

A close-up photograph of a child's hands, wearing an orange long-sleeved shirt, interacting with wooden letter cutouts on a white surface. The child is holding a red letter 'Y' and placing it into a matching red 'Y' cutout. Other cutouts, including a green 'L' and a red 'V', are visible on the surface.

**FORESIGHT** LAW+POLICY

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# WHY THE K-12 WORLD HASN'T EMBRACED EARLY LEARNING

BY ELLIOT REGENSTEIN



# *WHY WE MUST CONNECT THE EARLY YEARS TO WHAT COMES AFTER*



There are a rich set of important and interesting policy debates roiling the K-12 education world at any given moment. Among a diverse group of policymakers and advocates who share a common goal – improving student outcomes – there are fierce arguments about which strategies will be most effective to improve those outcomes, and indeed about how to even define which outcomes we care about. But through its policy choices and its cultural norms, the K-12 world ends up paying inadequate attention to the years that matter most to the achievement of whatever outcomes it could possibly define: the birth-to-eight years.

It's not that those K-12 leaders mean to ignore early learning. Indeed, many think of themselves as being in favor of early learning; they talk about its importance, and acknowledge research highlighting the importance of brain development in the early years. But for too many K-12 leaders, early learning is “other” – something they are in favor of even if it's not really their job to do something about it.<sup>1</sup> And the data are quite clear: the things that it is “their job to do” will never happen properly without a stronger connection between the early years and what comes after them.

**For years, the K–12 world has fundamentally underappreciated how the early years shape long-term educational outcomes. In both the K-12 and early learning worlds, there has been a corollary underestimation of the many ways policy and culture enforce a separation between the two. The goal of this paper is to expose these problems – and start proposing some solutions.**

The paper first explains why it is absolutely essential for K-12 leaders to pay more attention to the early years; this includes the pre-kindergarten birth-to-five years, and then also the early elementary years (K-2). The paper then explains how state policy can set the wrong incentives for local action, and discusses the state and local cultural issues that can perpetuate a divide between K-12 and early learning. The paper then identifies some promising practices, and concludes by proposing some next steps for states and districts that really want to change.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the same is often true in reverse: to many people in the early learning world, K-12 is “other” and something they do not fully understand. That problem also needs to be fixed and is also addressed here.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the analysis in this paper is based on personal experiences, both mine and those of many colleagues I've spoken to over the years. Observations based on experience are offered with no pretense that they represent universal truths, and I am always interested to hear from others whose experiences have been different.



I | **OVERLOOKING THE EARLY YEARS  
IS A RECIPE FOR FAILURE**





*While there are many different student outcomes that policymakers and educators focus on, federal law requires states to define educational goals on certain key indicators. The first two are proficiency on test scores and high school graduation rates, which under the federal No Child Left Behind law were required to be the dominant factors in state accountability systems. That eased up a bit under the Obama Administration's waiver approach, and under the new federal education accountability law – the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – states have even more flexibility. But proficiency and graduation rates remain critical factors in federal and state education accountability policy.*

## **A. Proficiency is a Critical Metric of School Performance**

“Proficiency” is essentially a line that states draw, with the idea that students performing above that line are on track to succeed – and that those below the line need to catch up. (Under federal law, proficiency is a function of scores on standardized assessments.) Each state sets its own proficiency line, and there historically has been wide variation in where those lines are drawn.

States are appropriately focused on ensuring that students achieve proficiency by the end of high school. In order to do that, students who are below proficiency in earlier years need to be caught up. Rich new data have helped us to understand just how much catch-up we can reasonably expect from our schools, and what that means for our improvement strategies. The short answer: it is extremely difficult to play catch-up if a cohort of students is even a little bit behind.

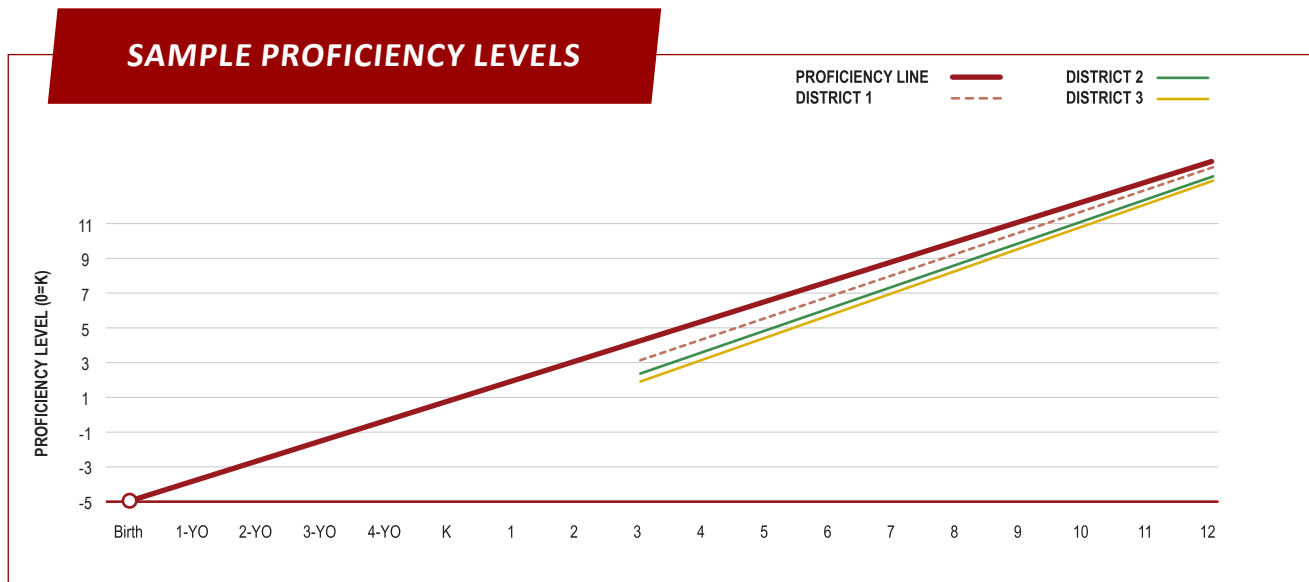
## **B. If a Cohort of Students is Not Proficient It is Hard to Catch Up**

Every state has a definition of what a grade's worth of academic progress should entail. In order to determine proficiency, states have to determine how much students should be expected to learn in a year. The proficiency line for each grade is then one year further along than the proficiency line for the previous grade. What that means, though, is that students who are behind need to make more than a grade's worth of progress every year. And delivering that kind of progress at scale is not easy.

An analysis produced last year by Stanford's Sean Reardon shows that a district that can produce 1.1 years of growth in a given year – or 5.5 years of growth in five years, the time period Reardon looks at – will rank among the best in the country. Extrapolate that out and a superstar district might produce 11 years of growth in 10 years. And what that means is that even in many above-average districts, a cohort of children that is more than a year behind at the end of second grade will not be caught up by the end of high school. Let that sink in for a moment: in most districts, a cohort that's a year behind at the end of second grade is already looking at a potentially insurmountable hill to climb.



The graphic below shows why this is the case. It shows the state proficiency line, plus three sample districts that are each providing 1.1 years of growth to a student cohort every year from third grade through high school graduation. In District 1 that cohort is a year behind entering third grade; in District 2 the cohort is a year and a half behind; and in District 3 the cohort is two years behind. As the graph shows, in none of these districts does the cohort ever catch up to proficiency. Only District 1 gets close.



Again, this graph shows districts that are achieving at year-to-year growth rates among the top 20% in the country. In most districts, new learning grows at much lower rates – and in close to 60% of American districts, proficiency gaps actually widen as students move through the grades.<sup>3</sup>

The data shown above start in third grade because under federal law, third grade is the first year that states are required to conduct accountability testing. So in many states, third grade is actually the first time there’s a clear window into how things are going for students. And as the song says: by the time you hear the siren, it’s already too late.

### C. A Lot of Students Are Behind by Third Grade

That’s because there are a lot of students who are below the proficiency line in third grade in even the highest achieving states. For example, look at Massachusetts, which in 2018 was rated by *Education Week* as the highest-performing state in the country in education overall (including in K-12 achievement). But on the 2017 Next-Generation MCAS exams, more than half of Massachusetts third graders were rated either “Partially Meeting Expectations” or “Not Meeting Expectations” in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math. Massachusetts is also like other states in that the proficiency rates for poor and minority students are below those of white students and children from higher-income families.

So even in the highest-performing state in the country, more than half of children are at least a little bit behind in third grade, with income and race strongly correlating to lower performance. Massachusetts’ data shows that the number of third graders who are really behind – that is, “Not Meeting Expectations” as opposed to “Partially Meeting Expectations” – is 10% in ELA and

<sup>3</sup> This chart is also an oversimplification of what is happening in schools, given that progress is rarely linear (and in fact can often flatten out as children get older). For a more thorough explanation of growth rates and what they mean for the ESSA goal-setting process, check out *Establishing Achievable Goals*, a paper released in December 2018 by Advance Illinois.





13% in math. Those percentages are higher for students who are economically disadvantaged (19/22), black (18/23), or Hispanic/Latino (20/22). For those kids, the odds of achieving proficiency by high school graduation are currently quite long.

### **D. Catching Up Is Less Correlated to Income than Starting Out Behind**

The chart above shows that when students are behind, even the most effective districts are unable to catch them up at scale – and of course, most districts produce student growth at much lower rates. Indeed, Reardon’s data shows that most districts produce less than a year of growth every year of schooling from third grade through high school graduation.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Reardon’s data also shows that growth rates are not necessarily tied to the demographics of a district; there are plenty of low-wealth districts producing impressive growth, and a lot of high-wealth districts where growth is limited. While proficiency rates are often tied to the family income of students, the ability of districts to improve proficiency does not appear to be strongly correlated to the wealth of the student population.

For those focused on equity in education, Reardon’s data drives home the point that inequities in achievement are about more than what’s happening in the schools – at least from third grade on, based on the data we have. Reardon’s data tell us that how fast you catch up is more an accident of geography than an effect of poverty: the rates of growth for students of similar demographic profiles vary substantially across districts. In many districts the low high school proficiency rates for low-income and minority students – and indeed, for all students – are less a function of how their schools served them than they are a reflection of where they started.

### **E. We Have to Start at the Beginning**

The bottom line: even if every single district in the country achieved growth rates from third grade on at the levels now achieved only by the most effective districts, it wouldn’t be enough to get kids caught up at scale by high school graduation. Of course we need to work on improving performance from third grade onward. But if that is all we do, we’ll never get where we want to be.

This dynamic is important to understanding the narrative about school performance. Many school leaders feel beat up by political leaders and the public about low performance in their schools. But this analysis shows that in many instances low performance isn’t a function of educators not doing their jobs. There are a lot of schools where the school is providing the expected year of education in every year, but the kids are not demonstrating proficiency because they started out too far behind. Blaming educators for this problem is unfair.

Federal law requires states to have accountability and school improvement systems that are designed to drive increases in proficiency. Given the data, it would make sense for state accountability, school improvement, and school funding systems to be heavily focused on years leading up to third grade. Unfortunately, the opposite is true.

<sup>4</sup> The reason Reardon’s data focuses on third grade and up is that this is the only data we have – but the process of students moving closer to or further from the proficiency line begins far earlier than that. The definition of proficiency is based on a state’s learning standards; every state has learning standards from at least age three through high school graduation, and most states have learning standards for the birth-to-three years as well. But as of now we are unable to rigorously study whether districts are producing growth in the K-2 years – and whether early learning programs are doing so in the 0-5 years.





## **HOW STATES TELL DISTRICTS THAT THE EARLY YEARS AREN'T THEIR JOB**



*No state has an explicit policy of telling school districts that the early years aren't their responsibility. But all states have important policies that have the practical effect of signaling to districts that those years really aren't what they should be focused on – or at the very least, it isn't where they should be putting their money. In the case of accountability and school improvement policies, the policy framework is dictated by federal law; in the case of funding, it isn't. Understanding those state policy signals is essential to changing how districts address the period from birth to age eight.<sup>5</sup>*

## **A. School Improvement and Accountability Systems Push Districts' Focus Away from the Early Years**

In the *No Child Left Behind* era, accountability and school improvement systems were clearly designed to apply only to third grade and up. Toward the end of that era, some of us made the case that accountability and school improvement should be birth-through-high-school – and ESSA at least opened the door to the possibility by requiring states to have accountability measures beyond test scores and graduation rates. So we proposed ways for accountability to include early learning, including identifying indicators states might use to measure it.<sup>6</sup> Those efforts yielded some fruit. But it's fair to say that early learning is still not a major focus of state accountability systems, nor is it a major driver of school improvement efforts.

### **1. Accountability Systems Focus Almost Exclusively on Third Grade and Up**

State accountability systems should be based on a definition of “successful district” or “successful school,” as a way of ensuring that districts and schools focus on what matters most. When federal and state officials define school success as what happens in the grades when statewide assessments are administered, it sends a clear message to schools to focus on those grades. Districts are (appropriately) under constant pressure to improve their performance, and if their performance is measured in third grade and up, that is where they will focus.

It is important to think about how this dynamic plays out for school superintendents. In other fields there has been an examination of incentives that potentially cause too strong a focus on the short term at the expense of the long term. For example, there are studies of how electoral pressures cause politicians to focus on short-term goals at the expense of society's long-term best interests; the same pressures are thought to affect businesses, creating corporate short-termism. Education is not the only area where the pressure of metrics potentially undermines long-term goals, but in education the problem may actually get worse for the districts that need the most help.

<sup>5</sup> There have been a lot of arguments and discussions about the degree to which federal and state accountability and school improvement policies have achieved their goals for school improvement. But regardless of the efficacy of these policies (on which this paper takes no position), they are discussed here because they are widely acknowledged to have a meaningful influence on local behavior – which is to say, they are important even if they're not entirely successful. And regardless of how test scores factor into state accountability systems, they are frequently the most commonly known public information about a school; that alone gives them a level of influence over school district behavior, regardless of any official consequences the scores might lead to under a state's accountability system.

<sup>6</sup> In my home state of Illinois, relentless advocacy/pestering led to the State Board's agreement to have a P-2 indicator in the state's accountability system. The State Board then followed the recommendation of the state's Early Learning Council and created a P-2 Indicator Workgroup, which filed a report making recommendations for implementation of the indicator. The indicator is still in process as a possible addition to the state's accountability system for the 2019-20 school year.



The superintendents responsible for managing district resources typically have terms of only five years. That means even if a district implemented a large-scale preschool program for four-year-olds in the first year of a superintendent's term, those four-year-olds will only start taking accountability tests in the fifth year of the superintendent's tenure, because it takes them that long to age through the system. By the time the scores are actually reported, on average the superintendent will be out the door.



Average superintendent tenures are even shorter in districts with higher percentages of low-income students. Those are the districts most likely to need interventions in the early years – and they're also the districts least likely to have superintendents who can take a longer-term view. Moreover, in low-income communities, high mobility means that a high percentage of the children enrolled in preschool will have moved out of the district by third grade. So if a superintendent in a low-income community is thinking about whether the state-mandated accountability system will ever hold him or her responsible for any particular pre schooler's test scores, the logical conclusion is that it probably won't.

Superintendents know all of this. Under existing state law, it is entirely reasonable for those superintendents to focus district resources on children they think are more likely to count against the district's accountability metrics. If superintendents are acting in their own interests, that's exactly what they'll do.

But that's actually the exact opposite of the state's interest, to say nothing of the interest of the children. As the data show, low-income children are the ones most in need of help before third grade. And the data on mobility plays out differently at the state level as well: in many instances children leaving a particular district will stay in the state, meaning that they will eventually show up in the state's accountability system in some other district.

When superintendents think about early learning, many of them think of exactly the example used above, preschool for four-year-olds. High-quality preschool for four-year-olds is a good thing, but, as discussed in the sidebar, that in itself is a limited early-years strategy. The most effective intervention strategy to prepare kids to succeed in kindergarten isn't just preschool for four-year-olds – it's a comprehensive set of birth-to-five interventions, followed by a sustained focus on high-quality K-2 education. Sadly short-term accountability pressures discourage districts from looking at even their four-year-olds, and those pressures make it even less likely that districts will pay attention to children younger than four. But that's exactly the reverse of what developmental science would tell us to do.

Finally, all of this assumes that a superintendent could actually implement a successful program in the first year of their tenure – and that's not a safe assumption. Even for superintendents with deep expertise in early learning, the implementation of any significant early childhood effort should take at least a year of preparation and planning. If the district is looking to strengthen its partnerships with existing early learning providers, it takes time to build trust and

put collaborative systems in place; if the district is expanding its own offerings, it takes time to hire teachers and work with parents to ensure adequate enrollment, and of course it takes money. So if our hypothetical superintendent in a low-income community came in with an agenda of expanding early learning, spent a year planning impressive new offerings for four-year-olds, and then successfully implemented the new strategy, those preschoolers – or at least those who actually enrolled in the program and then remained in the district – wouldn’t take accountability tests until that superintendent’s sixth year on the job. That’s an awful lot of effort and a few very big “ifs” for a pretty distant and uncertain payoff. But as long as state accountability systems focus on third grade and up, this is the calculus district leaders confront.

Think of state policymakers as a basketball coach, and the school districts as players. Essentially the coach is telling its players, “Go out in the first half and do whatever you want – I won’t be paying attention. We’ll see how things are going at halftime, and then I’ll start coaching. That should be enough to win.” Needless to say, there are no successful basketball coaches at any level who use this strategy.<sup>7</sup>



## THINKING BIRTH THROUGH FIVE

**The most common early childhood education program associated with school districts is preschool for four-year-olds – which makes sense, as it is the early childhood program most closely connected to kindergarten. But as Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has explained, investment in young children is most likely to be effective if it is made earlier. Birth-to-three services are actually the best opportunity to make a substantial difference, because they lay the groundwork for all that follows.**

**These birth-to-three services should include attention to meeting state educational standards – yes, states have learning standards for infants and toddlers – but those standards are focused on a wide range of developmental needs beyond “academic” subjects. The providers who focus on those services tend to be community-based and labor-intensive; the youngest children need a great deal of adult attention, and the required staffing ratios for most programs lead to high per-child costs. The complex world of birth-to-three services is underfunded and frequently not well organized, which can make it very difficult for school districts to understand and interact with. But infant-toddler providers would in many instances benefit from stronger partnerships with their local school district, and there are communities where effective partnerships have been established.**

**Far fewer children receive birth-to-three services than receive preschool. The largest high-quality infant-toddler program is the federal Early Head Start program, which serves only 7% of eligible children, with eligibility strictly for children from low-income families or with identified needs. In contrast, Head Start and state-funded preschool collectively serve 41% of all four-year-olds and 13% of all three-year-olds.**

<sup>7</sup> There are definitely districts that produce strong outcomes despite the lack of state support, as discussed later in this paper. Some districts have local leadership that bucks the incentive structure and focuses on the early years; other districts just have such an overwhelming demographic advantage that their students come in ready and need only a year of growth each year to end up in the right place. The larger point is that these successful outcomes will never scale if we’re counting on them to happen in the face of an incentive structure that pulls in the other direction.



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## 2. School Improvement Systems Also Focus Almost Exclusively on Third Grade and Up

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Reinforcing the limitations of the state's accountability system are the limitations placed on school improvement funds (known as School Improvement Grants under *No Child Left Behind*). Under *No Child Left Behind* these grants were three- or four-year grants whose metric of improvement was English Language Arts and math test scores. So even if the grants were used to add preschool slots the children served wouldn't actually take accountability tests during the grant period, meaning that according to the grant's metrics the grant recipient would essentially be wasting the money by spending it on preschoolers.<sup>8</sup>

Under ESSA, improvement grants are still for four years. States apparently have more flexibility in setting the metrics, but they are still expected to focus the grants on improving "student achievement and student outcomes." "Student achievement" is likely to be read as synonymous with improved performance on accountability tests. If that is the case, then ESSA will suffer from the same problem that *No Child Left Behind* had: the primary funding stream focused on improving "student achievement and student outcomes" will not be used in the years where strategic investment could actually do the most to improve student achievement and student outcomes.

States could easily end up compounding this problem in their school improvement rubrics. ESSA requires that school improvement be based on a needs assessment, and when the state defines the needs assessment rubric it defines what will happen in the school improvement process. These rubrics can have an impact beyond those schools that are receiving school improvement funds from the state, as they are often useful tools for a wide range of schools.

But many of these rubrics have historically fallen short when it comes to the years before third grade, because those years have not been the focus of school improvement efforts. That's meant that districts and schools often lack a real understanding of where children are in their development before third grade. That in turn has limited the ability of districts and schools to implement successful strategies addressing those years. These rubrics give districts and schools the critical questions they need to answer in the school improvement process; if districts and schools aren't asking the right questions, it's not very likely they will get to the right answers.

<sup>8</sup> On this issue, all of the issues discussed in II.A about planning for the implementation of early learning don't even apply; the grants were so short that even if a district had an early learning plan teed up and ready to fund, the grant period wasn't long enough for those kids to end up taking accountability tests until after the grant expired.



## KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT

Increasingly, states are adopting kindergarten readiness assessments to help them understand where children stand at kindergarten entry. These are important assessments for understanding the scope of the challenge of achieving higher levels of kindergarten readiness, even if the data can potentially be misused. These assessments can also help educators understand exactly what’s happening with children between kindergarten and second grade, so that schools can do a better job of keeping kids on track during these critical years.<sup>9</sup> This has enormously important implications for the school improvement process. While the promise of kindergarten readiness assessments is substantial, the actual rollout of KRAs takes a lot of work. Early learning advocates are often eager to see the statewide data KRA provides, but school districts – who are actually responsible for implementing the assessments – aren’t always as enthusiastic:

- Wealthier school districts often already have a battery of kindergarten assessments they have in place to ensure that they know how their children are doing at kindergarten entry. This is entirely correct on their part, but it means they probably already have whatever information they thought they needed about their students. So when the state proposes a new assessment these districts (whose wealth often gives them outsized influence) resist the requirement on various grounds – including that it is too burdensome to teachers, and/or that it’s an unfunded mandate (more on those later).
  - In some instances, this resistance can come from a belief that districts, rather than states, should be in charge of designing an assessment program – a view sharpened in many states by years of poorly-regarded accountability assessments in the older grades.
  - Some districts resist statewide KRAs because they believe they already have well-thought-out programs of kindergarten readiness assessment. The validity of this belief varies from district to district; some districts do in fact have thoughtful approaches to KRA, but others don’t. Where statewide KRAs have been implemented, some districts have decided to use the new statewide KRA as a base and reworked their overall assessment approach to incorporate it.
  - In fairness to districts with robust KRA programs impacted by new state approaches, they do actually end up having to do a fair amount of reconfiguration work for a new initiative that likely has far more benefit to others than it does to them.
- On the flip side, there are many districts that have no existing kindergarten assessment program. That is part of why states are rolling out statewide KRAs – but the challenge in these districts is that the teachers may not actually know how to properly administer these assessments. The state and local systems for helping districts implement these new KRAs are often underwhelming.

Successfully implementing kindergarten readiness assessments would be hard enough even if the people responsible for administering it were enthusiastic about the opportunity; when they’re not, the chances of success go down accordingly. Fortunately, some earlier-adopting districts are finding that after a rough first few years of implementation the successful implementation of kindergarten readiness assessments can lead to dramatic improvements in instruction. States committed to collecting this information must be prepared to commit to a multi-year rollout effort to make it work.

<sup>9</sup> Better data systems in states could lead to a better understanding of the relationship between early learning access and K-2 progression, as discussed further on page 8 of *An Unofficial Guide to the Why and How of State Early Childhood Data Systems*.



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### 3. It's a Definitional Problem

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Each state's accountability system and its school improvement rubric are the state's definition of what a good school looks like. In every state, for elementary schools, that definition is primarily driven by assessment results – as required by ESSA. But ESSA gives states at least some room to create a new definition of good school, and in doing so states can choose to address the near-complete absence of accountability in the years prior to third grade. The fact that states continue to define successful schools almost without reference to the early grades means that the local officials responsible for achieving success in their schools will continue to focus on the later years.



Interestingly, one of the major bipartisan purposes of *No Child Left Behind* was to uncover instances where schools were doing well by some students (usually well-to-do white students) but not others. Under NCLB disaggregation of data about low-income and minority student performance forced schools to pay more attention to some underserved constituencies; this was largely seen as one of the law's greatest successes, and was baked into ESSA as well. But what ESSA didn't do was apply the same logic to children prior to third grade, whose performance remains a complete mystery to all states and to too many districts.

Ultimately, this is an ownership problem. If superintendents are primarily responsible for the success of *schools* – and the success of those schools is defined with reference only to a subset of its students – that's the job they'll do. If, however, they are primarily responsible for the success of *all students*, that changes the equation substantially. Right now, state accountability plans are defined around the success of schools, not students, and the limitations of this definition have their greatest impact on the youngest learners.

## B. State Preschool Funding Can Take the Problem Out of Districts' Hands

Beginning almost two decades ago, many states have increased the number of four-year-olds they serve in preschool, to the point that 41% of four-year-olds are now enrolled in Head Start or state pre-k. (Some states have also increased service for three-year-olds, but those numbers are not nearly as promising; only 13% of three-year-olds are enrolled in either Head Start or state pre-k.) This is, in many ways, a good thing, because it has provided real opportunity to many children who needed it. From 2001 to 2009 states stepped up when neither the federal government nor school districts were doing so.<sup>10</sup> Then, from 2009 through 2016, the federal government infused new funding through the Early Learning Challenge (which supported systems development without funding additional enrollment) and the first version of Preschool Development Grants (which did support additional enrollment, and then in ESSA Congress changed them so they wouldn't any more). All of that is great and has led to many children having positive experiences.

For at least some school districts, though, this state leadership provides cover for their continued inaction. Unlike K-12 funding formulas – which involve a mix of state and local funds – in some states early learning is paid for in full by the state. That is not true everywhere; in some states early learning is in fact part of the K-12 funding formula, and some other states require a local match. But in states where the state is picking up a higher percentage of the tab for early learning than it is for K-12, that gives school districts an out to focus their resources elsewhere.

State early childhood advocates also are keenly aware that K-12 groups have been known to quietly undermine efforts to increase state funding for early learning. The opposition is rarely public, but whisper campaigns sometimes seek to shift funding from dedicated early learning funds to funding streams that give more discretion to local school districts. This is completely consistent with the advocacy approach of many school administrator groups, who want maximum discretion over their funding.<sup>11</sup> This advocacy is a first cousin to the frequent advocacy of school groups to reduce “unfunded mandates,” a term used to describe discrete expenses required by state law that are not attached to a dedicated funding stream.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the funding issue is a complicated one, and the signaling is much more ambiguous than the signaling from accountability systems. Data on district investment in early learning is much less complete than data on state investment, so there may in fact be more districts making these investments than is commonly acknowledged. Putting pre-k into the state's funding formula isn't inevitably a good thing, so states should not necessarily rush to do it. And in some states, it could easily be argued that the formula funding approach actually favors school districts at the expense of community-based providers, which is a completely different problem.<sup>13</sup> There are no easy answers here, but states should think carefully about what message their funding approach is really sending – and whether some different approach might send a better message.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> During this time period Head Start funding was almost completely flat: between 2001 and 2009 the highest funded enrollment was 912,345 (2002) and the lowest was 904,153 (2009). A subsequent spike in enrollment was created by short-term funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

<sup>11</sup> California recently created a new local control funding formula that consolidated many restricted funding streams and gave districts much more funding discretion. Some early childhood advocates thought this would lead to increased spending on early learning – but because none of the conditions surrounding school districts have changed, it mostly hasn't.

<sup>12</sup> State policymakers frequently combat arguments about “unfunded mandates” by responding that the state already provides a large percentage of school funding, and as the major funder has the right to define how that money is used. School districts will often then respond that while that may be true, the state is typically not thinking holistically or concretely about the relationship between what funds it provides to districts and what demands it places on them. While the exact nature of the argument varies from state to state and issue to issue, both sides make valid points. And hanging over these debates is the largest “unfunded mandate,” the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which the federal government has always underfunded and which places substantial demands on both states and districts.

<sup>13</sup> This messaging can get really complicated. In some states, the state is funding all of the early learning but putting a disproportionate share of the funds with school districts – which can send the message to districts that it's their job to lead on the issue but not to pay for the services.

<sup>14</sup> One complication of the grant-funded approach is that in some places preschool teachers, as grant-funded employees, have a supervision structure that is different than that of other teachers – meaning that they don't necessarily report to the principal of the building they work in. That's not an inevitable result of a grant-funded approach, but where it happens only reinforces the other-ness of early childhood.



III

***THE CULTURAL DIVIDE: HOW STATES AND DISTRICTS ACTUALLY EXPERIENCE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EARLY LEARNING AND K-12***



*The implementation of policy takes place through a whole host of actions at the state and local level; those actions are influenced by policy, but take on a life of their own based on personalities, historical norms, and any number of cultural factors. Policy both reflects and drives culture, so in the long term, the culture of K-12 could be influenced by policy changes – but in the short term, the implementation of policy will be heavily shaped by the current culture. This section discusses some of the norms that have emerged at the state and local level; state and local K-12 and early learning leaders would do well to reflect on whether the cultural challenges described here are in issue in their state or community.*

## **A. At the State Level, Early Childhood Can Be Everywhere and Nowhere**

Every state has a state education agency with the primary state-level responsibility for K-12 education. The structure and governance of those agencies varies. Some states have elected state superintendents, while others have superintendents appointed by the governor or a State Board of Education. But they all have a state education agency that is primarily responsible for administering education policy.

Early childhood just isn't that way. The work of birth-to-five services includes educationally-focused programs, but also a wide range of other health and human services programs. In some states preschool is part of the education agency, but in other states it is in a human services agency. Mandated services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act must be housed at the state education agency for three- to five-year-olds, but for zero- to three-year-olds can be housed in a few different places. While a few states have created standalone early learning agencies, and a few more have consolidated multiple programs into a single agency (sometimes but not always the education agency), in many states responsibility for early learning is widely dispersed. Moreover, the Head Start program is federal-to-local, which means that one of the most significant forces in the early learning community is one over which the state has no control.

That broader context influences state education agencies, which are naturally the key state-level executive branch actor in the relationship between K-12 and early learning. But in many state education agencies, the divide between K-12 and early learning is reinforced rather than broken down – even when the agency has major responsibility for early learning. Sometimes that seems to actually make things worse.

In the ESSA plan development process, it was completely understandable that the accountability and early learning staff didn't work together closely. In many states the state education agency's early learning staff weren't a part of the ESSA plan development, or played only a peripheral role. Historically, the responsibilities of the accountability staff and the early learning staff have essentially never overlapped, and in some states they barely even know each other.

After all, accountability policy has never included the early years before, and it wasn't required to this time around; accountability staff had a lot of new issues on their plate that the law actually required them to deal with, so they (appropriately) focused on those. As for the early learning staff, in some instances it never occurred to them that accountability and school improvement was an issue they should be tracking. And given how limited state agency bandwidth is to manage early learning programs, even if the early learning staff did want to get involved they might have reasonably determined that they just didn't have the time and/or capacity to do it. Unless state agency leaders were really committed to making this connection, the agency staff were not necessarily in a position to make it happen.

The ESSA plan process did require states to solicit feedback from outside stakeholders, but those processes weren't likely to change the dynamic. Early learning advocates in most states have never really focused on state accountability and school improvement policies – not for lack of interest, but because in many states advocacy capacity is limited and the number of issues to keep track of is vast. For years accountability and school improvement policy hasn't addressed early learning, so the advocates understandably focused on more pressing issues. K-12 advocates with expertise in accountability and school improvement may not have been thinking about the early learning angle – or, if they were, may have had other priorities. In many states, early learning advocates did actively engage in the state's ESSA process – with some success – but not always with a focus on the critical levers of accountability and school improvement.

In many states the divide between K-12 and early learning is, in effect, a language barrier. The state policy leaders and advocates for K-12 and early learning are actually thinking about a lot of the same issues – improving teaching, better data, effective use of assessments, and more – but they don't talk about them in the same way. The ESSA conversations about accountability are just one example of where the lack of translators between K-12 and early learning led to K-12 policies that didn't fully account for a potential early learning angle. So let's walk through the steps that got us to this point:

- The federal government in *No Child Left Behind* tried to inspire school improvement by focusing on what was measurable. It wasn't the goal of NCLB to reinforce the culture of ignoring early learning, just one of many unfortunate side effects. ESSA wasn't really focused on improving how early learning fares in state accountability systems but made things slightly better – not because it was specifically trying to, but because it addressed a broader issue that correlates to some degree with this one: the backlash against proficiency on tests as the sole measure of student success.
- States then in turn made the entirely rational decision to submit ESSA plans that minimize their commitment to the federal government, to give themselves maximum flexibility in implementation. In that context it's not surprising that state plans don't really commit to a great deal of specific action on early learning, even if a number of the plans do at least recognize its importance. This wasn't an inevitable result, but it was certainly predictable – especially when the Trump Administration signaled that it intended to give states broad flexibility. Moreover, the long history at the state level of accountability and early learning being two totally separate bodies of knowledge meant that when plans were being formulated there were few voices calling for the accountability system to thoughtfully address early learning.
- And then finally, predictably, those districts that are paying any attention to ESSA implementation are making the entirely rational decision to focus on what the state tells them to do.

The federal government, states, and districts are all making entirely logical decisions that have the cumulative effect of reinforcing our misplaced focus away from the time period that offers the greatest opportunity to impact long-term outcomes. Fortunately we can break out of this trap, and states can lead the way by redefining rational behavior for districts in ways more favorable to early learning. Before discussing how states can do that, though, it is worth considering some of the pressures that operate at a local level – which districts are also going to need to deal with to address the early years effectively.



## **B. There are Local Pressures that Can Make It Hard to Fund Early Learning**

The language barrier at the state level is also a serious issue at the local level. Indeed, many local administrators are not particularly fluent in early learning. At the local level, K-12 leaders frequently do not have a deep understanding of the importance of the early years.

### **1. School District Understanding of Early Childhood Development May be Limited**

A survey several years ago by the National Association of Elementary School Principals asked elementary school principals whether they felt comfortable with their knowledge of child development for children in the birth-to-eight age range. The survey showed that only 20% of elementary school principals were confident in their knowledge.<sup>15</sup> If that's the number for *elementary school principals*, it's safe to assume that among superintendents and other school district administrators the percentage is only lower; many of those administrators come from high school or middle school backgrounds. Administrators have a natural tendency to focus on what they know and are good at, and for the vast majority of school district leaders that isn't early childhood.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> These findings were so alarming that NAESP has launched a leadership academy to improve awareness of early childhood among its members. An initial evaluation of the pilot is very promising. For disclosure purposes, NAESP is a client of Foresight's.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that school district leaders do not understand the importance of the early childhood years; by and large they do. But the fact that it is not their expertise reduces the likelihood of their expending political capital on expanding opportunities in this area, and also can limit their ability to implement those programs successfully.





## THE ORPHANED K-2 YEARS

While some of this paper talks about “the early years” – birth through second grade – there are other parts that talk about “early learning,” which is birth through kindergarten entry. The K-2 years are often a strangely orphaned period within K-12 world, in part because they are the only years not subject to state accountability systems. Research has shown that in some cases that’s led to principals placing their weakest teachers in those grades.

Anecdotally, there are plenty of stories of schools in which the K-2 teachers feel cut off from the rest of their colleagues. Because many principals do not have a background in working with younger children, some of them struggle to provide instructional leadership to their K-2 teachers. A number of states have passed legislation relating to third-grade reading, often with a focus on retention and promotion policies, but those laws have not necessarily led to improved capacity for K-2 teaching in those states. In some cases those laws have led to more concerted efforts to do earlier diagnosis of reading levels, which can have value – but without additional K-2 teaching capacity that might also lead to a narrowing of the curriculum.

One possible impact of the lack of accountability testing in K-2 is that teachers may not have a strong sense of urgency about getting their kids who are behind caught up. There are certainly plenty of districts that use formative assessments in the K-2 years to understand how students are progressing.<sup>17</sup> But there are places where the school culture is to “let kids be kids” in the K-2 years and not worry too much about their academic progress. That is a huge problem given the stakes of falling behind in those years. When done correctly, teaching in the K-2 years takes advantage of kids’ natural curiosity and helps them have fun while learning essential content.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to argue that all assessment in the K-2 years is always well-designed or well-executed – only to say that when assessment in the K-2 years is in fact well-designed and well-executed, it yields valuable information.

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## 2. Budgetary Pressures Make It Hard to Ramp Up Early Learning

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Whatever their level of understanding, district administrators have difficult jobs that involve balancing multiple constituencies while allocating limited resources. If a district is not already actively devoting funds to early learning,<sup>18</sup> there will be significant pressures that make it hard to do so:



- The most significant expense in school districts is personnel; on average that accounts for about 80% of district budgets. In many of the districts where early learning would make the most difference, teachers are underpaid – and the competition for teachers can be fierce. Teachers are also an established and vocal presence in all school budgeting processes. Thus, pressure to increase salaries for current staff is a constant for district administrators, and must be accounted for when planning any other kind of spending.
- There are also going to be voices in some communities who say that it doesn't make sense to expand into preschool until some undefined improvement is made to the grades the districts already runs.<sup>19</sup> In many cases this argument is tantamount to “Let’s finish bailing out the boat before we plug the leak,” but it only makes it more difficult to get an early learning program approved.

An important underlying idea in any budgetary discussion is the radically different mutuality of obligation between school districts and children, and early learning providers and children. In a state’s years of compulsory attendance, children are obligated to show up for school and the school is obligated to take them; neither of those things are true in early learning. This makes funding early childhood feel “optional” at both the state and local level, often putting it behind other priorities with better-established infrastructures. Moreover funding early childhood can feel daunting because there are so many kids without service – and expanding service is generally much more expensive than funding improvements to existing services.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> As discussed below, this is not the only way districts can make a contribution in early childhood – but it’s a potentially important one.

<sup>19</sup> In districts that don’t have full-day kindergarten, this can take the form of someone insisting that until there is universal full-day kindergarten there shouldn’t be a preschool program.

<sup>20</sup> But as discussed below, in some cases that actually makes it more appealing to politicians.

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### 3. K-12 and Early Learning Leaders Often Have Different Worldviews

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The cultural divide between K-12 and early learning has spent decades taking shape, and it is quite powerful. In elementary and secondary school world, it is taken as a given that all teachers and school administrators will have some kind of bachelor's degree; in the early learning world, many professionals don't have those degrees and there's still a live debate over whether they even should. The rise of the pre-k movement almost 20 years ago worked hard to put early childhood into more of an "education" narrative, but even in an education narrative early childhood professionals have a broad view of child development.



Many early childhood providers are small non-profits, and school districts may not have a lot of experience in dealing with these kinds of community-based service providers. Those providers may perceive the school district as a powerful bureaucracy with substantial resources but a limited understanding of child development. The district, in turn, might perceive the providers as shoestring operations run by people who lack the educational qualifications of school district leaders. Those perceptions are often grounded in truth, but if the conversation starts out with each side believing the worst about the other then it won't usually progress far. Leaders on both sides have to approach the engagement believing that the other side is capable of adding value to their work; otherwise, they'll always remain "sides" instead of becoming partners.

It is worth noting here that there are an increasing number of superintendents who are putting in the time and effort to make these partnerships work. And there are plenty of superintendents who are benignly inclined toward early learning even if they haven't yet forged strong partnerships. Good intentions may not be enough, but they're a fine place to start. And many early learning providers have had positive experiences collaborating with their local school district. The worldview divide is real, but there are an increasing number of communities where the divide has been successfully bridged.

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### 4. Child Care Providers May Not Want the District to Offer Early Learning

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Sometimes when districts propose to expand their preschool offerings, the most vocal opponents are existing child care providers. This opposition is frequently rooted in a state policy barrier that school districts don't normally have to think about: how states fund child care. States generally underfund infant-toddler child care to the point that providers simply can't stay in business if they're only serving children from birth to age three – they need three- and four-year-olds to make the numbers work.<sup>21</sup> So when school districts propose to start serving four-year-olds, the child care providers may legitimately see that as an existential threat, and in some communities the Head Start providers do too.

<sup>21</sup> It's generally less expensive to provide child care to slightly older children because the adult-child ratios permitted are more favorable. You can have 20 four-year-olds in a room with two adults and probably be fine, but 20 one-year-olds in a room with only two adults is a disaster waiting to happen. State child care licensing rules generally reflect that and require more adults in the room for younger children.



If school districts are not sensitive to these dynamics when they roll out a proposal, the community-based early childhood providers may enter the conversation from an understandably defensive posture. In general, it's easier for school districts to fund initiatives that don't have an active opposition, and if district officials weren't expecting the opposition of early childhood providers they might not have a plan to deal with it. At that point, forward momentum can easily break down.

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## 5. These Are Obstacles, Not Insurmountable Barriers

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None of these pressures on their own (or even in combination) are necessarily fatal to the cause of advancing early learning in a district. But it is important to have them in mind when considering how state policy levers might influence local leaders. And these certainly aren't the only pressures that operate on local leaders; there are others to consider that can be positive, if potentially complicated.

## C. There is Local Support for Early Learning – How Does It Influence the District?

The state pressures that operate on school districts do not operate on other key local influencers. Preschool is popular, and in many communities local officials have figured out how to take advantage of that. Moreover, local philanthropies have in some cases identified early learning as an important strategy. These are generally good things for early learning advocates. The key: do these outside actors engage with school districts in a way that brings districts with them as partners in strengthening early learning systems – or do they fill a gap in a way that lets school districts off the hook?

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### 1. Early Learning's Local Popularity Can Bring School Districts Along

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Early learning advocates have been cheered in recent years by numerous local initiatives to expand preschool access. Some of the cities that have gotten positive press include [New York City](#), [San Antonio](#), [Denver](#), [Seattle](#), [San Francisco](#), and [Chicago](#). The common thread in these initiatives: it wasn't the school district that led the way. These cities have expanded early learning through a combination of referenda and leadership from city government. One reason early learning can be politically popular is that it allows politicians to offer a new service; in the compulsory school years everybody is already going to school, but early learning allows politicians to give constituents something they didn't have before.

Local political leadership on early childhood is a good thing, and of course the children served don't care who the source of political will was. And even when the leadership comes from outside the district, the city school district is often counted on to lead the implementation.<sup>22</sup>

But the implementation of a new large-scale preschool program does not necessarily change the culture of the school district. If the district treats the preschool program as "other" – not really a part of its core mission, but kind of an add-on – then the program growing doesn't necessarily move it out of "other" status. Indeed, if the push for its expansion came from outside the district's leadership it might just reinforce that idea, because districts have been known to raid their preschool funds for other priorities they think are more important.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This is not universally true, and is context-dependent; for example, in San Antonio the city is served by multiple school districts.

<sup>23</sup> In 2004 the then-CEO of Chicago Public Schools was [accused of doing exactly that](#).

Still, the idea of using external local forces to work with school districts is a good one. Engaging at the community level may create a base of support surrounding a school district that makes it more likely that the district will engage productively in discussions about the future of early childhood in a community. In addition to elected officials, school board members can play a valuable role; while superintendents turn over frequently and may be inclined to focus on short-term metrics, school board members are part of the community and may have an easier time supporting long-term investments. The national Campaign for Grade Level Reading is one of the most prominent initiatives focused on the early grades – and it operates in partnership with communities, not just school districts.

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## **2. Philanthropies Can Play a Critical Role in Engaging School Districts**

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Local philanthropic communities are often additional supporters of early learning. Philanthropic dollars are frequently used to support local collaborative efforts, which in some instances have led to districts building their understanding of the early years and strengthening their commitment.

The effectiveness of philanthropic investment is frequently tied to how much culture change they can bring about in the district. When philanthropies invest in creating “model programs” with no scaling strategy, then what can end up happening is the philanthropy ends up with an expensive ongoing commitment, and the district doesn’t change how it spends its much-larger pot of money. And most veteran early childhood advocates have a story about a district that saw an early childhood grant opportunity, did what was needed to get the grant, and then abandoned the effort when private money dried up.

But these cautionary tales are not an argument against philanthropic action, they’re an argument for philanthropists being strategic. Savvy philanthropists think carefully about which small private investments will lead to larger investments of public dollars. The state and local context will dictate exactly what that investment should look like.

## D. Yes, There Are Districts Doing a Great Job Despite All of This



The odds may be stacked against school district involvement in early learning – but there are plenty of districts that are beating the odds. [Boston](#) is a [popular example](#); while Boston’s mayors have been champions of early learning, the school district itself has done groundbreaking work. The collaborative work going on in [Omaha](#) through the Buffett Early Childhood Institute is worthy of national attention. The [District of Columbia](#) has made access to preschool a policy cornerstone, and there are many smaller districts that have invested in early learning as well.

Importantly, investing as a direct service is not the only way school districts can strengthen early learning. While percentages vary substantially from state to state and community to community, in many places community providers offer the vast majority of early learning opportunities – even when the school district is actively involved. Given the wide range of services

offered by those community providers – many of which school districts will have no interest in or capacity to run – it is simply not possible for the school district to get involved in a productive way without actively engaging the community providers. Those community providers are working with kids who will end up in the public schools, and smart school districts will see their expertise and relationships as a valuable asset.

Whether a district offers preschool services or not, there will always be some children who are in non-district settings before enrolling in a district program – be that at age five, age three, or even earlier. Districts that build strong relationships with the providers of those services can help improve the experience for those children prior to school entry. That can help those children enter school with a greater chance of achieving proficiency, and other important outcomes.

This work is not easy given how many different providers there are in the early learning space. And while it is important for school principals to be involved in building relationships with providers in their areas, early learning service areas are often very different from school attendance boundaries – meaning that the work of building partnerships cannot be done by principals alone. But there are resources available to districts interested in building these partnerships, with the [National P-3 Center](#) just one well-known example. If districts and early learning providers are committed to building strong partnerships and are willing to listen to each other, there are examples of success they can draw on to inform their own efforts.

The point of this paper is not to argue that school districts can’t succeed at early learning. [They can](#), and we should highlight their successes at every opportunity. The point is that school districts will always act in their interest as they define it. Some districts have defined their interest to include a focus on the early years, and that is great. But many have not, for a host of entirely logical reasons – some of which are grounded in state policy. That gives states the power to affect that logic and make it clearer to districts that succeeding in the early years is in fact in their best interest. Kudos to the districts that are doing a great job, but their existence should not diminish the need for a much better set of state policy choices.



IV

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND  
LOCAL ACTION**



*The policy and cultural challenges to strengthening the connections between K-12 and early learning have built up over a long period of time, and they won't be reversed overnight. But the Reardon data tells us that if we don't work on solving this problem, then it's unlikely that we're going to achieve our goals for middle and high school at scale.*

## **If states want to start trying to solve the problem, there are some concrete steps they can take:**

- **Include early childhood leaders in any strategy discussions about improving high school proficiency and long-term outcomes (including higher education and workforce outcomes). They're all the same students, and without a strong strategy for the early years it will be hard to achieve high school and post-secondary goals.**

The issues that are big issues in K-12 education are also big issues in early learning. Implementing learning standards, strengthening the use of formative assessment, raising the quality of teaching, providing stronger instructional leadership, using data more effectively, informing and facilitating parental engagement, figuring out the right structures for parental choice – these are all important in both K-12 and early learning. Sure, the exact content of the conversation sounds a little different depending on the age; it's still the same conversation. And that is particularly true of the conversation about defining the quality of the educational experience, measuring that quality, and then supporting quality improvement – which are the purposes of accountability and school improvement systems.

- **Implement an accountability system that puts meaningful weight on the K-2 years, to send a clear signal to school districts that those years really matter.**

Having been a leader of the effort to do this in my home state of Illinois, I can attest that it's really hard – the strictures of ESSA and the limited number of appropriate measures for statewide accountability in K-2 make it difficult to come up with good levers for change, and ESSA also limits what percentage of an accountability system's weight can be focused on non-test measures.<sup>24</sup> But if states aren't even working on the problem, we'll never solve it.

Doing this right will require states leading the way by developing processes for ESSA plan implementation that include early learning voices at the table.

<sup>24</sup> For what it's worth, our group in Illinois recommended two indicators: chronic absenteeism was one, and the other was the percentage of dual language learners receiving required services. The District of Columbia and Louisiana have focused on measuring teacher-child interactions in those years; that is the exact approach recommended in [this 2014 paper](#) on birth-through-high school accountability, but how it will end up fitting under ESSA is something of a question mark.



- **Require the school improvement process to include a diagnosis of what's going on before third grade. Colorado has already done this by state law. States are designing rubrics and needs assessments for their school improvement process, and those rubrics can force schools to confront some essential questions that are currently too widely ignored: how are their students doing at kindergarten entry? And what's happening to them between kindergarten and third grade?**

The assessments used prior to third grade are not suitable for statewide accountability purposes, and in general there's very little appetite for high-stakes standardized assessment of younger children. But there are available assessments that can be used to diagnose how students are doing in those years. Without that diagnosis, schools will have an incomplete picture of what their real challenges are, and run a very high risk of devoting their school improvement grants to solving the wrong problems.

- **Do a temperature check on school readiness statewide. Maryland was a pioneer in this area, and other states are bringing new systems on line. Knowing where kids are coming into kindergarten does two things: it allows the state and school districts to be realistic about mapping a path forward from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and it also allows the state and school districts to be realistic about how much work is needed prior to kindergarten entry to achieve the state's goals.**

The odds are high that this analysis will surface some significant equity issues, because in all likelihood the schools where children are behind at kindergarten entry will be disproportionately in low-income communities. State education leaders should be ready to have that conversation, and to help those school districts engage successfully with early learning leaders in their community.

It is important to remember that when children enter kindergarten behind after attending an early learning program, that doesn't necessarily mean the early learning program didn't do a good job. Kindergarten readiness assessment results cannot be used to evaluate the quality of early learning providers.

- **Build the capacity of district leaders to understand early childhood development. Illinois now requires all principals to be trained in early childhood development; some of those principals will go on to become superintendents. A culture of school leaders who really understand the early years makes it more likely that districts will be well equipped to address the issue.**
- **Think carefully about the state's early childhood governance structure. Changing governance structures is hard and should not be undertaken lightly, but if stakeholders are concerned about disorganization and inconsistency at the state level states should at least talk seriously about addressing the problem.**



- **Yes, the methods by which early childhood services are funded can send mixed messages to school districts – but the message to the families that actually need the services is more unambiguously positive. States may want to be more thoughtful about how they’re leveraging funds, but should make a commitment to funding access to services for children that need it.**

In particular, states could do a lot more to support infant-toddler investment. The infant-toddler years are the ones when high-quality experiences can mean the most for child development. Nonetheless, this is the age that states generally invest in the least. One specific investment referenced earlier is infant-toddler child care – strengthening commitment to that program could change the dynamic of conversations across the state between school districts and child care providers.

None of this is easy. And it’s important to note that while incentive structures are important, they are limited: changing all of these incentives might get more school districts working on the right issues, but it doesn’t guarantee they will do so effectively. Moreover, these are not necessarily levers that lead to quick results even under the best of circumstances; what’s proposed here is a set of changes that will likely require years to achieve their full potential.



### **CHANGE IS HAPPENING**

**Of course, some school districts haven’t been waiting for states to improve their policy sets. They’ve internalized the importance of the early years, and have been taking actions that include:**

- **Engaging in community-wide opportunities to talk about the early learning system and how that connects to K-12, to ensure that school district actions are understood and complemented by community partners;**
- **Diagnosing where their kindergartners are at kindergarten entry, and then engaging with early learning providers to improve the transition into kindergarten (which can include joint professional development efforts);**
- **Diagnosing how students are progressing in the K-2 years, and then building instructional systems to improve performance;**
- **Coming up with local metrics of success in the early years – which don’t necessarily have to meet the standards of ESSA – and using them to guide improvement efforts;**
- **Placing a focus on equity in the early years, to make sure the kids who need it most are getting access to high-quality opportunities; and**
- **Partnering with local philanthropies to support collaborative improvement efforts that the district can’t undertake on its own.**

The bottom line is that all states and all districts have goals for improving high school proficiency and helping students succeed in life after high school. While of course we should be working to improve education from third grade through the end of high school, we have a good sense of the limits on what our current direction is likely to produce. It is unlikely that in the near future every district in the country will soon perform at what is currently a near-elite level – and even if they did, that wouldn't be enough to achieve proficiency at scale if students are even a year behind at the end of second grade. There is only so much we can achieve if our approach continues to emphasize only third grade and up.

The birth-to-eight years offer our best opportunity to improve long-term outcomes. But as long as the relationship between K-12 and early learning remains broken, we will never take advantage of that opportunity at scale. We know that many kids aren't receiving any educational services at all prior to kindergarten entry, they're entering kindergarten behind, and that we're not using the K-2 years to catch them up as effectively as we could.

**WE CAN CHANGE ALL THAT – AND THE IMPACTS OF THAT CHANGE WOULD RIPPLE THROUGH THE ENTIRE EDUCATION SYSTEM.**

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