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## QRIS and P-3:

### *Creating Synergy Across Systems to Close Achievement Gaps and Improve Opportunities for Young Children*

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There is growing recognition that for children to achieve their full potential they must have a strong start throughout their early years, birth through age eight. The first eight years either set children on a path to success as curious and engaged learners with strong foundational skills – or allow achievement gaps to take root, forcing schools to play an impossible game of catch up that leaves far too many children behind. To maximize children’s potential during these years and to close later achievement gaps, the early learning system and the early years of elementary school must be high quality and be aligned with one another. While this has been discussed philosophically for years, the fragmentation and poor quality both within the early childhood “non-system” and across the early childhood/early elementary continuum have made such alignment extremely difficult – and left too many children underserved and underprepared for school success.

We find ourselves at a rare moment when new thinking and innovative solutions are being developed to improve the systems that affect young children. Philanthropic foundations are uniquely positioned to advance this work through investments in innovative practices and new ways of thinking that have the potential to transform both early

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childhood and elementary education. Two distinct reform movements, one in early care and education (ECE) and one that spans ECE and the early elementary grades, have emerged in recent years as holding great promise for the improvement of school readiness and the closing of achievement gaps. These two movements are each approaching critical moments in their development. Philanthropy has a critical role to play in bringing the two reform strategies into alignment with one another, improving the odds that both will have an effective impact on outcomes for young children. This brief describes what such alignment might look like, and what philanthropy can do to support it.

## Context and Challenges ● ● ●

Science has confirmed that the first eight years of children’s lives are a unique, sensitive, and critical period of development. During these years children acquire an impressive range of both social and academic competencies that establish the foundation for later learning and development. Policymakers and others increasingly realize that children’s success in 3rd grade and beyond rests largely on the experiences children have before they ever enter kindergarten. As a result, there is growing interest in developing systems that support and improve the full range of early care and education (ECE) programs that serve children from birth to school entry.

Simultaneously, there is growing recognition that maintaining and extending the cognitive and social gains children acquire in ECE programs rests largely on ensuring that the early elementary school years – kindergarten through 3rd grade – are of high quality. As a result, more than ever, there is interest in connecting, aligning, and creating continuity between children’s experiences to ensure all investments in the early years are maximized and achievement gaps are closed.

Two emerging movements – Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and P-3 (pre-school through 3rd grade) – present opportunities to improve the quality of children’s early experiences. After discussing the overarching challenges that these two parallel movements face, this paper provides overviews of both the QRIS and P-3 landscapes, followed by recommendations for how foundations and other leaders in the field can leverage and link the two movements to strengthen high quality learning opportunities for children.

### Common Challenge #1: Inequity and Achievement Gaps

Media and advocacy organizations at both national and state levels have reported on the woeful state of academic achievement across the United States, highlighting gaps that reflect deep disparities in the achievement of low-income students and students of color when compared to other segments of the student population. For example, the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as “the nation’s report card,” reveals a bleak picture of American children’s educational performance at the end of 3rd grade. Approximately 46% of Asian, 43% of white, 17% of Hispanic, and 14% of black 4th-graders scored at or above proficiency in reading. Results for math proficiency are equally troubling. These gaps exist not only between sub-groups of students, but also between similar sub-groups who live in different parts of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Reformers argue that achievement gaps exist because the K-12 system is somehow failing young students by providing low-quality and inequitable education to many young students. These



<sup>1</sup> Rowan, A. H., Hall, D., & Haycock, K. (2010). *Gauging the gaps: A deeper look at student achievement*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.



achievement gaps, however, do not just appear in elementary school. Data from nationally representative samples of children in the United States reveal disparities in cognitive, social, behavioral, and health outcomes between children from at-risk backgrounds and their more advantaged peers as early as nine months of age.<sup>2</sup> These disparities persist as children enter kindergarten.<sup>3</sup> Called “readiness gaps,” they not only reflect the opportunity gaps children face in terms of the types and quality of ECE programs and services to which they have access, but also precede the achievement gaps that are widely publicized and lamented in 3rd grade and beyond.

These gaps are costly for school systems and society to address; they cannot be closed with simple, “silver bullet” approaches. Addressing inequities in educational opportunities and closing achievement gaps require providing consistently high-quality learning opportunities that begin early in children’s lives and extend throughout their educational careers.



## Common Challenge #2: Widespread Low-Quality Programs and Classrooms

An impressive research base over the last two decades has demonstrated that high quality early learning programs improve school achievement, reduce the need for special education and grade retention, and reduce later involvement in the criminal justice system. Long-term cost-benefit analyses document returns of up to \$17 for every \$1 invested in a high quality early learning program.<sup>4</sup> But typical U.S. early childhood programs are not even close to the quality or comprehensiveness required to close the readiness gap or deliver such high returns.<sup>5</sup> Low standards, inadequate funding, and a poorly educated workforce mean only 11% of early childhood programs offer excellent quality care, while the remainder is of minimal or poor quality.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson Chernoff, J., Flanagan, K. D., McPhee, C., & Park, J. (2007). *Preschool: First findings from the third follow-up of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)* (NCES 2008-025). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, V. E., & Burkam, D. T. (2002). *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute; Magnuson, K. A., Meyers, M. K., Ruhm, C. J., & Waldfogel, J. (2005). Inequality in children’s school readiness and public funding. *Focus*, 24(1), 12-18.

<sup>4</sup> Ramey, C. T., Campbell, F. A., Burchinal, M., Skinner, M. L., Gardner, D. M., & Ramey, S. L. (2000). *Persistent effects of early intervention on high-risk children and their mothers*. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 2-14; Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40*. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 14. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press; Temple, J. A., Reynolds, A. J., & Miedel, W.T. (2001). Can early childhood intervention prevent high school dropout? Evidence from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. *Urban Education*. 35:31-56.

<sup>5</sup> Barnett, W.S. and Ackerman, D.J. (2006) Costs, benefits and long-term effects of early care and education programs: Recommendations and cautions for community developers. *Journal of Community Development and Society*. Vol. 37, No. 2. Available: <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/pdf/86-100%20barnett%20ackerman.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2003, October). *NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development*. Presented at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

Poor quality classrooms are not limited to ECE programs. Recent large-scale studies show that the general quality of elementary school classrooms is also inadequate.<sup>7</sup> In these studies, quality is defined by the emotional interactions in the classroom, coupled with the quantity and quality of literacy and math instruction. In one multistate study, fewer than 25% of 1st grade classrooms were found to be of overall high quality.<sup>8</sup> Because children's placement into elementary schools is almost entirely dependent on where they live, these findings about elementary schools' classroom quality are particularly alarming for low-income students because they are most likely to end up in low-resource schools.<sup>9</sup>

Systemically, if many children experience both low-quality ECE and low-quality elementary schooling, their chances of acquiring a solid foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional skills are greatly diminished.

### Common Challenge #3: Differences Within and Between Systems

To understand the quality challenges, it is important to understand the funding landscape for ECE, which is a mixed market. The ECE provider community is made up of many small businesses and of public programs. Largely, parents pay for care and government regulates these programs minimally. Government pays for only some families who are income-eligible and need child care. Within this mixed market is Head Start, Early Head Start, and most state-funded pre-K,

for which parents do not pay and do not have choices for enrollment, much like public schools.

The majority of resources for early learning programs comes from families who purchase early care and education for their children but, because families with young children typically are young themselves and at the beginning of their earning potential, the ability to increase their contribution is limited by their income; the cost of an early childhood program is more than tuition at the average state university, averaging between \$4,000 and \$10,000 annually.<sup>10</sup>

The largest share of public funding comes from the federal government in two primary funding streams

and many states provide a third significant source:

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#### 1) The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)

provides funding to states to work toward two goals: facilitating parental employment to achieve financial self-sufficiency and supporting children's development. Approximately 14% of eligible children received child care subsidies<sup>11</sup> and most states set only minimal licensing standards that focus on the most basic health and safety requirements. With limited funding, state administrators must make difficult trade-offs between these competing priorities, often choosing to fund more slots of lower quality to serve more parents.<sup>12</sup>

#### 2) Head Start was founded in 1965 and provides a comprehensive preschool and family support program for children three to five years old living

<sup>7</sup> Pianta, R.C., Belsky, J., Vandergrift, N., Houts, R., & Morrison, F. J. (2008). Classroom effects on children's achievement trajectories in elementary school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(2), 365-397; Pianta, R.C., Belsky, J., Houts, R., Morrison, F., & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network. (2007). Opportunities to learn in America's elementary classrooms. *Science*, 315, 1795-1796.

<sup>8</sup> Stuhlman, M. W., & Pianta, R. C. (2009). Profiles of educational quality in first grade. *The Elementary School Journal*, 109(4), 323-342.

<sup>9</sup> Clements, M. A., Reynolds, A. J., & Hickey, E. (2004). Site-level predictors of children's school and social competence in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19, 273-296; Education Trust. (2005). *The funding gap 2005: Low-income and minority students shortchanged by most states*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>10</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children (2010). Key facts. Available: <http://www.naeyc.org/woyc/facts>.

<sup>11</sup> Mezey, J., Greenberg, M. & Schumacher, R. (2002). The vast majority of federally-eligible children did not receive child care assistance in FY 2000: *Increased child care funding needed to help more families*. Center for Law and Social Policy: Washington D. C.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, G. and Rohacek, M. (2002). More than a work support? Issues around integrating child development goals into the child care subsidy system. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 17(2002) 418-440.



in poverty; an estimated 60% of eligible children participate.<sup>13</sup> **Early Head Start** was founded in 1994 and provides similar services for children prenatally to age three; an estimated 5% of eligible children participate. Head Start and Early Head Start programs must meet extensive federal quality standards.

- 3) A growing number of states invest state funds in early childhood programs. The majority of these investments are in *pre-Kindergarten (pre-K)*. Only three of the 38 states with pre-K programs meet all ten nationally recommended benchmarks of quality and most states do not invest sufficient amounts of funding per child to support high-quality pre-K programs.<sup>14</sup>

This mixed market for early childhood programs – with variable quality standards established at different levels of government and supported by different sources and amounts of funding – makes it cumbersome and difficult to improve quality systemically across the ECE field. This complexity is one of the key factors driving the national trend toward the development of comprehensive early childhood systems, in which the BUILD Initiative has played a key role.

In addition to, and exacerbated by, this non-system of ECE programs and services, there also exists a long history of disconnection between the ECE and K-12 worlds. The American K-12 system is publicly supported for all children, draws funding from federal, state, and local sources and is comprised of a vast network of local schools within school districts governed by local boards of education, state education agencies, and state boards of education. Establishing and maintaining consistent and meaningful connections between local schools and the fragmented world of ECE programs is an endeavor that varies widely from community to community.

Over several decades there have been modest efforts to connect, align, and create continuity between ECE and elementary schools. Notable examples include the urban Chicago Child Parent Centers, launched in the late 1960s to provide comprehensive educational support to children from preschool through third grade, and the federal Project Follow Through and Project Developmental Continuity initiatives of the 1970s that connected Head Start with elementary schools. Most efforts to reduce the disconnection between ECE and K-12 have neither been taken to scale nor sustained their model fidelity. If young children’s learning and development are like climbing a ladder,<sup>15</sup> where children build skill upon skill and depend on each learning opportunity to build upon the prior one, the disconnect between ECE and K-12 is creating a rickety and unstable ladder for most young children that is serving neither them nor our society well.

## Creating Systems to Support Children’s Success ● ● ●

To address these challenges, there are two emerging movements – **Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)** for early learning programs and



<sup>13</sup> Results. Investing in America’s future: Early childhood development. Available: <http://results.techriver.net/website/download.asp?id=2322>

<sup>14</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research (2009). The state of preschool 2009: State preschool yearbook. Available: <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Kauerz, K. (2006). *Ladders of learning: Fighting fadeout by advancing PK-3 alignment*. Washington, DC: New America Foundation.



## Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are one of the most promising and systemic strategies for improving the inconsistent quality of early childhood programs for children from birth to age 5. Broadly, QRIS are intended to build, align, and strengthen the core components of an early learning system necessary to ensure high quality early care and education experiences for all children. At their core, QRIS have five inter-related components: (1) quality standards, (2) a process for monitoring those standards, (3) a process for supporting quality improvement, (4) provision of financial incentives and other supports to meet higher standards, and (5) dissemination of information to parents and the public about program quality.<sup>17</sup>

Informed by research describing the features of ECE programs associated with better developmental outcomes for young children, QRIS establish a *comprehensive set of program and practitioner standards* that cut across program funding streams, location, and ages of children served; these standards are organized into progressive quality levels. Much like a hotel or restaurant rating, QRIS then *monitor program quality* and assign a rating to programs based on their compliance with QRIS standards. With an eye toward alignment, a growing number of states have begun linking early learning standards (what children need to know) with practitioner standards (what providers need to know to support young children) with program standards (what an organization needs to do to support young children and the practitioners who care for and instruct children) in their QRIS. This trio of aligned standards is a firm foundation for standards-based reform.

However, QRIS are not simply about ratings. Their potential power for improving quality rests on providing a *system of targeted quality improvement*

**P-3**, for the pre-school through 3rd grade continuum – that are gaining momentum and interest from policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropy and provide unique possibilities to increase alignment and improve quality across early learning programs and K-12 schools. QRIS provide a framework for a quality system that begins at birth and extends to school entry, serving as a compelling mechanism to reduce the fragmentation and improve the quality in ECE. QRIS can also serve as the linchpin for broader systemic change efforts, enabling greater alignment among standards, professional development and parent engagement efforts.<sup>16</sup> In addition, we argue that P-3 provides a framework for a quality education continuum that transcends the traditional boundaries of **Pre-school** programs (“pre-school” being used here as an adjective to describe all of the learning-based programs children experience before they enter school, including infant/toddler care, child care, family child care, Head Start, pre-Kindergarten, and others) and the early grades (**K-3**). P-3 serves as a compelling mechanism to reduce the divisions and improve the quality across ECE and elementary school. Together, QRIS and P-3 offer multiple opportunities to create a seamless birth through 3rd grade early learning system.

<sup>16</sup> See Anne Mitchell's brief, Quality Rating & Improvement Systems as the Framework for Early Care and Education System Reform, <http://www.buildinitiative.org/files/QRIS-Framework.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Child Trends (2010). Early childhood highlights. Volume 1, Issue 1. Available: [http://www.childtrends.org/\\_portalcat.cfm?LID=8599785C-DD02-4151-B31CC705870D3E01#rb](http://www.childtrends.org/_portalcat.cfm?LID=8599785C-DD02-4151-B31CC705870D3E01#rb)

supports designed to help ECE programs meet higher standards and offer more stimulating learning environments for young children. These supports typically include in-service professional development (e.g., on-site coaching, mentoring, and training for teaching and administrative staff), formal professional development opportunities (e.g., scholarships for staff to complete ECE coursework and to complete formal degree programs), financial incentives (e.g., wage stipends to help retain qualified staff), and financial awards to better quality programs. Many states have also created professional registries and professional certifications linked directly to their QRIS.

In many states, ratings are used as an important *consumer education tool* and further driver of program quality. By using an easy-to-understand symbol of quality, such as a star rating, quality is made comparable and transparent across the industry. Families, ECE funders, and policymakers are then able to use ratings to rationalize and direct their early care and education choices and investments. Public and private sector investors alike are able to invest in quality improvement efforts in more targeted ways and see the impact of these investments on program quality over time.

To date, 23 states have implemented voluntary or mandatory Quality Rating and Improvement Systems and many of the remaining states are in the process of QRIS design and piloting. Indeed, this systemic approach to aligning the larger ECE system around program standards has resulted in higher-quality programs in many states. It is important, however, to note that, given the relative nascence of QRIS and the limited resources available to support them in many states, not all QRIS are currently designed in ways likely to enhance teacher effectiveness, to improve children's learning outcomes around key domains of development necessary for early elementary school success, or to bring continuity to children's learning experiences across the birth through 3rd grade continuum. In latter sections, we will explore the role that the foundation community can play in strengthening QRIS and in aligning them with a P-3 framework to create a continuum of early learning experiences for young children.

## Across states, QRIS standards typically address:

staff qualifications (director and staff/provider education, ongoing professional development and professional development planning), learning environment (use of lesson plans, child assessments and curricula, implementation of developmentally appropriate learning activities, health and safety practices and physical environment); program management (program evaluation, staff evaluation, administrative policies, and procedures); family engagement (provision of parent-teacher conferences, family resources, and other family involvement activities); and classroom supervision (ratios and group size).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. (2009). *Comparison of quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and Department of Defense standards of quality*. Available: [www.naccrra.org/publications/naccrra-publications/publications/ARMY\\_QRIS\\_STATE\\_REPORT\\_081709.pdf](http://www.naccrra.org/publications/naccrra-publications/publications/ARMY_QRIS_STATE_REPORT_081709.pdf).



### P-3: Improving and Aligning Pre-school through 3rd Grade ●●●

P-3 efforts improve, align, and create continuity between and among ECE programs and elementary schools, with three primary goals for children that are based on decades of developmental and educational science:<sup>18</sup> (1) to develop strong foundational cognitive skills, such as reading and early math; (2) to develop social and emotional competence that enable children to interact constructively with both their peers and adults; and (3) to establish patterns of engagement in school and learning. These reform efforts embrace and support high quality early learning opportunities from birth through the end of 3rd grade.

The obvious first crucial component of P-3 is the “P” part for which there exist differing definitions, including pre-kindergarten, preschool, provisions for early learning, and prenatal care.<sup>19</sup> As noted above, we use the “P” to signify the wide range of learning-based programs children experience before (pre-) they enter school. As such, the “P” part includes infant/toddler care, child care, family child care, Head Start, pre-Kindergarten, and others. While the appropriate “P” starting point may vary depending on the values, priorities, and resources of a particular P-3 effort, it is most important to recognize that meaningful education reform will not be realized unless there is substantially increased attention to improving children’s educational experiences long before they enter kindergarten.

Full-day kindergarten is a second crucial component of the P-3 continuum. Evidence is nearly incontrovertible that full-day, as opposed to half-day,

kindergarten does more to boost children’s gains in both reading and math achievement.<sup>20</sup> Despite the label, across the United States, the “K-12 system” is funded and governed as if children’s learning began at age six or seven, the age at which most states make school attendance compulsory. While most five-year olds attend some form of kindergarten, kindergarten is not an embedded part of the K-12 system. Even half-day kindergarten attendance is voluntary in 34 states and only 12 states require school districts to even offer full-day kindergarten.<sup>21</sup> As a result, in state legislatures and local boards of education, especially when budgets are tight, the provision and funding of kindergarten are often on the chopping block. Kindergarten is an often

overlooked, yet vitally important, component of P-3 reform.

But no matter how beneficial early childhood programs and full-day kindergarten are for young

children, the benefits are undermined if students are subsequently exposed to elementary schools of lower quality. As such, the “through 3rd grade” portion of P-3 work must be taken seriously and there must be intentional and meaningful efforts to address, improve, and support the teachers and learning environments during 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades.

The “special ingredient” of P-3, though, is the continuum approach to learning across these early years. Meaningful P-3 work requires more than just putting together independent programs or initiatives; P-3 requires embedding similarities across each level

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<sup>18</sup> Kauerz, K. (2010). P-3: Getting out of the catch-up business. *Insight*. Silver Spring, MD: Grantmakers for Children, Youth & Families.

<sup>19</sup> Takanishi, R., & Kauerz, K. (2008). PK Inclusion: Getting serious about a P-16 education system. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(7), 480-487.

<sup>20</sup> Ackerman, D. J., Barnett, W. S., & Robin, K. B. (2005). *Making the most of kindergarten: Present trends and future issues in the provision of full-day programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University; Walston, J., & West, J. (2004). *Full-day and half-day kindergarten in the United States: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99* (No. NCES 2004-078). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>21</sup> Kauerz, K. (2010). *PreK-3rd: Putting full-day kindergarten in the middle*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.



and grade of the P-3 continuum. These similarities are accomplished by focusing on alignment, transitions, and establishing continuity. P-3 efforts often focus on:<sup>22</sup>

- improving professional development and formal education for teachers, across the full continuum, so that they become more effective in the classroom, offering high-quality instruction and establishing a supportive social and emotional environment for young learners;
- ensuring that all administrators (e.g., superintendents, principals, center directors) who oversee ECE and elementary school programs and classrooms receive professional development and formal education that equips them to be effective leaders who understand child development, support teachers and collaborative learning opportunities for them, and establish high-quality environments;
- creating and implementing aligned standards, curricula, and assessments<sup>23</sup> that support young children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development;
- establishing meaningful opportunities to engage families and communities in children’s learning; and
- instituting organizational structures and processes (e.g., governance mechanisms; longitudinal data systems that use assessment data to improve both instruction and systems) that support alignment, smooth transitions, and increase continuity.

### **Linking QRIS and P-3 Efforts: Each Strengthens the Other ● ● ●**

Independently, QRIS and P-3 reform efforts strive to improve the quality of ECE and early elementary learning experiences and, ultimately, children’s outcomes. Together, QRIS and P-3 create potent possibilities for providing the kind of high-quality programs and classrooms, coupled with effective teachers and supportive families and communities, that will close early achievement gaps and set students on a path to educational and lifelong success. To be most effective, P-3 reforms rely on QRIS to solidify the quality of the “P” part. In exchange, QRIS rely on P-3 reforms to extend the gains and benefits children achieve in high quality ECE programs by aligning early learning and early elementary efforts. Both of these systemic reform efforts reflect the importance of *high quality* programs; *alignment* of standards; system coherence (streamlined, efficient policy and funding); and *continuity* for children and families.

Each of these movements is poised to make substantive, long-lasting, and positive impacts for children, families, ECE programs, and schools. Each movement is relatively nascent, though QRIS is more widespread, with enough spread to have real traction in most states. Each is being developed in discrete policy contexts, though, and leadership in most places is eager for outside support and the benefit of lessons learned from research and other states to make the best choices for the work.



<sup>22</sup> Kauerz, K., & Coffman, J. (under development). *PreK-3rd: Implementation and Evaluation Framework*. Cambridge, MA and Washington, DC: Harvard Graduate School of Education and Center for Evaluation Innovation.

<sup>23</sup> Kauerz, K. (2006). *Ladders of learning: Fighting fadeout by advancing PK-3 alignment*. Washington, DC: New America Foundation.

The time is particularly ripe, therefore, for private funders to promote strategies to integrate and align these two movements. Without deliberate leadership and support from the foundation community to develop, enrich, and align these two movements, however, there is danger that each will mature along a parallel track paying no heed to developing complementary goals or metrics and creating contradictory and fragmented standards that confuse families, hobble systems, and ultimately negatively impact children. Yet, with leadership, the potential of these two movements to complement, expand, and improve one another in ways that truly maximize the promise of children’s early years is just as possible. The time is right for the philanthropic community and other partners to push these two alignment movements into alignment with one another.



### Recommendations for Foundations

Below we offer several broad recommendations for foundation action and investment. While all of the recommendations are relevant to both QRIS and P-3, for some of them we elaborate specific issues related to QRIS and P-3 initiatives that deserve particular attention. While funders may have focused policy or funding interests that rest in *either* QRIS or P-3 work, the recommendations are intended to underscore the necessity of undertaking reform within the context of *both* QRIS and P-3. Both movements can and should be strengthened in ways that consider the entire continuum of early learning opportunities from infancy through 3rd grade and that consider how each movement complements and strengthens the other. To strengthen and better connect QRIS and P-3 reform efforts, the foundation community can:

- **Expand and strengthen comprehensive models that engage the full ECE system.** To date, many QRIS initiatives focus primarily on the child care sector and the “P” part of many P-3 initiatives focuses primarily on school-based pre-Kindergarten programs. Incorporating a more comprehensive array of ECE programs can increase the chances that more children, if not all children, benefit from these reform models. Being part of a shared system creates new opportunities for collaboration and partnership.
  - **QRIS:** Most early QRIS emerged from concerns about the child care sector; contemporary QRIS are increasingly taking on a broader scope. Many are working to incorporate a more comprehensive array of ECE programs. There is a real opportunity to continue to extend QRIS into all parts of the early learning system, including Head Start and Early Head Start, family, friend and neighbor care, and pre-K programs. The QRIS in Miami-Dade County (Florida) includes all of these programs and the partnership has created opportunities to maximize resources: professionals from all settings are invited to early childhood professional development sponsored by the school system and early childhood program staff and leaders from the school district regularly participate in community-based events. There is a deeper focus on developing transitions between community-based early learning programs and area



schools, and technical assistance from high quality community-based early learning programs has been provided to the district's voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) program to enhance its use of cutting edge early childhood practices. This cross-sector sharing is strengthening and bringing into alignment early learning programs, regardless of setting or funding.

- **P-3:** Many P-3 models focus primarily on linking and aligning school-based/education-funded pre-kindergarten programs with elementary schools. Few states, however, provide universal access to school-funded pre-Kindergarten and, in fact, most children are in community-based child care or Head Start. Further, it's not just those three- and four-year olds in pre-Kindergarten who we want to succeed in school, graduate from high school, and engage in lifelong learning. To reach all children, P-3 models should include the full range of early care and education programs in their vision and implementation efforts; foundations should play a key role in making this happen. The P-3 effort in Bremerton School District (Washington), for example, includes a comprehensive set of community preschool partners, including Head Start, Migrant Head Start, and Tribal Head Start; child care centers and homes; and faith-based preschools. The school district builds partnerships with all of these ECE providers, sharing resources and professional development opportunities related to research-based instruction and best practices.<sup>24</sup>
- **Ensure that the design of standards for children's learning and development have an eye toward alignment across birth through 3rd grade.** What children should know and be able to do – often labeled as learning and development standards or benchmarks – should lie at the very heart of both QRIS and P-3 efforts. While all states have or are developing early learning standards for preschoolers, only 24 states have early learning standards for infants and toddlers and only two states (Colorado and Vermont) have created unified sets of learning standards that encompass the full range of learning and development (from preschool through 3rd or 4th grade).<sup>25</sup>

Further, it is now widely accepted that at least five domains of development are central to young children's development, birth through age eight:

- (1) physical well-being and motor development;
- (2) social and emotional development;
- (3) cognition and general knowledge;
- (4) approaches toward learning; and
- (5) language and communication.

While most states' early learning standards incorporate all five domains, only three states' standards for K-3 students reflect all

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan-Dudzic, L., Gearn, D. K., & Leavell, K. (2010). *Making a difference: 10 essential steps to building a PreK-3 system*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

<sup>25</sup> National Child Care Information Center (2010). State early learning guidelines. Updated September 2010. Available: <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/goodstart/elgwebsites.html>.



five developmental domains.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there is often a narrow focus on literacy and to some extent mathematics outcomes in the K-3 world, with little emphasis placed on children’s social-emotional development even though it is widely accepted that positive social-emotional development is foundational to children’s cognitive development.

**Foundations should both urge and support state policymakers and state agency leadership to define and endorse standards**

for what children should know and be able to do that are intentionally and meaningfully aligned across the full birth through 3rd grade continuum and that reflect all five domains of development at each age/grade level.

- **Ensure that the design of standards for teacher qualifications and credentials have an eye toward alignment across birth through 3rd grade and reflect how best to support the learning and development of all young children.** In many respects, the quality of learning opportunities depends on the skills and knowledge of the teacher. Debates about teacher qualifications and credentials are prevalent in both the ECE and K-12 worlds. While ECE’s debates center on the issue of bachelor’s degrees, and the K-12 debates center on issues of teacher preparation and induction, at least one issue – renewable certification or endorsement in early childhood education – impacts both teachers in the ECE system *and* teachers in the K-3 system. While a small but growing number of early childhood professionals have preparation, certification, or degrees specific to the unique learning needs of children from birth through age 8,

*The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators recommends that all teachers from pre-Kindergarten through 3rd grade hold certification specific to early childhood education.*

many K-3 teachers do not and most professionals working with younger children have none at all. The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators recommends that all teachers

from pre-Kindergarten through 3rd grade hold certification specific to early childhood education. As of 2006, only 14 states required K-3 teachers to hold an early care and education license.<sup>27</sup> Without certification specific to ECE, elementary teachers’ preparation is likely to neglect the principles and practices that are unique –

and essential – to children from birth through 3rd grade. Higher education degrees, certification standards, and professional development classes must not only reflect the latest science of how young children learn but also teach content on infancy through third grade. Thus the “ladder of learning” is clearly understood from the first rungs on up. This content must equally weight the different periods of development (e.g., birth to 3; pre-kindergarten years; K-3) and reflect alignment across the early childhood years.

In addition, with the growing diversity of the young child population, it is imperative that the content of coursework adapt to changing demographics and address multicultural educational approaches. Unfortunately, as the diversity of the young child population

<sup>27</sup> Fields, M. & Mitchell, A. (2006). Early childhood and elementary teacher certification survey. Unpublished work.

<sup>26</sup> Kauerz, K. (2006). *K-2 standards and assessments: A 50-state review*. A paper prepared for the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force. Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts.



has grown, there is simultaneously a steady decrease in the diversity of the birth through 3rd grade workforce.<sup>28</sup> Specific efforts should be made to recruit, professionally prepare, support, and retain a well-qualified and diverse workforce. Innovative models rely on a combination of several key features including: utilizing a cohort model; providing in-class mentoring to assist in making the linkages between theory learned in coursework and classroom practices; offering conveniently scheduled classes; and providing financial incentives.



Further, effective models set standards related to teachers' ability to engage and support families, exhibit cultural competency, observe and assess diverse young children, teach English Language Learners, and work with children with special needs.<sup>29</sup> These strategies will go a long way toward developing a pool of well-prepared multi-cultural and multi-lingual teachers for the birth through 3rd grade continuum.

**Foundations can invest in innovative recruitment strategies, professional preparation programs, and assessment of strategies to create an effective and diverse workforce.**

**Foundations can also facilitate the development of more effective higher education degrees and professional development opportunities by investing in the revision of existing classes or degree programs, creating new degrees, and ensuring articulation among credential and degree programs.** Fifteen states have defined core competencies for professionals working with children from prenatal or birth through age 8, three states extend this beyond age 8 (to age 12 and 15). **Funders can work with policymakers and others to ensure that both QRIS and P-3 reform models adopt standards for teacher certification/endorsement – and provide supports to teachers to acquire the certifications – that require preparation in child development, diverse learning styles, social and emotional development, cultural diversity, effective teaching strategies, and family engagement.**

- **Support increased attention to measures of program quality that have been shown to matter most for positively impacting children's learning and development outcomes.** Across both QRIS and P-3 initiatives, there is a wide range of measures of quality being built into system reform. Some measures have been more closely correlated with improving child outcomes than others (e.g., teacher effectiveness; meaningful instruction in literacy and math; and the regular use of formative assessments).
  - **QRIS:** Most QRIS use teacher qualifications as a proxy for teacher quality and effectiveness. Similarly, many QRIS evaluate the quantity and quality of classroom materials as a proxy for

<sup>28</sup> Ray, A., Bowman, B., & Robbins (2006). *Preparing early childhood teachers to successfully educate all children: The contribution of four-year undergraduate teacher preparation programs.* Report to The Foundation for Child Development.

<sup>29</sup> Kagan, S. L., Kauerz, K., & Tarrant, K. (2008). *The early care and education teaching workforce: At the fulcrum.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press. See also Julia Coffman and Melinda Green's brief *Reaching for Quality: Lessons from New Jersey on Raising Preschool Teacher Qualifications While Maintaining Workforce Diversity* at [www.buildinitiative.org/files/AbbottDiversityBrief.pdf](http://www.buildinitiative.org/files/AbbottDiversityBrief.pdf).

children’s learning. Only a few of the existing QRIS directly evaluate supportive teacher interactions with children and teaching effectiveness across domains of children’s development, yet research shows that these interactions are a powerful predictor of program quality and children’s outcomes and therefore deserve to be measured independently. The CLASS, a commonly used instrument to evaluate teacher interactions and teaching effectiveness, has pre-K and K-3 versions (and infant and toddler versions are in development). CLASS is used in several QRIS now, and is being considered in most of the emerging QRIS. The availability of this research-based tool that spans pre-K through grade three provides another unique opportunity for alignment. Further, research shows that formative assessments of children’s literacy, math, social and physical skills and approaches to learning can be effectively integrated into classroom practice without disrupting children’s or teachers’ schedules. **Foundations should support the integration of assessments like these into QRIS metrics and support strategies that use feedback from these assessments to inform developmentally and culturally appropriate activities and instruction in early learning programs.** Developmentally and culturally appropriate assessments of children’s learning should be integrated into all QRIS work and used as a central mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of early learning investments. The goal of QRIS investments should be squarely on how these investments are directly benefitting young children, and changes should be made to these investments if direct benefits to children are not demonstrated. Focusing on the other structural elements of program quality is necessary but nowhere near sufficient.

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- **P-3:** Most P-3 initiatives, because of the intrinsic link to public schools, assume that bachelor’s degrees and state teacher certification are adequate proxies for teacher quality and effectiveness. Further, many P-3 initiatives rely on summative assessments, most notably the federally required 3rd grade tests, to assess children’s learning outcomes. These tests often take a narrow view of children’s development and focus on literacy and mathematics achievement, while neglecting other important domains of children’s development. Just as described for QRIS, **elementary schools should adopt instruments and metrics (e.g., CLASS) that directly measure teacher effectiveness and the teacher-student relationships that support children’s positive social-emotional development. Schools should also adopt the use of regular formative assessments that span all domains of children’s development to measure student learning – in full-day kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms.** These assessments provide useful information that informs day-to-day instruction and highlights broad areas of teaching and learning that can be addressed through professional development and/or policy reforms.



- **Invest in strategies that focus on people and the relationships that support them.** While programs, standards, curricula, assessments, and other policy decisions are central to establishing meaningfully aligned systems, it is the people and the relationships they share that bring alignment efforts to life and that guarantee sustainability and widespread buy-in. Across many disciplines and fields, radical change is achieved when people from different levels of an organization or from different angles of a problem engage simultaneously in learning.



Both QRIS and P-3 would benefit greatly from the establishment and support of professional learning communities (PLC) wherein teachers and administrators from both the ECE and K-12 systems – together – create intentional time and space to share learning and then act on what they learn. These professional development partnerships should bring particular attention to fostering teacher’s skills to support children’s healthy social and emotional development and literacy, math and science knowledge and skills across the early childhood continuum. Whether these are regularly scheduled shared professional development workshops or common planning time each week, it is important to establish communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.

For QRIS initiatives, PLCs can provide a venue for bringing together teachers and leaders across the various ECE programs. For P-3 initiatives, PLCs can be designed to bring together administrators and teachers across grade levels and across school- and community-based programs. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation has invested in PLCs as a structure for its Learning Labs initiative that is working within five states on early learning, family support, and school reform and alignment. Schools, districts, early learning programs, and family support initiatives within these states have seen powerful results through the use of formalized protocols and leadership development inherent in successful PLCs. **Funders can convene or create space for professional learning communities that provide regular, meaningful opportunities to facilitate leadership development, create forums for problem solving, and support cross-sector partnerships to best support young children.**

- **Invest in efforts to establish universal access to high quality programs across the P-3 continuum.** Even though the American public education system guarantees access to 1st grade and above for all children, the availability and accessibility of high quality ECE and full-day Kindergarten are inadequate.
  - **QRIS:** Current policies for child care, Head Start, state-funded pre-Kindergarten, and family, friend and neighbor care do not ensure that most children have access to high quality programs before they enter kindergarten. **Funders can support and, if needed, facilitate the development of policies that expand access to high quality early learning opportunities for all children and specifically facilitate vulnerable children’s participation in the best quality programs.**

- **P-3:** Like QRIS, P-3 reform efforts rely on the existence of a broad span of high quality ECE programs. In addition, current K-12 policies do not ensure that all children have access to full-day kindergarten and anecdotal evidence is increasing about how some children’s education continuum is disrupted when they attend a high-quality, full-day pre-Kindergarten program but are then forced to attend a half-day Kindergarten program the following year. **Funders can support and, if needed, facilitate the development of policies that take a longer-term perspective on access issues, ensuring that vulnerable children receive high-quality opportunities *consistently over time, from year to year and grade to grade.***

## Conclusion ● ● ●

Across the country and across early childhood and K-12 communities, alignment-based system reforms are increasingly seen as promising ways to improve quality in diverse settings and improve outcomes for children, to close achievement gaps, and to ensure that every child is given a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and P-3 efforts represent two of the most promising of these strategies. At present, however, these two reform endeavors are on largely separate tracks. When the cross-continental rail system was developed in the United States, construction began on both the west and the east coasts. Although work progressed independently, there had to be constant vigilance and attention to ensuring that the rail tracks would actually align, creating a seamless continuum of track, at designated locations. The QRIS and P-3 efforts are much like this. While they need not be merged into a single effort, nor must one prevail over the other, they do need to be intentionally and meaningfully aligned with one another.

The philanthropic community can play a pivotal role in this. Foundations can cross the boundaries, pose the hard questions and provide incentives for bold solutions. They are uniquely suited to play a leadership role in QRIS and P-3 alignment.

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