



Starting Strong in Washington State

Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories



The academic achievement gap is an alarming reality both nationally and in Washington State. While academic struggles are experienced by children of every ethnic and income group, they are more common for children of color and those who live in poverty. Recent research makes it clear that the school age achievement gap is driven in large part by an early childhood preparation gap: those who arrive at school behind their peers tend to stay behind. However, there is hope. Children who have access to high-quality, aligned early learning opportunities from birth through 3rd grade (P-3) are ready to succeed and do.

Building an aligned system creates continuity for children and their families. Simply put, alignment means families, teachers and providers work together to ensure each learning opportunity builds on children's prior learning and experiences and that new skills and concepts learned prepare them for what they will learn next. Attention to the quality and alignment of early learning helps children to build a strong foundation for success in school and in life.

A number of districts in Washington State are charting new territory. They are working with early learning providers, community agencies and families to develop P-3 programs and they are generating impressive results. School district officials, teachers, parents, early learning providers, funders and policymakers recently came together to learn from these pioneers. On August 10, 2009, more than 380 people gathered for the Starting Strong P-3 Conference in SeaTac, Washington. Hosted by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the two-day conference aimed to create a shared understanding of the research and key elements of PreK-3 models. The event helped to broaden understanding and engagement in practices that benefit all children, especially those who experience the greatest disparities.

This brief serves as a tool to share the promise and benefits of aligned early learning for children birth through 3rd grade. It shares success stories and examples from throughout Washington State. Like the conference, this brief focuses on four themes:

- 1. Aligned and effective curriculum and instruction**
- 2. Family engagement**
- 3. Coalitions and partnerships**
- 4. Leadership**

Washington State Is a Leader in a Time of Opportunity



The timing couldn't be better. We now have leaders at the local, state and federal levels who understand the importance of birth through 3rd grade education and an aligned early learning system. Washington has emerged as a national leader because of the multiple levels of policy investments in place: a strong commitment from the governor, support from nonprofits and philanthropies, and champions at higher education institutions.

Our momentum is demonstrated by unprecedented collaboration across sectors as evidenced by the presence of policymakers at the Starting Strong P-3 Conference. A powerful milestone at the conference was an enthusiastic recommitment to collaboration between Randy Dorn, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bette Hyde, Director of Washington State's Department of Early Learning (DEL), and Nina Auerbach, President and CEO of Thrive by Five Washington, the state's early learning private-public partnership. Initiated by their predecessors in 2007, the three leaders signed an enhanced Washington State Early Learning Partnership Joint Resolution focused on improving early learning opportunities for all children in Washington.

To further demonstrate their commitment, the leaders added an accountability framework as a companion to the Joint Resolution. The framework outlines the priorities of the partnership, identifies roles for all three entities and defines how they will work together toward an aligned early learning system for all children birth through 3rd grade in Washington State.

Four Components That Support Effective Early Learning Birth Through 3rd Grade

1. Aligned and Effective Curriculum and Instruction

Creating a seamless education continuum means that children acquire skills and knowledge that build upon the previous years. Research supports the importance of aligning efforts within and across grades to link experiences and expectations. Because pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and elementary programs often function as separate entities, breaking down barriers and opening up communication channels are among the biggest challenges. Through alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, student supports and teacher professional development, we can create a strong academic foundation in the early years that improves student achievement.

Kristie Kauerz, special guest speaker at the Starting Strong conference, emphasizes the necessity of both horizontal and vertical alignment. Senior Intervention Manager at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, Kauerz is known for her work combining policy and research to forge better opportunities for children. She called on conference participants to "push" early education's values of social and emotional development into the rest of the K–12 system.

SUCCESS STORY: **Bremerton, Washington**

Six years ago, the Bremerton School District forged a community-wide plan to increase kindergarten readiness and literacy. Leaders are intentionally aligning up, down and across systems so that all children enter 3rd grade at reading level. Today, the district is nationally recognized for its leadership in early childhood education, connecting preschool to full-day kindergarten and beyond. What began as a collaboration between Head Start programs, preschools and child care providers has matured into a cohesive early learning system.

Bremerton boasts free full-day kindergarten, aligned curriculum through 3rd grade and dedicated professional development that supports teacher implementation.

The district also works hard to cultivate new partnerships, engage community members, and utilize current research



and data to drive the process. The result is significant gains in student achievement and increased quality of instruction. For example, in 2009, 66 percent of Bremerton kindergarten students entered school knowing their letters—up from just 4 percent in 2001.

2. Family Engagement

Educating the next generation requires everyone's participation; schools simply cannot do it alone. Parents are their children's first teachers and children's primary source of learning from birth to age 3. In preschool and beyond, activating and involving parents in their children's schooling has a long-lasting impact, from improving school performance to enhancing language and other basic school skills.

Too often, there is a lack of clear pathways for parents and caregivers to engage in the educational system. Critical to involving families is first understanding and then removing obstacles that stand in the way—from cultural differences to language barriers, work commitments or low literacy. Conference participants heard from schools and districts developing new models to involve families, improve student achievement and create culturally relevant supports.

SUCCESS STORY: The Native American Early Learning Project

The Native American Early Learning Project (NAELP) provides culturally relevant educational support services for 3- and 4-year-old American Indian and Alaska Native children—from enhanced curricula to family dinners with traditional storytellers. Funded through the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Indian Education, the project operates out of Puget Sound ESD and works in collaboration with the Puyallup Tribe's Chief Leschi School Preschool Programs and Grandview Early Learning Center.

The project ensures that Native children are culturally grounded and prepared for success in kindergarten, while promoting a larger understanding of Native culture in relation to children's learning goals. This responds to research citing a significant factor in school success of Native American children is a connection to their culture, which mitigates risk of school dropout and substance abuse.

The Native American Early Learning Project encourages parents' daily reading to their children and supports children's connection to their culture. Through activities like the Family Basket Project, the project supports children's learning while strengthening connections between families and their heritage. A family dinner is combined with presenters from the Native community, storybooks and a craft or traditional activity. Project outcomes are showing that increased numbers of participating children are meeting academic and social goals.

3. Coalitions and Partnerships

Many communities in Washington State have forged successful coalitions to increase the impact of early

learning efforts. In a time of shrinking state and local budgets, effective coalitions leverage resources and reduce duplication of efforts. Conference participants were challenged to explore non-traditional alliances that might advance their efforts—from corporate CEOs to media or health care professionals.



A benefit of strong coalitions is the activation of unlikely messengers who can mobilize new constituencies. In Bremerton, one such messenger was the Kitsap County Sheriff. In a letter to the editor, the sheriff made the case for fighting crime by investing in early learning, underscoring the connection between better performing students, a stronger workforce and safer communities.

SUCCESS STORY: The Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition

The Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition has been particularly successful in engaging business and community leaders around a vision for a comprehensive early learning system. Initiated in 2006, the coalition formed a three-tiered structure that leverages the connections and commitment of local influencers, including CEOs from two local banks, the superintendent of schools, elected officials and foundation leadership.

The 16-person leadership team meets quarterly and a mobilization team comprised of more than 30 advocates meets monthly.

The coalition is funded by a two-year grant from Sherwood Trust and anchored in the local community college, which serves as the fiscal agent and provides outreach and support for parents. The goal is that all children in the Walla Walla Valley will be healthy and ready for school and for life through support from well-informed parents, involved citizens and collaborative community partners.

Recent milestones include a parents needs assessment distributed in English and Spanish to 1,100 parents, which garnered nearly 400 survey responses. The results will help guide the strategic planning process and bridge gaps in services to families.

4. Leadership

Strong leadership at the district or school level guides some of the most successful aligned early learning systems. Principals and superintendents are uniquely positioned to articulate a strong vision, build a case for investment, energize teachers, and tap community and partner support that creates cohesion and continuity from birth through 3rd grade and beyond.



Conference panelist and Toppenish Superintendent Steve Myers is known as ‘the preschool superintendent’ in his district. “It only takes one person in your district,” Myers says. “Our charge as educators is to take each child as far as they can go.”

SUCCESS STORY: The Fruit Valley Community Learning Center

The Fruit Valley Community Learning Center connects the community in the Vancouver, Washington, industrial area. It houses a high-quality birth through school-age child care program, Head Start for 3- and 4-year-olds, an elementary school and a family resource center with two licensed therapists.

At the helm is Principal Debra Elliott, a former teacher and curriculum specialist who has served as principal of the center for nine years. “Daily interactions are the glue,” says Elliott, who can be found roaming the halls talking with teachers and family members and sitting in on Head Start classes. She says really knowing her students and their families allows her to be responsive to emerging needs and opportunities.

Formed in response to the needs of the community, the center strives to deliver high-quality preschool and help smooth the transition from early learning programs into grade school.

Historically, only 16 percent of students met learning benchmarks for entering kindergarten and, while some students were able to catch up during the school year, only 50 percent met the benchmark by the end of the year. Now, seven years after the center opened, nearly 60 percent of students entering kindergarten are at benchmark, with 85 percent meeting the benchmark at the end of kindergarten. Elliott says an important triumph is that students and families enter the school feeling connected.



What You Can Do

Each of us plays a critical role in ensuring continuity across early learning from birth through 3rd grade, so that all children are healthy and ready for school and life.

- **Policymakers** can advocate for policies that support an aligned system of early learning, birth through 3rd grade, including access to voluntary, full-day early learning programs, infant through pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, teacher planning time, and high-impact family and student supports.
- **Superintendents and principals** can promote aligned educational strategies within and across grades, robust connections and alignment with community-based preschool programs, and strong family and community outreach. Some communities may consider adding pre-kindergarten programs to public schools, or building strong alignment with pre-kindergarten programs that are already in public schools.
- **Administrators** can help identify, leverage and effectively use funding sources, such as Title I funds, Head Start, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), special education funds and child care subsidies to bridge birth through 3rd grade approaches.
- **Teachers and early childhood educators** can reach out to one another, build continuity and alignment among their classrooms and ease transitions for children by building bridges for them to the next level.
- **Parents and community members** can share books with their children daily, turn everyday moments into learning moments, and insist that their children’s preschools and elementary schools work together.
- **Funders** can provide seed funding to launch linkages, promote knowledge sharing through networking and convening, and fund policy change efforts and organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all who made the Starting Strong P-3 Conference a reality, including the speakers who shaped the discussions with their insights.

Special thanks to its funders, without whom this convening would not have been possible: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Boeing Foundation, Washington State Department of Early Learning, Foundation for Early Learning, Thrive by Five Washington, Washington State University and Washington Association for the Education of Young Children.

This brief was produced through support from the Foundation for Child Development and Foundation for Early Learning and in cooperation with The New School Foundation.

LEARN MORE

More information about the Starting Strong P-3 Conference, including speaker presentations and biographies, can be found online at: <http://www.k12.wa.us/EarlyLearning/StartingStrong/default.aspx>

For a comprehensive list of resources on aligned early learning, please visit: <http://www.k12.wa.us/EarlyLearning/Resources.aspx>