



FOUNDATION *for*  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

# PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Teacher Quality Matters

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PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>  
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## PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: Teacher Quality Matters

**More is known than ever before about how to educate children successfully, especially those at risk for underachievement. Now the challenge is to spread powerful teaching to all PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms.**

Across the country, researchers have been spending time in classrooms, observing and recording what teachers do hour by hour—the directions, explanations, questions, prompts, responses, pauses, glances, gestures, and improvisations that comprise daily practice. They have analyzed the “active ingredients” that allow some classrooms and schools to succeed with students similar to those who are struggling in other places.

Thanks to these large-scale studies, educators now know more than ever before about the instructional practices that are most likely to help young children from all backgrounds build a strong foundation for later learning (Hamre et al., 2007). Now the challenge is to spread powerful practices to all PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms, so all children can benefit.

This Policy to Action Brief will 1) articulate why effective teaching matters for student outcomes; 2) indicate how schools can organize to sustain effective teaching in every classroom; and 3) describe briefly what quality looks like in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms.

### What Can School Leaders Do To Ensure Instructional Quality?

- Articulate a clear commitment to high-quality instruction in every PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classroom, geared to supporting individual children’s development and learning.
- Engage teachers in rethinking what professionalism means in their field—focusing less on autonomy, and more on collaborative inquiry and shared standards of practice.
- Make organizational decisions—whether related to curricula, resource allocation, staffing, scheduling, programming, professional development, or any other matter—only after considering the question: “How will each option affect teachers’ capacity to work together to raise instructional quality?”
- Conduct frequent, focused walkthroughs, using observational tools geared to supporting proven instructional practices, and provide supportive feedback to teachers.

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## Why Does Effective Teaching Matter?

Previous efforts to improve education have given short shrift to instructional quality. More often, policymakers have focused on class size, credentialing, accountability systems, governance structures, or other top-down strategies. The theory of change was that such investments would lead to better teaching and more learning. But evidence connecting these broad policies with higher achievement is sparse (Grubb, 2009).

Why have most education reforms produced small effects? University of Chicago researcher Stephen Raudenbush believes that “they have not been devised to support explicit notions of powerful classroom instruction” (2009, p. 172). Raudenbush’s twitter-sized assessment presents educators with an epic challenge: ensuring that every teacher understands what constitutes good teaching and how to make it happen in the classroom, so that every child experiences good teaching. This requires an intensive focus on instructional quality, day after day, year after year.

High-quality instruction has special significance during the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> years, when children master foundational skills and concepts, develop attitudes toward school, and form ideas about themselves as learners.

Studies confirm what parents and teachers have long known: Young children are energetic learners and have potential for dramatic developmental leaps (Raudenbush, 2009). But for many children, the opportunities and support they require to fulfill their promise are often limited or sporadic. Teachers vary dramatically in the quality of their classroom practice, and this variation is strongly linked to significant differences in children’s learning (Hamre et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teachers’ content knowledge varies markedly as well, especially in mathematics (Hill, Rowan & Ball, 2005). Teachers also vary in their capacity to engage young children. When teachers provide the kinds of interactions and activities that engage children and motivate them to try hard, children make



greater academic gains than their less engaged classmates (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007). This is true even when studies control for general cognitive ability, as measured by IQ (Luo et al., 2009).

And so, a child's education and future prospects depend to a great extent on the classrooms (and schools) to which he or she happens to be assigned. "Luck-of-the-draw" education affects all schoolchildren, but especially those whose parents are not able to reinforce at home the foundation for academic success that PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> education builds (Raudenbush, 2009). When children consistently have good teachers, they can make great strides. The benefits are especially strong for children from low-income communities. But when children are exposed to mediocre or poor instruction, their development and learning suffer. When they miss out on effective teaching for three or more years in a row, their long-term academic prospects are jeopardized (Darling-Hammond, 2000). This happens all too often—especially to children from disadvantaged families and communities (Raudenbush, 2009).

### **Quantity Matters Too**

**Children need enough time to master new concepts and skills. Recent studies show that schools have large effects, and that time away from school can diminish those effects. Children make far greater gains in reading and mathematics during the school year than during the summer vacation.**

**Higher-income children gain more (or lose less) in the summer months than low-income children. Based on these findings, some researchers believe that increasing the amount of time children spend in school would increase learning and reduce inequality (Raudenbush, 2009).**

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## How Can Schools Spread and Sustain Effective Teaching?

**Relationships between teachers and children matter. When these relationships are based on trust and respect, children have the confidence in themselves and the willingness to take the risks necessary for learning.**

How can schools or school districts spread effective teaching to all classrooms, so that getting a good start in school is not a matter of chance? First and foremost, the educational leader—whether a superintendent or a principal—must articulate a clear commitment to high-quality instruction for every child in every classroom, and needs to align all resources and routines to achieving this aim. (See “What Can School Leaders Do?”) Montgomery County (Maryland) School District exemplifies a large school district whose leadership has made a commitment to “a great teacher in every classroom”—supported by an aligned PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> curriculum and professional development system. A recent interview with Superintendent Jerry Weast, available on [video](#), describes the district’s PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> approach.

Fostering collaboration among teachers is crucial to raising instructional quality. High-quality instruction for all will not be realized behind closed doors, one classroom at a time. As Stephen Raudenbush has observed, schools cannot close the achievement gap until they reject “privatized and idiosyncratic practice” and move toward public and shared practice. That means, on both school and district levels, “shared aims, shared assessment tools, shared instructional strategies, active collaboration, routine public inspection of practice, and accountability to peers” (p. 172).

As Raudenbush stresses, a key to school improvement is shared responsibility for results. That means public discussion of results that includes, but goes well beyond, collaborative review of test scores. What teachers do in their classrooms must be continuously shared, documented, and discussed. Teachers require opportunities to observe the children in each other’s rooms and to look together at “work products” (narratives, constructions, projects, writing, etc.) that reflect children’s development and learning over time. Finally, teachers must share responsibility for strengthening teaching and learning. This can only happen when professional development is frequent and collaborative, both within and across grades and levels of education.

Collaboration this broad and this focused requires a fundamental change in the culture of schools. It means new kinds of relationships between principals and teachers and among teachers—one that does away with a “gotcha” approach to assessment (Weast, 2009). As things stand, too many teachers work in isolation,

in their own classrooms, with their own curricula, without much contact or exchange with other teachers—even those next door. Principals too often reward effective teachers by leaving them alone. School leaders must engage teachers in rethinking what professionalism means in their field—focusing less on autonomy, and more on collaborative inquiry and shared standards of practice. In short, leaders need to build and support communities of practice.

Guiding more schools and districts on the path to instructional quality will take leadership and a commitment to enhancing the learning of everyone in the school community. Supporting this change is a core commitment of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> approach, and it reflects the reality that efforts to raise instructional quality must be ongoing and lasting.

## How to Recognize Effective Teaching

Classroom experience affects children's learning, and the impact of classroom experience resides primarily in interactions that take place between teachers and students and among students.

These simple but powerful ideas are at the heart of CLASS—a Classroom Assessment Scoring System designed by a team from the University of Virginia. CLASS both describes the building blocks of effective instruction and provides a tool for gauging the extent to which teachers are using those practices. It has been validated in thousands of classrooms across the nation. Classrooms that provide high-quality educational experiences, as measured by CLASS, have been linked with improved academic and social outcomes for children.

The CLASS Framework focuses on three broad areas of classroom interactions: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

**Emotional support:** Positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives.

**Classroom organization:** Behavior management, instructional learning formats, productivity, classroom chaos, classroom management, child responsibility.

**Instructional support:** Concept development, quality of feedback, language modeling, instructional conversation, literacy instruction, richness of instructional methods.

Each dimension, in turn, is broken down into specific indicators, and each indicator is described in terms of specific, observable interactions that take place in the classroom between teachers and students or among students.

CLASS has also proven to be an effective tool for professional development. Teachers who make changes based on specific feedback have become more effective, as reflected in gains in student learning. With practice, teachers can use the CLASS framework to reflect on and adjust their own interactions in the classroom.

Source: Hamre et al., 2007.

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## What Does High-Quality Instruction Look Like In PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>?

Today, thanks for observational research on effective practice, it is possible to describe the kind of classroom strategies that have the best chance of producing good results for children of all backgrounds. Classroom assessment tools, such as CLASS, provide more specificity than this summary allows (See “How to Recognize Effective Teaching”).

**1) Teachers observe and respond to individual children’s development over time.** As they orchestrate classroom activities, teachers are closely observing and recording each child’s growth so that they can gauge progress and provide needed support. They keep tabs not only on individual children’s mastery of academic skills (such as phonemic awareness or number sense) but also on other dimensions of development (such as their confidence as learners or their ability to consider others’ perspectives). They pay close attention to what interests young students (Wilson, 2009). If a child shows signs of struggling, teachers consult with colleagues and take action designed to get the child back on track, documenting the intervention and charting progress. In a classroom where these things are happening daily, the teacher can speak fluently about what he or she is doing to gauge and respond to individual children’s development and learning.

Carrying out this cycle (instruction-assessment-instruction) is not easy. It requires ongoing opportunities to deepen understanding of child development—with insight into both typical development of children and developmental variations; a command of observation tools and assessment strategies that are appropriate for young children and embedded in the learning experiences (Schultz & Kagan, 2007; Sadowski, 2006); and frequent chances to reflect on children’s progress and instructional practices with colleagues (Raudenbush, 2009).

**2) Teachers provide emotional support to individual children.** The research confirms that relationships between teachers and children matter. In classrooms where instructional quality is high, teachers move around the room, offering emotional support and ongoing feedback to individual children. These interactions help children learn to think and express themselves. They help children gain confidence as learners, control their impulses, and stay engaged in learning activities. And they help children explore the issues of identity that arise in the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> years: Who am I? Where do I belong? Who am I as a learner? These issues may have particular immediacy for children whose transition to school involves negotiating unfamiliar cultural terrain or a new language. Researchers have documented links among students’ beliefs about their academic competence, self-regulated learning, and achievement (Luo et al, 2009).

- 3) Teachers foster engagement in learning activities and keep classrooms running smoothly.** Teachers devote time to establishing classroom routines, especially in the early weeks of the school year, and they reinforce those routines throughout the year. They make time for children to move and play—building these activities into the life of the classroom (Wilson, 2009). They help children transition from one activity to another, and take time to help children learn how to “do school,” especially in classrooms where children are unsure of what is expected of them in school or lack experience with the kinds of words and concepts that are used in school. As they introduce new learning activities, teachers help children understand not only what they have to do, but also why they are doing it (Cameron, Connor & Morrison, 2004). These practices associated with well-organized classrooms have been linked with gains in school readiness and achievement (Hamre et al., 2007).
- 4) Teachers support higher order thinking and advanced language skills.** Teachers do more than cover the curriculum; they extend children’s learning by encouraging challenging conversation and activities that spring from the curriculum (Justice et al., 2008). They ask open-ended questions and help children pose and solve problems that matter to them. Teachers give children many chances to explore and represent (with words, pictures, blocks, dramatization, etc.) new environments and ideas. They encourage children to explain what they think and why, to test their assumptions, and to consider alternative possibilities. They make sustained efforts to expand children’s vocabulary, so they have the words they need to do challenging conceptual work. Teachers help children understand new concepts and show them how new concepts connect to more familiar ones. They make efforts to surface and address the misconceptions that children bring to school—a strategy that, according to cognitive scientists, allows young learners to internalize and integrate new facts and concepts (Branford & Cocking, 1999).



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## Ensuring Effective Teaching

The strategies (and combinations of strategies) described here are complex and difficult to do well. They take good preparation, experience, and opportunities to work with other teachers. All of them leave room for teachers to exercise judgment and creativity. They are not “teacher-proof” or “scripted” practices. Rather, they offer guidelines, rooted in research, that teachers and leaders can use to improve and sustain instruction within and across grades.

What children learn in classrooms is vital to their future. The quality of the teaching they experience strongly affects how much and how well they learn. Nothing is more important than ensuring that every child experiences high-quality teaching, grade by grade, over the entire course of his or her education. Achieving this requires new ways of defining professional teaching practice and organizing schools. It won't be easy, but it can be done.

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Wilson, D.M. 2009. Developmentally appropriate practice in the age of testing. *Harvard Education Letter*, 25(3):4-7, May/June.

### Online Resources:

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT SCORING SYSTEM (CLASS) <http://classobservation.com>

MY TEACHING PARTNER <http://www.myteachingpartner.net/index.php>

FIGHTING FADE-OUT THROUGH PREK-3<sup>RD</sup> REFORM  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htWKlcE0IhA>

EFFECTIVE TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS: MEASURING AND IMPROVING CLASSROOM PRACTICE  
[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=910769](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=910769)

ROOTS OF DECLINE: HOW GOVERNMENT POLICY HAS DE-EDUCATED TEACHERS OF  
YOUNG CHILDREN [http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=450060](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=450060)

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR PK-3 SUCCESS  
[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=506414](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=506414)

For FCD Publications on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>, see the next page.

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## References and Online Resources

### FCD Policy to Action Brief Series:

No. 1: The Case for Investing in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education:  
Challenging Myths about School Reform

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=801522](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=801522)

No. 2. PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>: What is the Price Tag?

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=879585](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=879585)

### FCD Advancing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Series:

Policy briefs in the Advancing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Series include:

No. 4: PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know It Works?

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=463888](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=463888)

No. 5: Core Knowledge for PK-3 Teaching: Ten Components of Effective Instruction

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=462123](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=462123)

No. 6: Carrots and Sticks: New Jersey's Effort to Create a Qualified PK-3 Workforce

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=462367](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=462367)

No. 8: Challenging Common Myths About Young English Language Learners

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=669789](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=669789)

### FCD Reports:

America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=711495](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=711495)

Ready to Teach? Providing Children With the Teachers They Deserve

[http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=463591](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=463591)

### FCD Web Site:

PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources by Audience

[http://www.fcd-us.org/issues/issues\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=835942](http://www.fcd-us.org/issues/issues_show.htm?doc_id=835942)

PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Resources by Topic

[http://www.fcd-us.org/issues/issues\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=847000](http://www.fcd-us.org/issues/issues_show.htm?doc_id=847000)