

**BUILDING STRONG RUNGS TO BUILD STURDY LADDERS:
The Status of Preschool-3rd Grade Systems in New Jersey
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Overview

New Jersey boasts three state-supported preschool programs which expose 33,000 four year olds and 20,000 three year olds to experiences that support child development and prepares them for kindergarten and beyond. Recent test scores are showing that the PK benefits are paying off. In 2005, 3rd grade scores in the state's poorest school districts increased in one year by 20% in math and 11% in language arts. The problem is that these effects can fade over time and thus it becomes important to insure proper transitions and alignment.

Discussion

- a. Because there are currently no regulatory definitions of a P-3 system, words such as alignment, coordination, and transition meant different things in different districts.
- b. One of the most critical components of a successful P-3 plan is for all standards to be aligned. Many of the districts visited had a plan of alignment written out on paper; however this did not always mean that this plan was actually implemented in the classroom. Many parents seemed to feel that it was not.
- c. A disconnect was also found in what PK teachers found as developmentally appropriate and what Kindergarten teachers found developmentally appropriate. It is important that there is a connection between developmentally appropriate practices at both levels.
- d. The Role of Administrators-A key factor in successfully developing a P-3 system is strong leadership.
 1. Those districts that were the furthest along in developing a P-3 system had administrators at both the district and building level who were well informed on developmentally appropriate practices for each age level. Many of these principals were being provided with some form of professional development on early learning.
 2. Cross level training related to practices for PK and K was also used in successful schools for staff and administrators. If this was not an option, some schools had an early childhood specialist who made both the program and budgetary decisions on PK and K.

Recommendations

- a. The process must be inclusive-An effective plan requires all of the 'players' to be part of the planning—from the beginning.
- b. Professional development is necessary for all-If all staff is to be on the same page, more early childhood professional development opportunities for all is essential.
- c. Certification-All new teachers in preschool through 3rd grade classrooms should have a P-3 certificate
- d. Expert initiated-A districts P-3 approach must be implemented by early childhood experts
- e. The government's role-The state must take a leadership role in the development of P-3 approach.

Conclusion

In studying the P-3 system it has become clear that the ladders are in place but the rungs need to be strengthened. Districts must begin to envision alignment as a system that encompasses all aspects of early childhood education – from preschool through 3rd grade rather than separate district programs. Only when this system is realized can every child begin to take advantage of an aligned and coordinated system of early learning.

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