

Linking Learning



The PreK-3rd Path to School Success

Giving children high-quality preschool is the first step in the journey to school success. The next steps – kindergarten through 3rd grade -- are equally important.

Over the past decade, New Jersey has made great progress in providing quality preschool to low-income children. Now, the state and school districts must advance efforts to continue this quality early learning through 3rd grade so that every child is reading on grade level by this time.

Early literacy is critical for children to succeed in school because by 4th grade children are “reading to learn,” instead of “learning to read.” Research also shows that strengthening children’s education from preschool through 3rd grade helps ensure they are able to better understand math and other concepts that will lead to school success.

The issue is gaining traction nationally because so many children are arriving at 4th grade reading below grade level. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, in 2009 only one-third of all American 4th graders were reading proficiently. New Jersey 4th graders fared better with 40 percent scoring proficient on reading tests. Still, a majority of New Jersey 4th graders were reading at or below a basic reading level.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) is working on several fronts to help school districts across the state build strong early learning programs, which can significantly improve children’s performance in the upper grades.

What is PreK-3rd Grade?

To maximize our investment in quality preschool, a child’s preschool experience should be closely coordinated with the early elementary years. To accomplish this, teachers, school administrators and parents must work together across grade levels to ensure that all children’s learning experiences build on past years and connect with those to come.

An effective pre-k through 3rd grade experience provides:

- High-quality and coordinated learning in well-staffed classrooms
- Well-prepared teachers and aides to educate children in the 3-8 age range
- Supportive school district policies
- Strong school and district leadership that includes supporting professional development time for teachers to plan for effective coordination across and between grades

Giving Every Child A Chance

- Families and communities that share accountability for young children's educational success.

The goal is for all children to complete 3rd grade with the skills they need to succeed in school.

What is the Linking Learning Initiative?

ACNJ's Linking Learning Initiative is an effort to coordinate and advocate for strong early learning systems at the local and state levels. To accomplish this, ACNJ is working with a broad group of educators, state officials, education associations and other stakeholders to build this quality early learning system that can help our children succeed in school and grow up to be productive members of our communities.

This is being accomplished through three primary strategies:

Advocating on PreK-3rd issues on the district, state and federal level. This includes preschool expansion, mandatory full-day kindergarten and state and federal laws and regulations that support coordinated systems of early learning.

Providing professional development opportunities in PreK-3rd for district administrators focusing on leadership, teaching and teacher quality, curriculum and standards, family engagement and transitions. Through these trainings, New Jersey administrators are learning to be strong early learning leaders so that their staff can work together across grade levels, build strong connections and link learning experiences during these critical years.

Facilitating the PreK-3rd Labs Initiative. This model for planning and implementing seamless, coordinated PreK-3rd systems is being conducted in three New Jersey school districts -- Morris, Orange and Red Bank.

Through this comprehensive approach to systems development, ACNJ and its partners, the New Jersey Department of Education and New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, are leading the national effort in ensuring that all children experience a high-quality, coordinated system of early learning.

More details on each initiative follow.

PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series

Building quality early learning systems across New Jersey will require leaders who understand the unique ways that young children learn and how to best build on children's progress from preschool through 3rd grade.

To develop early learning leaders around the state, ACNJ co-sponsored the successful PreK-3rd grade leadership training series from October 2009 through March 2010. This series drew 180 school administrators and other educators from around the state.

It was so successful that ACNJ and its partners, launched a second training series, Track II, which began in October 2010. This advanced course is designed for those who participated in the first session and who want to continue to build their early learning skills. This session will continue into April 2011, with nearly 100 administrators participating.

Sponsored by ACNJ through a grant from the Foundation for Child Development, the seminars assist school administrators and other educators in evaluating their early childhood programs, as well as successfully leading their instructional staff to improve the quality and consistency of those programs.

The course equips participants with:

- An understanding of the importance of a quality PreK-3rd program
- Tools to assess and refine classroom practices in collaboration with teachers
- The ability to use data to drive decision-making to promote student achievement and family engagement
- Techniques that teachers need to successfully instruct all types of learners

The PreK-3rd Grade Lab Initiative

Evidence continues to mount that successful education programs for young children need to be comprehensive, span several years and target important education transition periods. In order to promote such academic successes, the implementation of a PreK-3rd continuum incorporates these principles into a broader education framework.

Because there is a need for tangible examples of the steps required to implement a quality PreK-3rd grade system, ACNJ is working with three New Jersey school districts to create model systems that could provide both guidance and support on developing PreK-3rd programs in other school districts.

This initiative is taking place in Morris Township, Red Bank and Orange.

The initiative began with a needs assessment that used demographic data, classroom observations, review of existing district PreK-3rd planning, interviews and surveys. This information was used to develop district action plans to address areas of need within the PreK-3rd continuum.

The “lessons learned” from these districts will benefit other school districts, and more importantly, other children. The experiences and outcomes stemming from these “laboratories” will help guide

state policies to support the implementation of quality PreK-3rd systems throughout New Jersey and nationwide.

ACNJ’s partners in this effort again include the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education and the New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association, Foundation for Educational Administration.

Linking Learning receives primary funding from the Foundation for Child Development and additional support from the Schumann Fund for New Jersey and JP Morgan Chase Foundation,

For more information on this project, visit www.acnj.org and click the link to early learning.

Linking Learning: A Case Study in Red Bank

Fewer Red Bank elementary school children need special education and more are reading before they leave kindergarten, thanks to a new approach that builds on young children’s learning from year to year.

The Red Bank School District is being hailed as a national leader in building links between its preschool programs and the early elementary years. This coordination of curriculum, instructional approaches and teacher development has resulted in real gains for Red Bank’s youngest students.

“We are seeing tremendous progress in the achievements of our young students,” said Red Bank Superintendent Laura Morana. “From year to year, the children build on gains made in preschool. This forms a solid foundation for their entire academic career. They are farther ahead and more likely to excel in the years to come.”

This is the result of a concerted effort over the past four years to link learning experiences from preschool through 3rd grade.

According to Morana, the district has focused on closely coordinating a child’s preschool experience with the early elementary years, with a strong emphasis on early

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literacy. To accomplish this, teachers, school administrators and parents are working together across grade levels to ensure that all children's learning experiences build on past years and connect with those to come, she said.

"Unfortunately, this hasn't always been the case," Morana said. "Before, teachers often worked in isolation. Now, we are looking at it as a continuum, rather than a grade level."

The changes started with a School Improvement Team that identified strengths and areas that needed improvement and developed ways to track students' progress. This resulted in several important changes, including Red Bank's kindergarten classrooms adopting the same curriculum used in its preschool programs.

This research-based curriculum has been proven to help young students learn in an age-appropriate way. Built into the curriculum are ways for young students to learn to control their own behavior in the classroom, said Red Bank Primary Principal Rick Cohen. This has resulted in fewer disciplinary problems, creating a more productive and positive learning environment for all children in the classroom, he said.

The district is now taking pieces of that teaching approach and adapting them for 1st grade students. For example, "learning centers" are an important teaching strategy, allowing children to explore certain topics areas in small, interactive groups. In preschool, teachers use learning centers to engage children in play that leads to learning. By the second half of kindergarten, the centers become more academic in nature, Cohen said.

"The students become comfortable with this type of learning early on and we then carry that approach from grade to grade," Cohen said. "It is very effective."

Teachers from the different grades also meet regularly to plan activities, coordinate teaching programs and discuss students' progress.

"This is a level of communication that did not exist before," Morana said. "The teachers have really embraced this. They say it has made a world of difference in their classrooms."

Another key change was the introduction of "teaching coaches," who act as both mentors to teachers and a link between teachers in different grades.

"My instruction coach was aware of the tools used in preschool and kindergarten and that helped me so much with my 2nd graders," said Christine Vlahos, who has become an instructional coach this school year. "He was making those connections for me. My students have really benefited from this approach."

District officials also recognize that young children's school progress needs to be measured in different ways. That's why the district recently revamped report cards for students in pre-k through 3rd grade, using the categories "Expected," "Needs Development" and "Other Than Expected." The last category can mean either a student is performing above the norm or below the norm. Notes appended to the report card go into greater detail about the student's performance.

In addition, the report includes a portfolio of a student's work and compares pupil performance with the national standard for that grade level and with students' own past performance. This system gives teachers, parents and students more accurate information on a student's progress, areas of strength and areas that may need more attention, school officials said.

Marybeth Maida, parent of a Red Bank 3rd grader, said this approach is really paying off for her son.

"I was a little worried that he wasn't ready for kindergarten," said Maida, who sent her son to a private preschool, not the one offered through Red Bank. "He wasn't even holding a pencil yet."

But the boy attended Red Bank's summer pre-kindergarten program and made tremendous progress, she said. Once in kindergarten, the boy benefited from the consistent, quality teaching approach.

"By Christmas, he was reading and writing and coming up with creative ways of expressing himself," Maida said. "I was amazed. It was really impressive."