

PK INCLUSION: Getting Serious About a P-16 Education System
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Overview

A P-16 system must pay particular attention to the P-3 years, from early childhood through third grade, because learning during these years lays the foundation for everything that follows. This article argues that the P-3 years—from prekindergarten through the primary grades—are the cornerstone of any P-16 system. They provide a strong foundation for children’s lifelong learning, educational excellence, and eventual competitiveness in the marketplace. From the perspective of P-16 systems, the learning experiences children have during the early childhood years (birth to age 5) should be better integrated and aligned with those they have during the kindergarten and elementary school years.

Discussion

There is still discussion and disagreement as to the definition and conceptualization of “P-3”. Although all agree that P-3 extends to third grade, there is disagreement on how to define the starting point of the continuum.

- a. In one definition of P-3, P stands for preschool and includes all of the learning and educational experiences that children have beginning at birth and extending into their entry into the public school system. This perspective focuses on learning and education as broad concepts that can take place in a variety of locales, not just in schools. It recognizes that children and families have different circumstances, different needs, different preferences, and different learning styles. The P-3 perspective is not about merely extending the existing education system to serve younger children; it is about changing that system itself. The concept of P-3 embraces the decade or more of system building in early care and education in which states and communities have worked to coordinate and align child care, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, and other programs and services that have traditionally been categorical and nonaligned.
- b. In the second definition of P-3, P stands for pre-kindergarten (those programs that serve 3- and 4- year old children). This perspective recognizes the critical need to improve the public education system, especially the need to extend the current K-12 system to serve young children in PK classes. As such, the term PK-3 would be most applicable to describe this part of the continuum. As public investments in PK programs increase, there will be more pressure to make stronger connections between PK programs and K-12 education in order to sustain gains students make in high-quality PK programs.

Conclusion

While the differences between these two perspectives deserve further discussion, what they have in common is more important. The P-3 perspective includes PK as a core component of the continuum of learning; the PK-3 perspective recognizes the importance of high quality infant, toddler, and child-care services, but it does not see them as central to a reformed PK-16 education system. Both perspectives acknowledge that the “P-3” part is routinely overlooked in broader P-16 discussions and deserves substantially more attention and investment from policy makers, researchers, think tanks, foundations, and educators.

Takanishi, R. & Kauerz, K. (2008). PK inclusion: Getting serious about a P-16 education system. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(7), 480-487.