public resources.

In North Carolina, for example, joint public/private funding has been channeled to all 100 counties in the state to enhance early-learning opportunities.^{viii} The effort, called Smart Start North Carolina, creates local partnerships

to convene stakeholders to assess local needs; ensure accountability; and leverage community, state, and federal resources. The North Carolina Partnership for Children administers the funds. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation are just a few of the private funders committing dollars to the venture.

6. Create an aligned continuum of research-based, age-appropriate standards for young children that include a focus on social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, and creative learning, as well as school-related skills.

In both the K-12 and pre-kindergarten domains, states have developed standards for what students should learn and know. However, K-12 standards tend to focus exclusively on the “academic” subjects, while those for children in the years prior to school generally include a full range of developmental areas, including social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and language development, in addition to the creative arts.

The Task Force envisions two critical areas for policymakers to address in partnership with providers, higher education institutions, researchers, and practitioners:

First, the Task Force urges states to lead a careful, well-balanced effort to align K-3 standards to pre-K standards and vice versa. This will require states to expand their K-3 standards to include a

focus on social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative learning, as well as school-related skills across the continuum. States should also promote balanced teaching strategies, a variety of types of learning opportunities, and multiple ways for children to demonstrate progress in learning in conjunction with the implementation of their standards.

Second, the Task Force calls for the full range of Common Core State Standards for all grades to include additional child development domains that focus on social, emotional, and physical learning. There is a great deal of focus now on the implementation of a common set of state standards in reading and math. The Task Force supports these efforts and urges further development of alignment in these areas for early learning with the Common Core.

7. Develop and support an effective, well-compensated workforce with high-quality teacher and administrator preparation programs, professional development, and continuing education. These educators should be versed in the full continuum of early childhood education.

Good teaching matters: research confirms that an effective teacher can do more to improve achievement than any other factor in the educational setting. To ensure the delivery of high-quality programming for students in pre-K through third grade, we must provide teachers and leaders, including principals, with a broader base of knowledge to understand child development and what effective teaching and learning should look like in classrooms with children ages 3-8. For beginning teachers and leaders, this means exposure to a core of competencies in pre-service training, and this core should be applied consistently by all institutions and credentialing programs. It should include a focus on child development, knowledge and practice to promote children’s school readiness, early childhood curricula and assessment, and approaches to family engagement as well as the interrelationship between programs that serve children up to age 5 and K-3 programs. Teachers and leaders should be “ready” for children, just as children and families are “ready” for school.^{ix} Education schools and other preparation programs should also require clinical practice in pre-k through third grade settings.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Arthur Reynolds, professor of child development at the University of Minnesota, led a study of the effectiveness of an early education program in Chicago public schools called Child Parent Centers (CPC), a federally funded program dating back to 1967. The findings show evidence that the early-learning program has one of the highest return on investments of any social program targeted to children—a return of \$8.24 for every dollar invested in the CPC from age 3 through age 9.

Arthur J. Reynolds and others, “Age 26 Cost–Benefit Analysis of the Child-Parent Center Early Education Program,” *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 379-404.

States should also establish regulatory language mandating professional development and ongoing accountability for pre-K through third grade educators, regardless of setting or certification, AND provide incentives that promote continuous improvement beyond the mandates. Teachers, directors, and principals should be given appropriate time and resources to engage in ongoing professional development that is meaningful, linked to the learning standards, and the methods for implementing them that leads to increased student outcomes.

Early-learning programs and elementary schools should also develop professional learning communities across the pre-K/grade years, across disciplines, and across the full range of early childhood providers. Administrators should provide time and resources for teachers to learn from each other, improve alignment of curricula and assessment efforts, examine and discuss the implications of data on children’s progress and the quality of classrooms and early childhood centers, and create new approaches to shared challenges in working with children and their families.

Decision-makers should intentionally develop a career lattice for the early childhood workforce—one that adequately compensates the full range of teachers and leaders serving students ages 3 through 8, taking into account the diverse range of settings in which the early-learning teachers and leaders are working.

Finally, states should also develop and use a broad range of tools for classroom observation to help inform and improve instruction. These tools should include the full range of social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative domains included in the state’s definition of readiness.

8. Develop and administer age-appropriate assessments that include both formative and summative evaluations to help guide teaching and learning and to inform program effectiveness.

The early learning sphere is not exempt from the debates raging over assessment. Careful observation of children's progress has always been a hallmark of quality early learning. Translating this into a thoughtful system of assessment for children from pre-K through third grade is critical. Task Force members see the pre-kindergarten to third grade span as a key area for innovation. Testing under No Child Left Behind begins in third grade, giving the early-learning community an opportunity to explore the role of assessment in a non-high-stakes environment and to build a system that contributes to the understanding and use of assessment in education.

Accordingly, the Task Force urges state leaders to create and use developmentally appropriate early learning assessments aligned to standards. The assessments should follow the development of the child and focus on improving instruction, not imposing sanctions.

Task Force members are united on several other key points:

- Children should be assessed using age-appropriate methods on all domains of early learning and development;
- Children should be assessed in their native language AND in their progress towards English proficiency;
- Assessments should be used to inform and improve classroom practice and to highlight and share best practices;
- Assessments should be based on a growth model that gauges how much progress an individual child is making;
- In order to implement any new assessment, both teachers and leaders in school- and community-based programs must get the appropriate professional development and supports to administer and use assessment results; and
- Assessment data should be shared with parents to inform them of their child's development and identify strategies for supporting progress.

The Task Forces urges communities to develop an assessment feedback loop between K-12 principals and teachers and other community-based preschool providers. This data sharing should focus on effectiveness and improvement, avoiding the blame-game that has become commonplace in many communities around grade 3-12 results. Communities should also include population data along with child and program-specific assessment results to allow for a more comprehensive examination of trends and resources by geography.



9. Develop state and local longitudinal data systems that include pre-K student and program information.

States and local school districts are grappling with the difficult—and expensive—task of developing longitudinal data systems for education. The Task Force strongly supports the inclusion of data from the early childhood years in these efforts. Incorporating pre-K data into the larger K-12 system will allow communities and state policymakers to better understand and inform decision-making about the most effective policies and practices. Indeed, while the Task Force focused on ages 3 to 8, members stressed that states should include infants and toddlers when building out a comprehensive education data system.

Both Maryland and Pennsylvania have also been leaders in developing a robust approach to creating systems that link data on children up to age 5 with data on children in kindergarten and up through the K-12 system. These states provide educators throughout the pipeline with salient information that helps improve quality and make the focus on quality in the early education programs transparent. This assures robust connection and mutual interdependence between the programs that serve children before age 5 and early elementary programs.

The Task Force encourages states and communities to:

- Include public and private program information associated with individual students—including child care, Head Start and Early Head Start;
- Include retention and absence data—a precursor to disengagement in later years;
- Include workforce data such as teacher and leader training and previous experience, credentialing, compensation, and turnover;
- Share data among community providers, schools, and community leaders in order to identify and implement early intervention alternatives;
- Share data across states and communities when children relocate; and
- Provide training for teachers and leaders to better understand how to improve pre-K to third grade practice based on data.

According to the Data Quality Campaign and the Early Childhood Data Collaborative, states DON'T have the necessary data included in their longitudinal data systems to answer the following questions:

- Are children, birth to age 5, on track to succeed when they enter school and beyond?
- Which children have access to high-quality early care and education programs?
- Is the quality of programs improving?
- What are the characteristics of effective programs?
- How prepared is the early care and education workforce to provide effective education and care for all children?
- What policies and investments lead to a skilled and stable early care and education workforce?

Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 10 Fundamentals of Coordinated State Early Care and Education Data Systems, (2011). <http://www.ecedata.org/files/DQC%20ECDC%20brochure%202011%20Mar21.pdf>.

10. Evaluate models of early learning integration and alignment through research.

Over the decades, we have gained a sense of what high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs for children up through age 8 should look like due to a strong research base. However, as stakeholders move towards the vision outlined by the Task Force, it is critical to expand research that focuses on alignment. States

and communities should include evaluation as part of any effort to integrate and align the early learning continuum, as there is an enormous potential to share what they learn about governance, policy, funding, and practice.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Never before has there been such a strong understanding of the interconnections among the “systems” that support early childhood development, school readiness, and success in the early school years. And the need is clear for states and communities to build an aligned system that supports children and youth from birth to career. The NAESP Foundation Task Force envisions an aligned system in which all children and families have access to high-quality early learning; a system in which policy, funding, and practice are aligned; a system where programs are based upon evidence and data; a system where teachers and leaders are well-trained, suitably compensated, and supported in the classroom; and a system where children’s learning and development is assessed and fostered in a truly comprehensive fashion to capture all the ingredients that contribute to their success in school and in life. The Task Force urges policymakers and stakeholders to unite in an effort to break down the silos and co-construct the comprehensive, cohesive Pre-K-grade three system that our children need and deserve.

ENDNOTES

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