

Issues in Brief

PROMOTING QUALITY IN PreK – GRADE 3 CLASSROOMS

**Findings and Results from
NASBE's Early Childhood
Education Network**



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Introduction

Policymakers have come to recognize the potential of preschool as a strategic investment in the future of children, particularly those most at risk. The research is clear regarding the importance of the early years to children’s subsequent success in school and life and the impact of quality early experiences in reducing the huge disparities in children’s early development evident at the start of school. As a result, even in the face of serious budget shortfalls states have been making substantial investments—now in excess of \$3.7 billion annually—in early childhood programs. As of 2009, the vast majority of children in the United States enroll in some form of early education: 38 states serve about 800,000 children, and nationwide about 66 percent of four-year olds are enrolled in preschool.¹

In fact, national experts predict that public school programs for children ages three and four will become the norm.² As prekindergarten programs, kindergarten, and the primary grades of elementary school are slowly merged, states will have to figure out how to design systems that provide children with consistent high-quality programs staffed by well-trained teachers. Over the past decade, policymakers and administrators have been grappling with tough challenges and decisions to maximize the benefits of early childhood care and education. These challenges derive from a number of important research findings: first, the research is very clear that preschool must be of high quality to replicate the gains demonstrated by model programs and second, it appears that the early gains may dissipate unless pre-

school is followed by consecutive years of quality schooling in the early grades.³

States face tough decisions about how to hold early education programs accountable for performance and how to leverage improvements in programs and staff. Historically, these efforts have been largely fragmented and uncoordinated across separate early education categorical programs such as Head Start, private child care, early childhood special education, and state-funded prekindergarten. Furthermore, the early education field has been largely disconnected from K-3 and cautious about approaches that rely heavily on outcome assessments as a measure of quality.⁴

In order to maximize preschool benefits, states must first envision a system of high-quality early education and care—one that provides children with rich classroom experiences aligned to K-12 standards, connects families and schools, and addresses the holistic learning needs of young children. To succeed, policy leaders need to attend carefully to the research on child development to reconcile disparate approaches to ensuring program quality. Then, working with broad coalitions and the research community, they must determine the central elements that define quality and how to leverage policy in ways that yield their systemic improvement.

In 2006, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, created its Early

Childhood Education Network. The three-year initiative was designed to help states advance the quality and coherence of their early learning systems. In order to accomplish the central project goals, NASBE awarded small grants under the auspices of the state board of education to six states: Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, and Virginia.

State boards of education, which have purview over public education systems, play an increasingly important role in articulating the design of PK–3 systems. They have broad oversight of state education policies regarding standards, licensure, accreditation, accountability, and assessment. They are uniquely positioned to advocate high-quality systems that respond to the needs of young children and their families and to address issues of equity and access to quality education and care. State boards are also key to ensuring that gains in preschool carry forward through the elementary years. Clearly, public education officials can be a powerful, constructive force for strengthening early learning systems—but to accomplish this, education leaders must work closely with other constituencies and attend carefully to research and evaluation data on child development and learning.

The states in NASBE’s Network compiled a truly impressive list of accomplishments. They articulated an aligned set of early education standards, curriculum, assessments, and teaching practices; they strengthened teacher preparation and professional development in line with the latest research; and they worked toward new systems for evaluation and accountability that are more closely aligned with what really makes a difference in terms of improving student outcomes. This report tells the remarkable story of the Network’s goals, actions, and achievements, including what it takes to leverage change both within state systems and in early learning programs, and it highlights some of the important accomplishments the Network members made to improve early education and care in their states.

Phase I: Defining Preschool Quality

In August of 2006, NASBE brought together state teams* to work on identifying a set of actionable strategies to ensure sustainable improvements in the quality of learning environments for young children. The work was guided by a conceptual framework that highlights quality interactions between teachers and children as the most powerful factor in a child’s development and learning. Based on recommendations from NASBE’s 2006 report, *Fulfilling the Promise of Preschool*, on creating high-quality early learning environments, project staff introduced a theory of action that gives priority to defining quality in terms of teaching attributes—how well teachers respond to children’s differences, their learning processes, and capacities; and how well they modify curriculum and teaching practices to meet children’s needs.⁵ Indeed, NASBE’s report concluded that what is most critical in quality early learning environments is having highly trained and well-supported teachers who can provide responsive interpersonal relationships, nurture children’s dispositions to learn, and cultivate their emerging abilities, particularly their foundational literacy skills (see text box on page 6).

In building on this framework, the state Network teams reviewed studies that linked measures of effective classroom environments with higher child outcomes, then identified policy and regulatory leverage points that can be used to make improvements in the quality of teacher-child interactions (such as licensure, professional development, assessment, and quality assurances), and generally strengthen early education quality.⁷

To assist in this effort, NASBE invited Dr. Robert Pianta⁸ to present to the Network teams the findings of two major national studies of early education and children’s development conducted in prekindergarten through grade three set-

* The initial state teams that participated in the opening conference included representatives from each of the following: 1) state board of education; 2) the state department of education/special education; 3) higher education; 4) community colleges; and 5) the state department of health and human services.

tings across the country.⁹ In both investigations, researchers studied over 4,000 classrooms, collecting 1) time sampling data to gather information about typical activities and settings in the classroom, 2) reliable, standardized observational measures (Classroom Scoring Assessment System – CLASS)¹⁰ that explicitly focus on teacher-child interactions; and 3) assessments of children’s achievement and social development across this time period.

Pianta and his team’s collective findings from preschools in 11 states were consistent in demonstrating that interactions between teachers and children were the central aspects of classroom environments that contribute directly to children’s learning and developmental gains. Classroom observations of teacher interactions were categorized into three broad domains—Emotional Support (promoting children’s social and emotional functioning), Classroom Organization (managing children’s behavior, time, and attention in the classroom, and Instructional Support (fostering higher order and language skills). (See textbox on page 8.) Across all age levels, children experiencing classrooms with positive climates were associated with gains in literacy skills; high levels of instructional support were associated with gains in language development. The analysis of the obtained data from both studies yielded remarkably consistent findings for children’s experiences not

only in prekindergarten classrooms but into the early elementary grades as well.¹¹

These include:

1. The majority of classrooms across the prekindergarten through grade three period were uneven in quality and in the aggregate, were characterized by low levels of instructional support. Teachers rarely encouraged higher order thinking, problem solving, or advanced language skills, but rather focused on learning basic skills and eliciting responses that had a correct versus incorrect orientation.
2. There was a high degree of variability in both children’s learning experiences and the quality of emotional and instructional support across classrooms (even within the same program). Some children received one hour worth of literacy; other children who were in the same program but a different classroom received none. On average, only 15 percent of classrooms provided high levels of social and instructional supports.
3. Children who were placed in classrooms with higher emotional and instructional climates made greater gains. Instructional support emerged as an important feature of teacher-

Foundational Literacy Skills

In order to reduce early learning gaps and ensure children are ready for school, preschool teachers must provide rich language and literacy experiences, particularly for those children who come from backgrounds that limit their exposure to language. Initial differences in children’s foundational literacy skills translates to a one-year gap in reading development by the end of first grade that continues to widen over time if not addressed. As a consequence, more than 80 percent of children reading poorly at the end of first grade will be reading poorly at the end of fourth grade. In particular, deficits in vocabulary have a lasting impact and continue to impede children’s ability to comprehend increasingly complex text as they progress through school. Children need to learn the language, learn to talk, learn to tell stories, and learn to comprehend. Skillful teachers elaborate on children’s language and concepts, helping them to see connections and look for patterns while expanding their linguistic and conceptual repertoire. Most children irrespective of background can learn foundational cognitive and language skills in preschool when their questions and comments are recognized, supported and extended to promote higher order thinking skills and vocabulary.⁶

child interactions: developmental learning in preschool was maintained into kindergarten and further solidified if the children's kindergarten teacher provided high levels of emotional and instructional support.

4. Classroom quality was even more important for children who were at the greatest risk for school failure: positive emotional support lessened adjustment problems and instructional support was linked to greater gains for children coming from less advantaged families.
5. But those children in greatest need were less likely to receive high quality learning experiences in preschool or for that matter in kindergarten or the elementary years. As it turns out, these children had only a 10 percent chance of being placed in a high-quality classroom across the elementary years. This was true even if children stayed in the same schools, indicating that the resources the school provides to ensure high quality are insufficient.
6. The variations found across classrooms and programs in terms of classroom learning were not related to the structural features and inputs, such as teachers' credentials or degree status, that are typically regulated at the state level.

State Approaches to Ensuring Quality Preschool Programs

This set of compelling findings about the majority of early education programs calls into question how states design policy structures and systems to leverage improvements. State approaches to adopting early learning guidelines or program standards that prescribe structural features such as teacher credentials, curriculum staffing ratios, and services have turned out to be weak proxies for program quality. For example, despite adoption of specific curricular guidelines, how teachers implement curricula varies widely, leading to pronounced differences in what children

In order to build a seamless system that delivers a coordinated continuum of learning and care, states had to address two major challenges: 1) how to bring quality learning environments to scale and 2) how to maintain and extend gains from preschool throughout the early grades.

experience in classrooms and what they learn as a result.¹²

The message for the Network states was clear: there is a dire need for better systems to prepare and provide ongoing training and supports to early education teachers, particularly teachers of disadvantaged children. The variability in teaching quality and the difficulty in penetrating classroom teaching and learning have been well-documented in school improvement literature. But so far the resources and systems devoted to developing teachers have not been sufficient to provide consistent, high-quality learning experiences to children either in preschool or in the early elementary grades.¹³

During this early portion of the initiative, NASBE challenged the state teams to rethink the early school years. The teams were asked to create collaborative structures and partnerships to help design strategies to improve children's early learning environments. Project staff guided states to leverage regulations and incentives to ensure continuous improvement of programs in ways consistent with the research about enriched learning environments for young children. State teams had to commit to a limited number of strategies that would connect policy to research on effective practice through a series of action steps. Project staff asked teams to: 1) identify cross-cutting principles for strengthening both early care and

Measuring and Improving the Quality of Early Learning Environments

Researchers have designed new ways to measure the quality of early learning environments, and how such quality is conceptualized is continually evolving. Guided by the rationale that classroom environments influence children’s learning and their progress in socialization, evaluations of classroom quality have sought to establish metrics for both these domains.

One approach to assessing the global classroom environment is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and its revised version (ECERS, ECERS-R). Used widely as a comprehensive observational measure for more than 25 years, ECERS-R taps into the quality of a preschool classroom through elements including space and furnishings, routines, language reasoning, interactions, and program structure. Investigations have found an association between higher scores on ECERS-R observations and children’s developmental outcomes. As a result of this data and evidence suggesting that targeted investments can boost ratings, the scale has been used extensively in program monitoring and to inform improvement efforts.

Other observational measures of classroom quality look more systematically at how the processes within an early childhood classroom create or undermine quality of the environment. Based on the idea that daily interactions between teachers and students are the primary mechanism through which student learning takes place, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) distills the “value added” from teacher-child interactions through a standardized, reliable, validated evaluation instrument that measures three broad domains:

- **Emotional support** (positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives),
- **Classroom organization** (behavior management, productivity, instructional learning formats), and
- **Instructional support** (concept development, quality of feedback, language modeling).

Large-scale studies using CLASS have found that programs with higher ratings in two of these domains in particular—emotional quality and instructional quality—are associated with greater gains in children’s academic achievement and social competencies in the early graders in school.

Developed by the same research team that created CLASS, MyTeachingPartner (MTP) builds on the CLASS model to provide a training tool tailored to individual teachers. Specifically, MTP begins by measuring the quality of teacher-child interactions by “outsourcing” observation to consultants who regularly watch videotapes teachers mail in from their classroom teaching. The observers then edit the material into discrete segments, each focused on one of the dimensions of emotional or instructional quality assessed by the CLASS. Finally, the consultants deliver intensive, individualized professional development on specific dimensions of teacher-child interactions back to teachers through a web-based portal. Recent staff evaluations in a state-funded preschool program found that teachers’ effectiveness gains in the areas of reading children’s cues, engaging children in instruction, and stimulating language development were particularly strong following cycles of observation, feedback, reflection, and implementation.

Furthermore, MTP research results revealed data significant to improving the outcomes of struggling students and addressing the nation’s achievement gap (which is largely predicated on family income). Teachers of classroom populations classified as high poverty showed greater gains in their interactions related to the areas of Teacher Sensitivity and Instructional Learning Formats than did teachers who had 50 percent or fewer of their children in poverty. Since observations of teacher-child interactions correlate to valid measures of social and academic success, the capacity MTP offers to strengthen such interactions and improve teachers’ practices through intentional training suggests a powerful leverage point for advancing children’s educational outcomes. For more information about the CLASS and MTP, please visit www.classobservation.com and www.myteachingpartner.com.

education and schooling in the primary grades; and 2) target the important policy levers to make linkages between regulation and effective practice transparent and consistent.

State Strategies and Early Accomplishments

After the introductory period, state teams completed action plans that outlined core strategies for making significant improvements in their state early learning systems. Working with broad coalitions of practitioners, higher education, families, agency staff, and other key constituencies, states adopted incremental, iterative processes to make improvements—including taking stock of what currently exists (and what’s working well, where, and why) and testing new approaches prior to widespread adoption. State strategies clustered around three central system elements. These are discussed below, accompanied by state examples.

1. System Alignment: *Articulating early education standards, curriculum, assessment, and teaching practices that are associated with quality classroom environments and children’s social and academic outcomes.*

Alignment is critical to overcoming the problems and limitations of reconciling disparate standards across different early education programs and funding streams. Network states needed to map areas of agreement across current standards and regulations and connect what goes on in pre-school with the larger K-12 system.

Oregon set out to design a standards-based infrastructure to ensure continuity of quality instruction across learning environments that included aligning certification, preparation, and professional development to early learning standards. Oregon established the Oregon Early Childhood Foundations, which describe what prekindergarten children should know and be able to do during the first five years of life to be ready for schools; the state also aligned those expectations with content standards for students in the elementary grades. Their development was a collective effort among more than 80 stakeholders

and educators including several state agencies that work with Oregon’s youngest children. The state’s Foundations outline the essential dimensions of quality learning environments and describe how caregivers and teachers can enhance children’s development and learning.¹⁴

Indiana likewise created the Indiana Foundations for Young Children, which stands as the “foundations to the standards,” the heart of the state’s efforts to promote quality early childhood experiences. Indiana’s Foundations, based on the latest national research and findings for each content area, were designed to assist all who work with young children by outlining instructional strategies for the various domains from a developmentally appropriate perspective. The Committee on Transition Benchmarks designed a system for measuring children’s progress based on the Foundations, revised in 2006, and the K-12 standards. Two agencies—the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration and the Indiana Department of Education—collaborated to fund training on the Foundations to advance the quality of early education throughout the state.¹⁵

2. Teacher Development: *Strengthening teacher development and professional practice to ensure that early education maximizes benefits to young children and closes early learning gaps.*

The central tenet of the NASBE initiative holds that early education will fail to make good on its promise unless teachers have the knowledge and skills to create rich learning environments and interact with children to nurture and cultivate their emerging abilities. States must work closely with teachers, higher education, community colleges, agency staff, and child advocates to ensure regulations reflect what we know about optimal early learning and leverage improvements in teaching practice.

Virginia revised the teacher core competencies for an endorsement in the area of Early Childhood Education. Their recommendations included requirements for teachers to provide for the unique social and educational needs of young children and to understand how student–teacher

interactions and relationships serve as the foundation for learning in the early grades. Following review and approval by the state's teacher licensure board, the proposed changes were adopted by the Virginia State Board of Education in 2007. Subsequently, the grant team convened stakeholders from two- and four-year institutions regarding how to advance a coordinated system of earning one's degree toward teacher licensure. The state succeeded in accomplishing one of its primary objectives—facilitating articulation agreements between teacher training institutions in order to create a path that would give early childhood professionals the knowledge and skills to create high quality learning environments for all young children.

As a by-product of these collaborative efforts, a number of Virginia's community colleges have adopted a common early childhood curriculum for an associate in applied science (AAS) degree in early childhood education. The NASBE grant team worked with the Virginia Community College System to create a website and a brochure to disseminate information regarding these opportunities to pursue career opportunities in early childhood education.¹⁶

In a similar fashion, **Nebraska** revised the core competencies for early education professionals based on the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Standards and the Nebraska Early Learning guidelines, both of which reflect the research on what constitutes quality teaching and what makes learning meaningful for children as they grow and develop. Following broad input from stakeholders, the revised Core Competencies for Early Education Professionals were adopted in June 2007 as "working" guidance for field-test purposes.

According to the Nebraska state team, the completion of the Core Competencies was a major success in defining "what all adults who work with children need to know, understand, and be able to do to support children's development school readiness." The state followed by developing training modules on the competencies; implementing a broad dissemination plan in close

collaboration with the Early Childhood Training Center, Early Childhood Professional Development Partnerships and Regional Training Coalitions; and conducting train-the-trainer sessions to promote high quality appropriate practices and professionalism in prekindergarten, kindergarten and elementary classrooms.¹⁷

3. Progress Monitoring and Accountability:
States should examine how to use different measures of program quality and child development to improve teaching, learning, and positive outcomes for young children.

A key Network tenet is that states must create structures to collaboratively review assessment data and use the findings to strengthen teaching, learning, and professional development. It is essential that a range of metrics and assessments are used to examine program efficacy and leverage improvement in the important dimensions of learning environments. Policy leaders are well-advised to pilot and test the impact of using a range of indicators for program monitoring and improvement before moving to statewide adoption. The information should inform planning, adjusting, enriching, and offering new learning experiences and teaching strategies to support children's progress.

Oregon created a plan for refining kindergarten readiness indicators and improving data accuracy as part of a continuous improvement model. While 2006 survey results indicate steady progress in improved readiness outcomes for entering Oregon kindergarteners,¹⁸ the state decided to refine its Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS) and piloted the revised measure in 16 school districts in fall 2007 in preparation for the statewide data collection in fall 2008. The 2008 KRS includes a broader range of content indicators across five areas: approaches to learning; social and personal development; physical health, well-being, and motor development; general knowledge and cognitive development; and communication, literacy, and language development.

Survey results are considered vital for teachers, parents, and policymakers and are used to determine the efficacy of programs for young children.

In April 2009, the 2008 KRS report on the readiness of children entering the K-12 school system will be submitted to the Oregon Legislature, the Oregon Progress Board, and the public.

Missouri convened the Early Childhood Task Force to complete a two-year process of developing quality program standards working closely with a broad group of private providers and stakeholders. The Quality Program Standards for Universal Preschool, approved by the State Board of Education in 2007, address multiple elements such as assessments, personnel development, curriculum and assessment, accreditation, and program evaluation. The program standards are now before the Governor's Coordinating Board for Early Childhood, which was convened in 2008 to articulate recommendations for the expansion of publicly funded prekindergarten and to ensure young children have access to high-quality early learning experiences.¹⁹

Members of the Task Force now participate on the coordinating board that has crafted overarching recommendations for prekindergarten programs including focusing on children identified at risk, improving the quality of all preschool programs, structuring oversight to ensure that all children experience early learning environments associated with positive child outcomes, and implementation of systemic process of tracking program and child specific outcomes.²⁰

After studying quality rating system (QRS) programs in other states and taking stock of the infrastructure of the Early Childhood System in **Nebraska**, the state's Network team modified its plans for instituting a system to monitor early education program quality. In general, quality rating systems are used to define the optimal conditions for early care and education and for leveraging improvements aimed at developing higher levels of competencies among program staff. Now that the state has established what teachers need to know and be able to do to be successful in classrooms, program quality can be defined and assessed in terms of children's learning experiences, how teachers implement activities and lessons, and the quality of teachers' interactions with children.

In lieu of requesting legislative funding for a QRS, **Nebraska** decided to work incrementally through 2010 to identify funding avenues for professional development, redesign their purposes and incentive structures to link training and performance with core competencies, and establish the infrastructure necessary for improving the quality of early learning environments. Finally, the state team will receive the QRS Pilot Evaluation from the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium.

Likewise, **Indiana** began to roll out a voluntary rating system called Paths to Quality (PTQ) through the Family and Social Services Administration. PTQ provides mentoring and monetary incentives in addition to rating programs to help all programs, including childcare, improve their quality of education and care. The phase in began in 2008 with full implementation targeted for January 2009. The standards for childcare homes and centers are similar, but are rated accordingly to the type of license they hold:

- **Level 1:** Meet minimum health and safety standards and develop and implement basic health and safety policies and procedures.
- **Level 2:** Provide a nurturing environment that contains a variety of age appropriate learning materials, provide pertinent information to families about their child, provide for children's language and literacy skill development, and promote staff development and training.
- **Level 3:** Caregivers/teaching staff must have either a CDA or an early childhood degree or equivalent degree; centers or homes will have a planned curriculum that addresses the stages of child development; facilitate family and assistant input into the program; and actively engage in program evaluation and have an action plan for improvement.
- **Level 4:** Meet the highest standards for high quality early care and education and assist other programs in quality improvement through volunteer mentoring; achieve and maintain accreditation by a nationally recognized accrediting body.²¹

The Importance of Collaboration to States' Success

The grant requirement that states create a network of ongoing collaborative partnerships and structures was central to their success in accomplishing the goals outlined in their action plans. As reported by Pal-Tech, which served as an independent evaluator throughout the grant period, all of the Network states reported that the ongoing collaboration among state agencies, early education providers from diverse programs, public school teachers and administrators, community programs, higher education, and advocates was crucial to reaching agreement on key strategies, reconciling divergent viewpoints across agencies and programs, garnering political support, and laying the groundwork for more complex undertakings. Most states opted to establish a working committee, while at the same time building expansive networks to consider the needs of all children and families in local communities.²²

Efforts to create partnerships around critical aspects of PK–3 systems proved challenging during the initial stages: states struggled to find common ground and develop the vision and leadership necessary to mobilize action around a single set of goals. It became imperative that state networks identify the features of each component of the system that promoted quality learning environments and make adjustments in policies and procedures as necessary. As a result, the states focused on creating structural changes to better align standards, competencies, and assessments and on promoting broader buy-in and political support for the proposed improvements. States worked to define the substance and content of policies by working with those most responsible for implementation. The Network states talked about the need to take the long view, considering not just what's needed at one point in time, but thinking ahead to what children will need in subsequent years to succeed.

The initial collaborations focused on finding common ground to develop a vision for a cohesive, high-quality system and to set priorities for taking specific action. States were able to put aside differences among stakeholders to mobilize concerted action in making improvements. As a consequence,

“All of the Network states reported that the ongoing collaboration [required by the grant] ...was crucial to reaching agreement on key strategies, reconciling divergent viewpoints across agencies and programs, garnering political support, and laying the groundwork for more complex undertakings.”

the state networks, comprised of agency staff, higher education, community colleges, district and school leaders, and multiple early childhood providers, opted to focus on cross-cutting principles such as promoting the collective accountability for children throughout early care and education, working to connect families, communities, and schools, and providing rich learning environments responsive to the needs of all children.

Over time, the state networks served to strengthen communication regarding new directions and challenges, leveraging funding from multiple sources, and maintaining momentum to reach the goals in the state's action plan. Despite the challenges posed by limited time and resources, the states reported that the depth and extent of collaboration was a major factor in their ability to accomplish their goals. For example, the **Virginia** state team noted that “the preschool network in Virginia has a wide variety of stakeholders who are diligently working towards the goal of providing high-quality preschool programs for preschool students; however, stakeholders are not always working together to pool their resources and build on the strengths that each of them bring in the preschool network. The success of Virginia's NASBE committee can be attributed to the extraordinary collaborative leadership across agencies and organizations.”²³

Similarly, the **Nebraska** state team commented that “the agencies—the Early Childhood Training Center, the Nebraska Department of Education, and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services—collaborated on every part of the project....Without open and frequent communication, progress toward any of the objectives would not have been made.”²⁴

Phase II: Creating a Prekindergarten through Grade Three System

In the second and third year of the Network, as states continued to expand preschool enrollments, more attention was paid to better coordination and alignment of preschool programs with kindergarten and the early primary grades. This new focus on PK–3 education required states to rethink the way they conceptualize early learning environments and reconcile differences in curriculum, assessment, and teacher training to ensure a consistent, developmentally informed orientation. States focused on how to increase the responsiveness of schools to the diverse needs of children, families, and communities; provide a continuous system of quality education and care across grade levels; partner with communities to collaboratively support children; and prepare and support educators to respond to child and family needs.

Moreover, as K–12 education moved into the fifth year of stringent accountability requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, states continued to be troubled by the intransigence of achievement gaps, as well as having deep concerns about the design and implementation of state accountability policies. Debates surfaced about the merits of assessment, the impact on classroom teaching, and the fairness and feasibility of applying consequences to program performance. The Network states recognized the need—and urgency—to not just add preschool to the existing organizational structure and practice of K–12 public schools, but to reexamine early education entirely. State teams seized the opportunity to revisit underlying premises and goals of public education and examine their approaches to establishing shared accountability for children’s ongoing education and well-being across the PK–3 system.

NASBE encouraged states to focus on a PK–3 approach that 1) specifically attends to the quality of instructional practices in classrooms across the grades and that 2) includes features that will

enhance the responsiveness of schools to the needs and experiences of individual children. As a result, states made considerable progress in developing policies and structures to integrate early education into a seamless system of PK–3 education by:

1. Increasing the alignment between standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction in early education programs and the early elementary grades.

The Network states crafted strategies and action steps with the recognition that the long-term benefits of preschool depend on the coherence and quality of the PK–3 system writ large, including the intentional design of curriculum, assessments, and instruction across grade levels.

For example, under the auspices of the State Board of Education, **Georgia** developed an ambitious proposal to design a seamless, high-quality PK–3 system to maximize and sustain the benefits of early education. But achieving this goal required close collaboration between two state agencies, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL)—the first with responsibility for K–12 education, the latter with responsibility for the state’s prekindergarten program.

This work was facilitated by the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, established by Governor Sonny Purdue, which brought together the agency heads and governing board chairs for the departments of early care and learning, education, technical and adult education, the University System of Georgia, and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. With leadership at the top, along with increased opportunities to pool resources and expertise across GaDOE and DECAL, the two agencies arrived at a consensus on the value of documenting and reporting evidence of children’s learning progress. This data, along with other key attributes of local education programs and settings, would be included in the state’s emerging comprehensive student data system.

In accord with these agreements, GaDOE and DECAL rolled out a joint plan to create a performance-based assessment (Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills—GKIDS). The assessment would be natural in its application and would provide teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed by individual students entering kindergarten and first grade. Use of the data would promote a more balanced and deeper understanding of the needs of individual children, the effectiveness of education programs, and a strong basis for making improvements at all levels of the system.

To accomplish this overarching goal, the agencies convened a Core Development Team that included teachers (prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade teachers, including special education and English language learner teachers), early childhood specialists from DECAL and Georgia’s university system, and state education department curriculum specialists. Their responsibilities included identifying the purposes and goals of the kindergarten assessment; defining the construct of “readiness for first grade”; developing a framework for aligning the kindergarten assessment with the K-12 Georgia Performance Standards; and recommending data collection sequencing and methodology. They also worked to map GKIDS to the Georgia prekindergarten assessment—based on the Meisel Work Sampling System—to increase the comparability across the two sets of domains and indicators.

This has been a major undertaking involving a strategic planning process to develop, pilot, administer, and implement the GKIDS assessment by the 2008-2009 school year. The agencies succeeded in completing an alignment of prekindergarten standards with K-12 standards, created a data system to track student performance

“The Virginia State Board of Education collaborated with key agencies and constituencies to address the need for a high-quality early education workforce.”

throughout schooling, and implemented joint training of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers on using assessment results. The training also incorporated components of the prekindergarten curriculum and assessment to foster consistency considered critical to aligning the state’s early and primary grade systems.

Georgia’s Network team remarked that inter-agency collaboration produced greater efficiency in the use of resources and expertise, and noted that “the development of GKIDS marked a complete shift in the way of thinking about early childhood learning and assessment in Georgia.”²⁵ Interagency collaboration is continuing with respect to developing corollary measures using technological supports and professional development in the early grades that mirrors the naturalistic, child-centered quality of the prekindergarten and kindergarten assessments.

2. Focusing on research-based teaching practices to provide responsive learning environments to young children at all levels—prekindergarten, kindergarten, and the primary grades.

The Network states recognized the essential link between building a robust professional development system for early educators and ensuring high levels of program quality by way of assessment, accountability, and oversight. In particular, states acted on the need to bring together new networks of professionals, experts, practitioners, and advocates to design the infrastructure, supports, policies, and practices that would maximize the benefits of early learning and sustain early gains into elementary school.

Working with Governor Kaine’s office, the Virginia State Board of Education collaborated with key agencies and constituencies to address the need for a high-quality early education workforce. Virginia committed to a broad strategy to ensure alignment and consistency in requirements for teachers across prekindergarten through grade three. As a result, the state revised the foundational documents for establishing expectations of early learning environments including Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive Standards for Four-Year Olds and

“Oregon developed a statewide professional development system to increase the ability of local education agencies to respond to the needs of individual children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and throughout schooling.”

the recently produced document from the state’s Early Childhood Education’s Alignment Project, Milestones of Child Development and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals. The state added core competencies that included requirements for teachers to provide for the unique social and educational needs of young children and to understand how child-teacher interactions define the central elements of quality learning environments. In addition, an “add on” endorsement to an elementary teacher’s license in the area of Early Childhood Education was proposed and subsequently approved by the state’s teacher licensure board and adopted by the Virginia State Board of Education in 2007.²⁶

The state went further by creating a Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool aligned with the policy documents to help teachers implement high-quality early learning environments. Following a pilot in Virginia Preschool Initiative programs, the tool was broadly disseminated throughout all state preschool programs.²⁷

Finally, Virginia adopted a quality rating and improvement system that is aligned to Virginia’s teacher licensure regulations and that requires measures to assess classroom interactions, learning environments, instructional practices, and staff qualifications.²⁸

Oregon developed a statewide professional development system to increase the ability of local education agencies to respond to the needs of individual children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and throughout schooling. During the past three years of the grant, the Oregon team and Department of Education (ODE) has focused

attention on Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), two effective programs to target skills acquisition in reading and language development, cognitive skills and positive behavior for all children. These programs provide differentiated emotional and instructional supports in accord with children’s learning needs, offer responsive and fluid learning environments based on the science of child development and learning, and use progress monitoring of individual growth. Models are designed to help staff provide high-quality teaching and curricula in all classrooms and to differentiate instructional intensity based on individual needs. ODE has promoted these initiatives through intensive district-level professional development, grants to local school districts for training and implementation, and expert technical assistance to improve the emotional and instructional support to young children. District data analysis, progress monitoring, and evidence based practices are required components in the implementation plans of both initiatives.

3. Promoting smooth transitions, responsive schools, and family and community engagement at all levels through “ready schools” initiatives.

States have recognized that in order to sustain the benefits of early education, they need to create structures to foster shared responsibility for children’s development and well-being. Ready schools initiatives, which have been part of the early childhood landscape for the past decade, incorporate a multi-dimensional approach that draws attention to need for early education and care but also to the capacity of schools to respond to the learning needs of young children. The ready school framework delineates the essential attributes of a “ready school” such as smoothing the transition between home and school; connecting with community partners and families, and striving for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools, and integrating training of professionals who work across the three- to eight-year-old age span.

Indiana reported that the investment and attention to its Ready Schools Initiative has been the most promising and exciting of its efforts to

Indiana's Ready Schools Initiative

Ensuring children's school readiness has been seen by researchers, foundations, and child advocates as a collective endeavor that addresses a range of factors affecting children as they enter school, including children's development, schools' readiness for children, and family and community support. Research shows, however, that many children experience discontinuity when they make the transition from preschool or home into kindergarten and that less than 20 percent of schools in the United States have transition practices in place that support the needs of children and families.³⁰ Even for schools that do, standard "transition" practices are generally of low intensity and impersonal, falling "woefully short of helping to build the kind of supports for children that can reduce the risk of school failure."³¹ Despite lip service to more personal transition practices, poor communication and connections between early childhood education and early childhood programs prevail. In fact, researchers have found that less than 17 percent of teachers nationally either called or visited children at home or visited preschool programs in an effort to smooth transition to kindergarten.³² Most often schools lack mechanisms to ensure substantive exchanges about programs, curricula, and the individual strengths and needs of children and families.

A number of the Network states invested in ready schools initiatives to facilitate children's successful transition into kindergarten and the elementary grades. Key characteristics of "ready schools" include promotion of healthy growth and development with respect to all developmental domains; an open, child-focused, welcoming environment; and strong leadership that conveys the belief that all children can learn. Ready Schools:

- Work closely with early care and education providers to improve the quality of early education to ensure children are ready for school;

- Establish communication between elementary and early education teachers to coordinate education, care, and services for children;
- Share information and assessments about individual children to plan and individualize children's learning;
- Align expectations, curricula, assessments, and instruction; and
- Participate in substantive transition activities and engage families before the start of school.³³

Indiana, one of the Network states that focused on helping local elementary schools support children's transitions to kindergarten, commissioned a study by Dr. Patricia Clark of Ball State University. She examined the impact of the Indiana Ready Schools Initiative on the efforts of 16 communities to improve connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools and to reach out to children and families before children enter kindergarten. Results from the initial High/Scope Ready School Assessment, conducted by teams at participating elementary schools, revealed that of eight areas examined (e.g., leadership, teacher support, environment, assessing progress, family involvement) transition received the lowest rating.³⁴ As part of the state's initiative, elementary schools were asked to develop strategies to connect to Head Start and other community preschool programs based on their needs and resources.

Common approaches included exchange visits to preschools and kindergarten for preschool and kindergarten teachers to learn more about programs, curricula, and children; procedures to obtain records and share information about individual children; outreach to engage families through special events, classroom visits, and home visits before school begins; and distribution of information such

as brochures and videos. In addition, some of the Ready Schools communities created opportunities for joint professional development for participating early childhood and kindergarten teachers. Other communities formed a transition team to solicit input from families and community agencies on how to address the needs of children and families before elementary schools starts and how to provide continued support once children have entered school. Survey responses from teachers, administrators, and families showed improvement in children's transitions to kindergarten, increased family involvement in schools, and a greater sense of community.

Recommendations for Improved Transition:

- Strengthen connections between preschools and elementary schools by fostering communication and aligning expectations and curricula to increase consistency in the quality of learning environments and the responsiveness to individual children's needs.
- Require localities and school districts to undertake transition planning to ensure the design and implementation of a broad spectrum of transition practices.
- Strengthen the relationship between programs, schools, and families before the start of kindergarten. Ensure that activities to engage families are substantive, ongoing, and sufficiently intensive to respond to children's developmental and learning needs.
- Focus on providing high-quality settings to nurture children's learning throughout kindergarten and primary years by providing young children with well-trained teachers and environments that provide strong instructional and emotional supports.

advance the quality and coherence of early learning systems. The state Department of Education expanded funding to communities to implement the Ready Schools Initiative for the 2008-09 school year, providing small grants to a total of 16 high-poverty school districts. The state worked with participating elementary schools to complete the Ready School Assessment developed by High/Scope to evaluate the level of support schools provide to children and families and to create a set of strategies based on their needs and resources. Findings of an impact study documented improvements in children's transitions to kindergarten and increased family involvement in schools.

The Indiana state team also conducted regional meetings and a statewide forum each year to share lessons learned from all participating communities and to determine what communities needed in order to 1) improve connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools and 2) reach out to children and families before children enter kindergarten. Participants received a "ready schools" notebook along with other information on approaches and strategies to connect early childhood programs to elementary schools and community agencies and to improve transitions for children.²⁹ (See text box.)

In **Nebraska**, the Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, along with several other partners, sponsored a "Birth through Grade 3: Research to Practice Conference" series. This two-part research conference was designed to provide up-to-date research related to early childhood development and best practices for programs serving young children and their families across the age spectrum. The first conference concentrated on the needs of children birth to age 5 and their families; the second on children three years of age through third grade and their families. The conference focus was on children's overall development, the need to ensure continuity of education and services, collaborative relationships, and implementation of practices based on the science of child development and learning.

Oregon also focused on efforts to connect prekindergarten and kindergarten. The state convened

the first-ever Kindergarten Summit in March 2007 with more than 500 participants; the second was held on March 2008 with more than 400 participants. The event marked an important step in the continuous effort to enhance educational opportunities for young children, with a focus on transitions into kindergarten and issues related to ensuring continuity in curriculum and quality teaching.³⁵

The Next Phase: Moving Forward to Improve the Quality of Early Learning Environments

NASBE's Early Childhood Education Network has been remarkably successful over the past three years in terms of building state policy frameworks to advance the coherence and quality of each state's early learning system. The states worked with broad coalitions to identify the central elements that define quality and to leverage policy in ways that yield systemic improvement. States applied a range of approaches to define quality in terms of what we've learned about the importance of how teachers respond to children to promote their learning and development. This has been a complex undertaking that has required states to audit their current system, identify weaknesses and inconsistencies, and reach consensus on a set of viable strategies to scale improvements at the program and classroom level.

While states indicated that for the most part they remained on course with their initial set of strategies, the work shifted as new trends within early education and K-12 reform efforts emerged.³⁶ As discussed in this report, the initial work focused on reconciling disparate approaches to ensuring program quality among multiple programs administered and funded separately. While working toward reduced fragmentation within the early education system, the Network states also identified cross-cutting principles to ensure that children receive rich classroom experiences in early education and the primary grades and framed policy language to make linkages be-

tween regulation and effective practice transparent and consistent. States used a range of policy levers to improve the quality of learning environments and the capacity of teachers to nurture and cultivate children's emerging abilities, including early learning guidelines, program standards, assessment and data systems, teacher competencies, professional development systems, and quality rating systems.

In addition, as states continued to increase access to prekindergarten programs, the grantees focused more intently on how to merge early education, kindergarten, and the early grades. Consistent with recommendations from national experts, states set out to develop aligned systems of child learning guidelines, program quality standards, curricula, and assessments between preschools and the first years of elementary school.³⁷ For example, Georgia sought to vertically align continuity of expectations, curricula, and instructional practice through the design of a naturalistic performance assessment and a student data system. Other states focused on aligning standards, developing kindergarten readiness indicators, and promoting smooth transitions along with family and community engagement through "ready schools" initiatives.

As this work moved forward, states began to recognize some of the limitations of current approaches to regulating program quality and educator licensure. Even though forming consistent policies to better align prekindergarten initiatives and K-3 education was considered necessary, these efforts proved insufficient to bring to scale high levels of program and classroom quality. What became increasingly clear was that states needed to design better teacher preparation and professional development systems and to examine how to connect regulatory policy with teaching performance in explicit ways. In Georgia, for example, the joint work of the state agencies focused attention not only on designing an assessment to measure children's outcomes, but on creating a mechanism to advance research-based teaching practices throughout the PK-3 continuum. Similarly, Nebraska recognized the need not only to define core teacher competencies, but to strategically build a professional development infrastruc-

“While working toward reduced fragmentation within the early education system, the Network states also identified cross-cutting principles to ensure that children receive rich classroom experiences in early education and the primary grades and framed policy language to make linkages between regulation and effective practice transparent and consistent.”

ture in the coming years as a precursor to designing a regulatory system that would use incentives to promote improvements in program quality.

Furthermore, national research along with state evaluations have demonstrated weaknesses in current accountability frameworks used to improve preschool quality. In one such study,³⁸ researchers looked at the relationship between child development outcomes for four-year olds in public prekindergarten programs in 11 states and three approaches to assessing prekindergarten quality. The three approaches to measuring quality selected for study have been commonly used by states. These are:

- Meeting nine benchmarks of quality recommended by the National Institute of Early Education and Research (NIEER), such as teachers with bachelor degrees, teachers who have received specialized training; comprehensive curriculum, and class size;³⁹
- Observations of the overall quality of classroom environments as measured by Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R),⁴⁰ which includes 36 dimensions of classroom environments, such as space and furnishing, routines, activities, program structure, interactions, and language reasoning; and
- Observations of teachers’ emotional and instructional interactions with children using CLASS.

The analysis showed that measures of teacher-child interactions using CLASS was the only measure that most consistently and strongly predicted children’s academic, language, and social development in prekindergarten. In contrast, no relationship was found between the NIEER nine benchmarks and child outcomes, and for observations of overall preschool environments as measured by ECERS-R, the only link to child outcomes was the positive association with children’s development of expressive language skills. These findings support child development science, which indicates that children learn and acquire skills as a result of teacher-child interactions that impact directly on children’s experiences in classroom settings. Furthermore, they provide further credence to our knowledge of how children learn in the primary grades and the nature of instructional and emotional supports that can reduce achievement gaps and contribute to later school success.

These findings showing a weak connection between classroom teaching and policy structures are not unique to early childhood education. Increasingly, commentary from education experts point to the inability of K-12 reform efforts to impact what specifically needs to be improved in instructional practice. The uneven effects of current school improvement efforts have raised questions about the merits of state systems for preparing and licensing educators and about the effectiveness of accountability systems to leverage improvements in teaching practice.

Richard Elmore, Director of the Consortium for Policy Research at Harvard University, has written, “The premise that educators know what to do and all they need are the correct incentives to do it is essentially wrong.... It will require measures of instructional improvement and performance that are much closer to the ground than the state assessments that are the basis of accountability systems.”⁴¹ Other reformers of K-12 education have also noted that while nothing matters more than placing good teachers in classrooms, research consistently shows that credentialing teachers, at least among well-established programs, has little to do with the teaching excellence essential for producing high levels of student performance.⁴²

Rethinking the System

So how can states design regulation and policies to leverage consistent instructional improvement throughout the prekindergarten – grade three system? What is clear is that we now know a great deal about what makes a difference in children’s learning and development, but lack mechanisms to actively regulate classroom quality and follow up with the appropriate technical assistance and professional development.

NASBE’s role has been to help states think about how to strengthen the linkages between classroom processes that are empirically linked to children’s academic, cognitive, and language development and regulatory approaches to improving the quality and coherence of early learning systems. In order to build a coherent PK–3 system, NASBE encouraged the Network states to focus on systems to strengthen career licensure and advancement and to create approaches for leveraging specific classroom practices. Accordingly, the states revised policy structures to strengthen the linkages between teacher competencies, refine data systems and assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses in early education; designed regulatory systems such as quality rating systems to strengthen program quality; improved professional development and preparation; and built consistency in the standards, curricula, assessment, and instruction throughout PK–3 range. As the states moved through the process of developing strategies to advance the overall early learning system, they arrived at similar conclusions:

- The quality of teaching throughout the PK–3 age span is paramount and states must focus on the critical dimensions of learning environments if they are to recoup investments and achieve long-term positive outcomes for children.
- The assumption that kindergarten through grade 3 is a coordinated system that only needs to add a year of preschool not valid. The overall integration across each classroom at every level is much more complicated and requires rethinking the policies and the

practice essential to reducing the enormous variability in quality across classrooms, programs, and grade levels.

- Collaborative processes across agencies and divisions are critical in order to pool expertise, reduce inefficiencies, develop common language, examine research and program data to establish key linkages up front, focus on collective accountability, and to arrive at the ultimate goal of improving teaching and child learning and development.
- While the states reported that they accomplished their major goals, they acknowledge the need to go much further to develop regulatory mechanisms and professional development closer to the classroom level.

States found that while it was necessary to create structures through implementation of standards, curricula, and assessments, changes in regulatory structures to improve and maintain the benefit of early education will only come about if they are accompanied by systematic investments in the knowledge and skills of educators. Yet, this means going beyond teacher credentials and other structural features such as curricula and class size. Rather, training and ongoing support needs to focus on the classroom processes that are empirically linked to positive child outcomes. As a result, a number of the Network states, including Oregon, Missouri, and Georgia, are considering deploying classroom observations (using a process measure such as CLASS) as part of their progress monitoring and professional development systems.

“The quality of teaching throughout the PK–3 age span is paramount and states must focus on the critical dimensions of learning environments if they are to...achieve long-term positive outcomes for children.”

Recommendations for State Action

NASBE's work with the Network states has brought to light the importance of rethinking policies to ensure greater consistency across early learning settings and to recognize the need to monitor and make improvements in line with what we know matters most in determining what children learn.

What's more, we've learned that to design coherent systems there must be far greater understanding and transparency as to how to calibrate and improve the nature and quality of how teachers engage and interact with young children. Much more must be done to shore up teacher development so that teachers have the knowledge and skills to create learning opportunities linked to gains in cognition, language, and social and emotional development.

States will need to design policies and infrastructures to provide incentives for improvements and work with key constituencies—including higher education and community colleges—to design comprehensive approaches to strengthening teacher preparation and professional development. These policy structures may include the following core actions:

- 1** *Aligning standards, curricula, assessment, and teaching practices for prekindergarten through grade three that reflect the research on quality learning environments and on the impact of early learning settings on children's developmental outcomes.* This is an important foundational step to creating the infrastructure for a coherent, evidence-based early learning system. States may want to examine how to create incentives for school districts and early education providers to partner in building a seamless prekindergarten through grade 3 system.
- 2** *Establishing a state role in defining and funding effective research-based professional development.* States should adopt and adhere to national professional development standards, which delineate the essential characteristics of quality professional development. High-quality professional development is purposeful, structured, embedded within the classroom context, occurs over time, and provides non-evaluative feedback about important teaching dimensions and behaviors that impact children's learning. Educators should be involved in collaboratively planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development using multiple sources of data that include measures of teaching behavior.
- 3** *Developing professional development that incorporates communication technologies to broaden the scope of collaboration.* Recent examinations of a web-based professional development program that include opportunities for teachers to receive focused, intensive, individualized feedback have shown promise.⁴³ Teachers participated in a regular cycle of observation and feedback by providing videotapes of their teaching to trained consultants who viewed and rated how the teachers interacted with children in accord with the CLASS evaluation system. The participating teachers improved in reading their children's cues, modeling language development, and engaging children in instruction. Of note, teachers who taught in classrooms that were classified as high poverty showed the greatest gains in a number of these areas.
- 4** *Developing networks in collaboration with higher education, community colleges, and program developers to scale up research-based teaching practices in prekindergarten programs.* States should create collaborative processes to examine data on children's learning and classroom processes that create a shared focus for improving the quality of prekindergarten through grade 3 early learning systems. The common focus and vision for defining quality can then be used for developing coherent systems for training and supporting teachers and for designing and monitoring programs.
- 5** *Increasing the state's capacity to prepare and support effective teaching practice and*

certify teachers in accord with demonstrated competencies. States should identify the potential linkages between elements within the system (e.g., quality rating systems, teacher competencies, preparation program approval requirements) that will strengthen teacher development and effectiveness, such as broader use of performance-based measures of teaching. States need to partner with universities, community colleges, and program staff to redesign preparation programs and tighten the connections among early education teacher preparation and statements of teacher knowledge and skills and standards for child outcomes.⁴⁴

6 *Designing program policies that focus on effective learning and optimal outcomes for children throughout the early years.* While structural features of a classroom or school provide a foundation for early education settings, it is clear that these features of programs, while perhaps necessary, do not account for the gains children make in the early years. In this way, policy, program development, and professional preparation for PK–3 education should target the nature and quality of how teachers engage and interact with children and provide performance-focused professional development on an ongoing basis.

7 *Developing regulatory mechanisms that feed back information to teachers regarding their performance in terms of instruction and meeting the individual needs of children, and coupling this information with measures of classroom teaching and child outcomes to inform classroom and program improvements.* Accountability should be based on a continuous improvement approach that includes ongoing evaluation to assess a program’s plan for meeting early learning needs, the quality of its implementation, and its impact on children and families. States should use multiple age-appropriate indicators of both child learning and the quality dimensions of classrooms so that needed improvements and professional development can be identi-

fied. By way of linking critical dimensions of early education settings and state-level factors, states can begin to articulate a common language and lens for understanding and improving important assets for children’s development and school readiness.⁴⁵

8 *Using program evaluation and tracking data as part of a comprehensive state early learning system to inform how policies are crafted and assess their implementation and impact.* States need an infrastructure for collecting data on multiple indicators to identify the needs of young children, track children’s learning and development over time, and build consistency in the quality of early childhood programs and services.

Conclusion

Developing comprehensive policy frameworks and educational structures that actually improve instruction in the classroom is notoriously difficult work. This is especially so when the systems are seriously fragmented in terms of policies, accountability, and funding, as is the case in early childhood education. Despite these challenges, the Network states, as reported in this brief, made very significant progress in advancing the quality of their early learning systems. And, importantly in the current economic climate, this was generally accomplished without large expenditures.

But, as we have also noted here, there is much work yet to do to ensure that early learning environments across the prekindergarten–grade 3 spectrum provide young children with rich, responsive learning environments. It is expected that states will continue to invest in prekindergarten programs fueling significant growth in early education enrollments. We have learned a great deal from working with the Network states about the need to treat early education investments not as an end in themselves, but as a starting place for a high-quality, aligned system of prekindergarten through grade three education.

Conversations with Members of NASBE's State Early Childhood Education Network

While policymakers, researchers, and practitioners agree that early childhood education is a strategic investment to promote children's subsequent educational successes, "there is no one-size-fits all approach" to developing and advancing high-quality early childhood initiatives, said Virginia State Board of Education member Eleanor Saslaw. As Saslaw and other members of NASBE's state Network teams moved through the process of formulating and addressing the policies needed to structure early childhood learning systems, it became clear that there is no easy fix or single model that ensures high quality and consistency across classrooms.

However, several states shared an awareness of the imperative to directly confront the historic fragmentation and finger pointing that has become the norm in the early education field, especially in states where preschool and childcare have their own state agency separate from the K-12 education agency. So, identifying the places where multiple groups could find overlapping benefits—or "impingement" points, as Georgia State Board of Education member Larry Winter said—was critical to bringing everyone out of their silos and forging the communication and commitment needed to move forward.

In an effort to get a behind-the-scenes understanding of the inner workings of the Network, NASBE traveled to Atlanta and Richmond to interview individuals from two state teams at the conclusion of the grant cycle. Their voices provide deeper insight into some of the more complicated aspects of policymaking, and illustrate what stakeholder engagement and grassroots empowerment look like in the field. The interviewees' reflections and perceived next steps, and the similarities and differences within the state approaches shared in this article, provide practical guidance for considering initial and continued investments in early childhood education and care. In talking to the Virginia and Georgia Network teams, we were able to gain a greater understanding for how this undertaking played out in different ways to achieve the same

ultimate goal of improving teaching and child learning and development.

Stakeholder Engagement

Both states recognized optimum entry points for advancing their improvement efforts. For Georgia it was via assessment, while in Virginia it was the policy lever of teacher licensure. Despite differences in the approaches described by Georgia and Virginia, it is clear that the efforts of the state Network teams gained traction by maximizing timing, starting at the ground level by establishing a collaborative tone, and bridging political commitments.

Both states had a push for unity from the top. In Georgia, the NASBE grant coincided with Gov. Sonny Perdue's creation of an agency head roundtable. "You have to get the right people at the table who can make the decisions on the spot without going through 100 channels to get a decision," said Mary Mazarky, assistant commissioner for pre-k at the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), who served on Georgia's cross-agency Network team.

Similarly, Virginia was better situated to establish a common vision, pool expertise, and reduce inefficiencies because the NASBE Network paralleled Gov. Tim Kaine's priorities and his development of the Start Strong Council in 2006. "At the same time, the core competencies for teacher licensure were going through their review process, so it was perfect timing," added Mark Allen, who directs Elementary and Instructional Services at the Virginia Department of Education (DOE) and served on the Virginia Network team. "When we first applied for the grant through NASBE's Network, we thought \$15,000 isn't that much," Saslaw said. "But the grant helped us direct our thinking and enabled us to bring all the players around the table." By being able to piggyback on a process already in progress, Virginia concurrently revised its standards to balance the academic and developmental needs of young children and made a curriculum rubric tool for districts to better match resources to the state's standards.

Spending time to align standards upfront was also a priority in Georgia. "It's hard to connect if different departments aren't talking the same language," said Mazarky of DECAL. Doing research, looking at standards, and agreeing on common verbiage was the groundwork necessary before building an as-

assessment. And, with the “right” people at the table, Mazarky emphasized the power that resulted from being able to link what her pre-k office had already done (in terms of research with Dr. Sam Meisel’s work sampling performance assessment system) with the K–12 Department’s desire to move away from a “drop-dead” form of kindergarten assessment to a more naturalistic, ongoing assessment that could help teachers throughout the year.

“I think sometimes we try to come in after something’s complete and see where the links are—rather than creating the links as you are doing it,” Mazarky said. “When they developed the new assessment, they were doing it with pre-k in mind.” The collaboration allowed Georgia to draw from the common expertise of the two agencies, establish teacher training protocols, and come in under budget and under time. “It will take us a couple of years, but we’ll mesh so that pre-k and kindergarten teachers understand each other,” Mazarky added.

Grassroots Empowerment

Conversations with Georgia and Virginia officials also provide examples of how Network teams keyed in on the value of a grassroots element in their early childhood work. Recognizing that setting and aligning standards are necessary but insufficient for bringing quality early learning systems to scale, Georgia officials talked about their priority of ensuring that those who would actually administer and use the results of the assessment in the classroom were invested in its development and success.

“If you are sitting at DOE coming up with all these great plans alone, you might as well throw them out the door because the teachers have to be involved in every step and the results cannot be dictated,” said Jeff Barker, former assessment director for the Georgia DOE and a member of the Georgia Network team. For example, a key feature of the new first grade readiness assessment, the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), is its commitment to naturalistic observation. So it was essential not only for DECAL and the DOE to align standards and goals, but also for “teachers to provide feedback about the feasibility of administering the test with flexibility in a way that children never know they are being assessed,” said Barker.

Through field testing and piloting, teachers gave input as to best practices and suggestions for group

configurations for different activities that are now posted in an online resource bank. Moreover, since teachers were intimately involved in the GKIDS evolution from the beginning by serving on development committees, teacher buy-in was natural rather than mandated. This inclusionary process also assuaged many teachers’ concerns about testing. “Before, they didn’t think it was an appropriate test, or even that it was giving them valid results,” said Barker. But the new test and its development process seemed to bring a mind shift. Instead of perceiving assessment with an air of suspicion and burden—as a box to check or a paper to push to meet accountability and comparison pressures—teachers saw GKIDS as a tool that could empower them to give and use honest ratings of children’s progress and gaps, and to use the evaluation results to continuously inform instruction.

“We really listened to teachers,” said Barker. Indeed, while the state had initially intended to have a standard setting procedure to determine cut scores as part of the development process, the Georgia team changed course when a group of teachers asserted that using scores in this way would defeat the purpose of an assessment that was supposed to provide ongoing information. “It took about 15 minutes of us hearing from the teachers,” Barker added, “and then we went to the associate superintendent, who said, ‘they know better than anyone.’ And that’s the kind of relationship, the kind of trust, you need to have. So we didn’t standards set. We built GKIDS so that it would be hard to use as a ranking mechanism, keeping it as a performance level measure based on teacher activities. And I think that was a really wise move.”

This greater degree of ownership also extended to the district level as schools were able to show greater innovation and organically design testing protocols. For example, Bullet County officials looked beyond the assessment itself to build integrated instructional units and directly relate progress reports to GKIDS dimensions—and they have since traveled around the state to share their ideas.

Virginia also credited grassroots efforts for developing the momentum necessary to build traction in professional licensure. “It was able to happen so quickly because higher education wanted it too,” said Saslaw. What universities were experiencing with students having trouble getting degrees because of mismatched credit transfers among

institutions was also creating a road block for the state getting the qualified personnel it needed most. So, building on the existing work of a group of community college educators who were developing a common, streamlined curriculum, Virginia was able to mutually benefit higher education and the state education department. During this process, Virginia team members noted, they worked to infuse current research findings on teacher-child interactions into changes to teacher education and licensure requirements, ensuring that teachers provide for the social and instructional needs of young children. In the end, the Network team credited partnerships and shared responsibility for the successful development of the two- and four-year college articulation agreements, as well as new add-on PK-3 and PK-6 teaching endorsements.

Next Steps

Virginia's experience with higher education also provides perspective on the need for problems to be shared across the educational system. One way to merge pre-k issues with the wider K-12 conversation is through a unique dropout prevention effort. Virginia is working to establish linkages between high school vocational and certification programs, two- or four-year degrees, and teacher licensure to expand its pool of skilled practitioners and motivate more students to work toward a high school diploma.

Through connections with an early childhood coordinator from technical schools who sat on NASBE workgroup, Georgia has already made some progress in expanding a similar vocational education program in its high schools. Beginning by establishing training grounds by placing pre-k classrooms in more high schools, the state has built bridges to local technical schools where students can be dually enrolled. By creating a path among teaching assistantships, associate's degree coursework, and eventual placements as lead teachers in private centers, Georgia is anticipating twofold benefits. "We're trying to make it a workforce-ready initiative at the state level," Mazarky said. "So we're saying to students, 'We'll help you get the credit, which we hope will help you to stay in school, but we're also going to offer you a job in the field.'"

Research shows that the benefits of pre-k can only be sustained if classroom quality is maintained. Accordingly, Georgia is also approaching next steps to its work on GKIDS from a more proximal angle. "There

has been a lot of conversation in the state that maybe the first grade assessment needs to be an extension of the GKIDS," said Barker. "I see it planting seeds in different places. Using this kind of assessment in grade, 1, grade 2, grade 3...would be a very natural progression for both the kids and the teachers."

Using the new partnerships to address future issues was also mentioned by our interviewees. "The fact that Georgia's K-12 and Early Childhood departments collaborated on assessments and have both seen the benefit of the assessment alignment has cemented that relationship and paved the way for ongoing ties," said Mazarky. "We came out of tunnel vision looking at our own areas. To look at it as 'we're all about every child' was a wake up call and I think that we're all benefitting from that." Indeed, de-compartmentalization has already been seen, as the Georgia DOE invited DECAL to help examine kindergarten to second grade writing assessments.

Technology is also a consideration for future work addressing fragmentation in the education system and the mobility rates of students. Georgia hopes to improve data entry about student outcomes by making it a hand held process teachers can do on the spot. With plans to expand online databases and give each child an identification number earlier, Mazarky and Barker said they hope Georgia will offer an example of how to build records that follow students from pre-k all the way through higher education. "It will enable teachers to better use student information to inform instruction, and it will also allow us to look at indicators statewide," said Mazarky.

While both states made significant and speedy headway, the work is hardly over. The Virginia and Georgia stories highlight how the challenges of sustainability and scalability continue to confront states. These interviews showed that creating a "seamless" system includes but goes beyond ensuring the connectivity of agencies and alignment of standards and assessments—it has to reach the level of instructional continuity. The interviewees agreed that ongoing state-level research and policymaking will have to invest in appropriate instructional practices to make sure classrooms beginning in early childhood care reflect what is best for young children. "You have to have great quality all along to have a great product," Virginia's Mark Allen added. "Pre-k is just one of those pieces we have to get right."

—Jessie Levin

State Actions in NASBE's Early Childhood Education Network

Georgia

Evaluations of Georgia's long-standing state pre-kindergarten program indicated that preschool gains tend to diminish over time resulting in concerns over the state's early education investments. Under the auspices of the state board of education, Georgia developed an ambitious proposal to design a seamless, high-quality PK-3 system that would maximize and sustain the benefits of early education. But achieving this goal would require close collaboration between two state agencies, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), the first with responsibility for K-12 education, the latter with responsibility for the state's prekindergarten program.

Under Gov. Sonny Purdue, the state established the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, bringing together the agency heads and governing board chairs for the departments of early care and learning, education, technical and adult education, the University System of Georgia, and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Under the direction of the alliance, chaired by Superintendent Kathy Cox, a permanent P-16 council made up of representatives from each of the agencies and the business community began collaborating on policies and programs, particularly on those initiatives where the work of one agency "intersects" with that of others. The leadership at the top, along with increased opportunities to pool resources and expertise across GaDOE and DECAL, laid the foundation for a highly successful partnership. The two agencies arrived at a consensus on the value of documenting and reporting evidence of children's learning progress. This data, along with other key attributes of local education programs and settings, would be included in the state's emerging comprehensive student data system.

In accord with these agreements, GaDOE and DECAL rolled out a joint plan to revamp the state's kindergarten assessment program. The goal was to create a performance-based assessment that would be natural in its application and provide teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed

by individual students entering kindergarten and first grade. The new assessment, called the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), was mapped to the Georgia prekindergarten assessment (based on the Meisel Work Sampling System) to increase the comparability across the two sets of domains and indicators. The design and implementation of the GKIDS assessment entails a comprehensive set of procedures to secure its technical soundness and to promote the internalization of standards, curriculum, and instruction by PK-3 teachers. Use of the data would promote a more balanced and deeper understanding of the needs of individual children, the effectiveness of education programs, and a strong basis for making improvements at all levels of the system.

Beginning in 2007, the two agencies convened a Core Development Team that included pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade teachers (including special education and English language learner teachers), early childhood specialists from Georgia's university system, and DECAL and GaDOE curriculum specialists. Their responsibilities included identifying the purposes and goals of the kindergarten assessment; defining the construct of "readiness for first grade"; developing a framework for aligning the kindergarten assessment with the K-12 Georgia Performance Standards; and recommending data collection sequencing and methodology.

This has been a major undertaking involving a strategic planning process to develop, pilot, administer, and implement the GKIDS assessment by the 2008-09 school year. The steps completed this past year include:

- Conducting background research on 1) critical concerns in designing assessment for young children; 2) developmental domains; 3) purposes of assessment; 4) linkages between state standards and the assessment; and 5) administration windows;
- Convening focus groups comprised of kindergarten and first grade teachers, Georgia primary school administrators; special education teachers, English language learner teachers, and test coordinators on revisions to GKIDS; and

- Establishing an Advisory Committee (AC) to develop activities/tasks that included 15 members from the ranks of teachers and from both the GaDOE and DECAL, along with specialists from the University System of Georgia. The AC provided additional feedback to the Core Development Team on scoring rubrics and training for field test sites and for statewide training of kindergarten teachers, considered critical to aligning the state's early and primary grade systems.

With respect to alignment, the GaDOE and DECAL identified opportunities for joint professional development to advance vertical teaming and transitioning children from prekindergarten into kindergarten and first grade. These were completed in summer 2008 and included statewide teacher training on conducting the new kindergarten assessment. Georgia Center for Assessment will conduct kindergarten assessment training sessions across the state, online training, and separate training sessions for the larger school systems. In addition to sessions on GKIDS implementation, the training will also include a component on the prekindergarten curriculum and assessment that focuses on how to use results from the pre-k assessment to determine kindergarten readiness.

Throughout 2008, DECAL and GaDOE collaborated to determine consistent use of terminology and definitions between and the prekindergarten standards and the K–3 Georgia Performance Standards and to reconcile how the Georgia standards cross-walk with current national standards. This exercise was performed to ensure consistent application of the standards by teachers across all grade levels and to ensure the seamless transition between prekindergarten and K-12 curricular activities and practices. The content review team consisted of teachers, professional staff, and other core team members to provide a representative group.

This has been a major undertaking involving a strategic planning process to develop, pilot, administer, and implement the GKIDS assessment by the 2008-09 school year. The agencies succeeded in completing an alignment of prekindergarten standards with K-12 standards, conducted three field tests of GKIDS, created a data system to track student performance throughout schooling, and implemented joint training of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers on using assessment results. GaDOE and DECAL also identified opportunities for joint professional development to advance vertical teaming and transitioning children

from prekindergarten into kindergarten and first grade. The agencies completed multiple kindergarten assessment training sessions that included using online technology to interpret assessment data and plan instruction. The training incorporated components of the prekindergarten curriculum and assessment, as well, to foster consistency considered critical to aligning the state's early and primary grade systems.

The State Board of Education continued to play a pivotal role in mobilizing the key education policymakers in the state to help coordinate the project, garner political and public support, and achieve operational administration of GKIDS by the 2008-09 school year. The Georgia state team acknowledged that interagency collaboration produced greater efficiency in the use of resources and expertise in achieving critical improvements in the state's early learning system. The team noted that "the development of GKIDS marked a complete shift in the way of thinking about early childhood learning and assessment in Georgia." New electronic tools and measures allow for customization of instruction and supports, particularly as children transition across programs or from grade to grade. Interagency collaboration is continuing with the development of corollary measures using technological supports and professional development in the early grades that mirrors the naturalistic, child-centered quality of the prekindergarten and kindergarten assessments.

Oregon

Oregon developed a set of strategies to create a standards-based infrastructure that includes quality assurance and accountability systems. To that end, one of its primary strategies was to establish a structure to ensure continuity of quality instruction across learning environments that included aligning certification, preparation, and professional development to early learning standards.

A part of that strategy, Oregon developed the *Oregon Early Childhood Foundations*, describing what prekindergarten children should know and be able to do during the first five years of life to be ready for school, and aligned those expectations with content standards for students in the elementary grades. Development of the *Foundations* was a collaborative effort among the state agencies dedicated to work with Oregon's youngest children: the Oregon Department of Educa-

tion (ODE), Oregon Head Start Collaboration, Department of Employment Child Care Division, and Oregon Commission on Children and Families. In all, more than 80 stakeholders and educators participated in the development process. The *Foundations* outline the essential dimensions of quality learning environments; describe how caregivers and teachers can enhance children's development and learning; and serve as a resource to assist teachers, parents, family members, caregivers, and other adults in promoting the development and learning of young children.

Significantly, the *Oregon Early Childhood Foundations* are aligned with the state's Foundations for Grades K–2, which in turn are aligned to the Grade-Level Standards for Grades 3–12. By looking at the hierarchy of skills required in each prior and subsequent level, teachers can focus instruction on the appropriate knowledge and skills. The *Foundations* are available online at www.ode.state.or.us/gradelevel/pre_k/introfoundations.pdf.

As part of its standards-based infrastructure, ODE piloted the *Early Childhood Assessment* during the 2006–07 school year and finally adopted two assessments: the Assessment Evaluation Programming System (AEPS) for Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education and Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum and Galileo for Oregon Pre-Kindergarten Head Start. Training and technical assistance have been ongoing. Results are reported to the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs and the Oregon Legislature.

Oregon crafted a second strategy for refining kindergarten readiness indicators and improving data accuracy as part of a continuous improvement model. While 2006 survey results indicate steady progress in improved readiness outcomes for entering Oregon kindergarteners, the state decided to refine its Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS) and piloted the revised measure in 16 school districts in fall 2007 in preparation for the statewide data collection in fall 2008.

The 2008 KRS included a broader range of content indicators across five areas:

- approaches to learning;
- social and personal development;
- physical health, well-being, and motor development;
- general knowledge and cognitive development; and
- communication, literacy, and language development.

Survey results are considered vital for teachers, parents, and policymakers and are used to determine the efficacy of programs for young children. The 2008 KRS report on the readiness of children entering the K-12 school system will be submitted to the Oregon legislature, the Oregon Progress Board, and the public in April 2009. The results are also used as one of the ODE Key Performance Measures used by the legislature to gauge agency performance. Survey data will now be collected from all kindergarten teachers on an annual basis about all children, with ongoing training and technical assistance provided in accord with identified needs. In April 2009, ODE will again convene meetings of kindergarten teachers and stakeholders to discuss the latest KRS report. The newly revised Oregon Kindergarten Readiness Survey is online at www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=1356.

Oregon's third strategy focused on connecting pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. In order to provide professional development and networking opportunities to enhance kindergarten transition practices, the state convened its first-ever Kindergarten Summit in March 2007 with more than 500 participants; the second was held on March 2008 with more than 400 participants. The event marked an important step in efforts to enhance educational opportunities for young children, with a focus on transitions into kindergarten and issues related to ensuring continuity in curriculum and quality teaching. Materials from the Oregon Kindergarten Summit, including the Ready Schools documents distributed to participants, are available online at: www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=1702.

To enhance local capacity to meet the needs of individual children in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and throughout schooling, Oregon designed a professional development system to disseminate effective practices. ODE focused particular attention on Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), two effective programs to target skills acquisition in reading and language development, cognitive skills, and positive behavior for all children. These programs provide differentiated emotional and instructional supports in accord with children's learning needs, offer responsive and fluid learning environments based on the science of child development and learning, and use progress monitoring of individual growth.

Models for implementing RTI and PBS are designed to help staff provide high-quality teaching and curricula in all classrooms and to differentiate instructional intensity based on individual needs. ODE has promoted these

initiatives through intensive district-level professional development, grants to local school districts for training and implementation, and expert technical assistance to improve the emotional and instructional support given to young children. District data analysis, progress monitoring, and evidence-based practices are required components in the implementation plans of both initiatives.

Finally, efforts to expand prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten opportunities for low-income families have also moved forward as well. During the 2007 legislative session, the Superintendent of Public Instruction promoted increased funding for Oregon prekindergarten along with increased funding for full-day kindergarten. The legislature approved increased funding to expand the Head Start prekindergarten program by \$39 million, which will add 3,100 three- and four-year old youngsters to the state-funded program.

Indiana

Indiana has focused on strategies to enhance system quality and alignment that include: 1) expanding and strengthening its Ready Schools Initiative already implemented in nine communities; 2) determining transition indicator benchmarks based on the Indiana Foundations for Young Children; and 3) improving the quality of early childhood programs statewide through implementation of a voluntary quality rating system.

First, Indiana reports that the investment and attention to the Ready Schools Initiative has been the most promising and exciting of its efforts to advance the quality and coherence of early learning systems. The state continued funding the Ready Schools Initiative for the 2008-09 school year, adding four more districts to the 12 communities already funded by the state Department of Education (DOE). The state team conducted regional meetings and statewide forums to share information and to determine what communities needed in order to improve transition practices. Participants received a “ready schools” notebook along with other information on approaches and strategies to connect early childhood programs to elementary schools and community agencies and to improve transitions for children.

The state used the Ready School Assessment developed by High/Scope, completed by a team at each

participating elementary school, to evaluate the level of support schools provide to children and families. In all cases, the area rated the lowest was that of transition, in particular the lack of communication between early childhood programs and elementary schools. While each community designed strategies differently based on its resources and needs, common approaches to improving communication and connections between early childhood programs and the elementary school included exchange visits to preschools and kindergarten for preschool and kindergarten teachers to learn more about programs, curricula, and children; procedures to obtain records and share information about individual children; outreach to engage families through special events, classroom visits, and home visits before school begins; and distribution of information such as brochures and videos.

Dr. Patricia Clark of Ball State University’s Teacher College, a member of the state team, compiled a report for the Indiana DOE on the impact of the initiative (based on Ready Schools Assessments and community-level data). Responses from teachers, administrators, and families showed improvement in children’s transitions to kindergarten, increased family involvement in schools, and a greater sense of community. Future plans include site visits to the Ready Schools communities to support implementation, expanding web-based information through DOE to assist school districts, and holding statewide meetings with participants from Ready School communities.

Second, in order to improve children’s transitions throughout the early learning system, the Committee on Transition Benchmarks examined the Indiana Foundations for Young Children, which stands as the “foundations to the standards,” the heart of the state’s efforts to promote quality early childhood experiences. The Foundations, based on the latest national research and findings for each content area, were designed to assist all who work with young children by outlining instructional strategies for the various domains from a developmentally appropriate perspective. (See: www.doe.state.in.us/primetime/pdf/foundations/indiana_foundations.pdf). The Foundations were revised as of August 2006 to include new birth through three guidelines. The Indiana DOE Family and Social Services Administration will be promoting the early learning guidelines by updating the Foundations’ training DVD and conducting a train-the-trainer event.

Third, the state launched a voluntary quality rating system through the Indiana Family and Social Services

Administration (FSSA). The rollout of *Paths to Quality* (PTQ) for home- and center-based childcare facilities began in two regions in 2007; nine regions were added during 2008 to complete the system by January 2009. The PTQ standards for childcare homes and centers are similar, but are rated accordingly to the type of license they hold:

- **Level 1:** Meet minimum health and safety standards and develop and implement basic health and safety policies and procedures.
- **Level 2:** Provide a nurturing environment that contains a variety of age appropriate learning materials, provide pertinent information to families about their child, provide for children's language and literacy skill development, and promote staff development and training.
- **Level 3:** Caregivers/teaching staff must have either a CDA or an early childhood degree or equivalent degree; centers or homes will have a planned curriculum that addresses the stages of child development; facilitate family and assistant input into the program; and actively engage in program evaluation and have an action plan for improvement.
- **Level 4:** Meet the highest standards for high quality early care and education and assist other programs in quality improvement through volunteer mentoring; achieve and maintain accreditation by a nationally recognized accrediting body.

In addition, PTQ provides mentoring and monetary incentives in addition to rating programs to help all programs including childcare improve in the quality of education and care.

Finally, the state expanded full-day kindergarten: most school districts received state grants to pay for full-day kindergarten for the 2007-08 school year. The legislature passed a measure directing \$33.5 million to full-day kindergarten grants for the 2007-08 school year and another \$58.5 million for 2008-09.

Missouri

Over the grant period, Missouri focused its attention on three strategies to improve the quality and coherence of its early learning system: 1) expanding children's and families' access to quality early education that is aligned with K-12 education; 2) developing Quality Program Standards for State Board of Education approval that support the pre-existing framework and address multiple elements, such as assessments, personnel development, curriculum and assessment, accreditation, and program evaluation; and 3) designing a training guide for the Early Learning Guidelines.

First, Missouri continued to increase its investment in the 524 Parents as Teachers (PAT) programs, which serves more than 110,000 families through the state's school districts. The State Board of Education has a long-standing commitment to early childhood education, recommending high-quality educational services be made available to every family and preschooler in Missouri. The board recommendation led to the landmark legislation, the *Early Childhood Development Act*, authorizing the administration of a program of services for children below kindergarten entry and their families.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has issued stringent guidelines for all aspects of the PAT program, including child screenings, parent education and curricula, resource networks, requirements for parent educator training, and evaluation (using parent questionnaires, assessing degree of participation, evaluation from coordinating committees). The PAT guidelines were revised and presented to the State Board of Education as a part of the rule making process in January 2008. The changes reflect the additional services to be provided based on the additional funding over the last three years (e.g., addition of screening instrument).

Offering evidence of the PAT program's costs and benefits, policymakers took note of a 2006 study of 7,710 Missouri children who participated in prekindergarten* and Parents as Teachers. Researchers investigated

*Prekindergarten included First Steps, Early Childhood Special Education, Early Head Start, Head Start, public preschool, private preschool, center-based child care, child care in own home, child care in other private home or remained at home with parent.

the impact of early education services on children's readiness for school and performance on state assessments at the early elementary years, comparing both poverty and non-poverty children who received PAT and/or preschool. The researchers found that for poor children, high-intensity PAT and preschool reduced the achievement gap at kindergarten and third grade: 82 percent of poor children who participated in these programs were ready for school, compared with 81 percent of more affluent children with no preschool or PAT experience. Key findings included:

- Parents in the PAT program read more frequently to their young children and were more likely to enroll their children in preschool, both of which were positively linked to school readiness and later school achievement. Children who received both high-intensity PAT and preschool performed comparably with more affluent children without preschool or PAT.
- At third grade, 88 percent of poor children with high-intensity PAT and preschool reached a benchmark level of performance on the Missouri Assessment Program Communication Arts test, compared to 77 percent of poor children who did not participate in these programs. (The report can be found online at www.parentsasteachers.org/attf/cf/%7B00812ECA-A71B-4C2C-8FF3-8F16A5742EEA%7D/Executive%20Summary%20of%20Kind.%20Rea_singlepgs.pdf.)

Second, Missouri convened the Early Childhood Task Force to complete a two-year process of developing quality program standards, working closely with a broad group of private providers and stakeholders. The result was the Quality Program Standards for Universal Preschool, which was approved by the State Board of Education in 2007. The Standards address elements such as assessments, personnel development, curriculum and assessment, accreditation, and program evaluation. The Standards are online at dese.mo.gov/divimprove/fedprog/earlychild/documents/EarlyChildhoodStandards.pdf.

The program standards are now before the Governor's Coordinating Board for Early Childhood (CBEC), which in 2008 convened the Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education (Pre-K Panel). Members of the Early Childhood Task Force have joined the Governor's Board to craft overarching recommendations expanding prekindergarten programs and ensuring young children have access to high-quality early learning experiences.

Considerations before the panel include focusing on children identified as being at risk, improving the quality of all preschool programs, structuring oversight to ensure that all children experience early learning environments associated with positive child outcomes, and implementation of a systemic process for tracking program and child specific outcomes.

The draft recommendations are online at: www.mocrrn.org/PDFs/090808%20meeting/Draft%20%20Emergent%20Recommendations%20_%20PreK%20Panel%20_%20September%2008.pdf.

Nebraska

Nebraska's state team accomplished a number of its grant objectives in 2007, including 1) establishing core competencies for early education professionals, 2) providing state training on the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines, 3) expanding the Early Childhood Grant Program to increase availability of collaborative, community-based prekindergarten for all 3- and 4-year olds, 4) designing a system to monitor program quality, and 5) cultivating best care and instructional practices across the birth through grade three years.

Nebraska revised the core competencies for early education professionals based on the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Standards and the Nebraska Early Learning guidelines, both of which reflect the research on what constitutes quality teaching and what makes learning meaningful for children as they grow and develop. The Core Competencies were reviewed by a team of 24 Nebraska early childhood education professionals, including staff from child care centers and family child care homes, Head Start providers, directors and administrators, higher education representatives, early childhood special education professionals, and state agency representatives. From February through April 2007, the Core Competencies leadership team held focus groups across the state to gather even broader input into the proposed competencies. The revised *Core Competencies for Early Education Professionals* were adopted informally in June 2007 as "working" guidance for field-test purposes. They are online at ectc.nde.ne.gov/projects_opp/core_comp/index.htm.

According to the Nebraska state team, the completion of the Core Competencies was a major advance in defining "what all adults who work with children need to know, understand, and be able to do to sup-

port children’s development and school readiness.” The state followed by developing training modules on the competencies; implementing a broad dissemination plan in close collaboration with the Early Childhood Training Center, Early Childhood Professional Development Partnerships and Regional Training Coalitions; and conducting “train the trainer” sessions to promote high-quality, appropriate practices and professionalism in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and elementary classrooms.

Second, Nebraska succeeded in expanding programs for three- and four-year olds so the population served represents the community overall instead of targeting only high-need children for categorical programs. The state team completed its analysis of the Early Childhood Program Report and calculated state aid requirements that would increase the number of funded early childhood classrooms by 20 to 40 for 2007-08. The Nebraska Department of Education issued a request for proposals for new early childhood grants and conducted workshops to provide the information necessary for school staff and community partners to write proposals for new or expanded programs. Twenty-one new or expansion grant proposals were approved and funded for additional preschool classrooms to be operational in the fall of 2007.

Third, Nebraska Early Childhood Training Center and the Early Childhood Professional Development Partnerships/Regional Training Coordinators completed trainings for the Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) in each of the state’s 10 professional development regions (the ELG brochure is online at www.nde.state.ne.us/ech/ELGuidelines/index.htm). The Coordinators provided six-hour training sessions for each of the seven ELG domains. An additional full series of six hour trainings, approved as a three-hour equivalency for each childhood paraprofessionals employed by school districts, was offered in each region in 2008.

Fourth, Nebraska studied design elements for a quality rating system (QRS)—renamed as the Quality Recognition System—with consideration of what structures were in place to help programs meet the quality criteria at the forefront of discussions. In general, quality rating systems are used to define the optimal conditions for early care and education and for leveraging improvements to higher levels of competencies.

The state team examined rating systems in other states, cross-walked licensing and accreditation requirements for programs, identified current technical

assistance resources, and provided input on criteria for program quality. Their recommendations formed the basis of a “pilot” conducted by Midwest Early Childhood Research Consortium (MECRC), which consists of teams from higher education in the states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. For each of the participating states, the MECRC piloted the criteria for rating program quality in centers and family child care homes in both rural and urban areas of Nebraska. Participating early childhood centers and homes submitted paperwork regarding quality indicators such as teacher education, management, and professional training. Researchers also conducted classroom and home observations using a range of measures and conducted focus groups with providers and other stakeholders over a two-year period. The state team will receive the final report on the QRS Pilot Evaluation in 2009.

After further study by groups looking at particular aspects of the state’s infrastructure for the Early Childhood System in Nebraska, the state team decided to modify its plan for launching a system to monitor early education program quality. Based on its extensive analysis of local needs and taking stock of the existing infrastructure for supporting early childhood educators, Nebraska drew up a strategic plan to concentrate on establishing the necessary professional development infrastructure. The team crafted a plan that maps out a set of incremental steps through 2010 to identify funding avenues for professional development, redesign their purposes and incentive structures to link training and performance with core competencies, and establish the foundation essential for improving the quality of early learning environments.

Finally, to connect early education and the primary grades, the state departments of education and health and human services, along with several other partners, sponsored a “Birth through Grade 3: Research to Practice Conference” series. This two-part research conference was designed to provide up-to-date research related to early childhood development and best practices for programs serving young children and their families across the age spectrum. The first conference focused on the needs of children birth to age five and their families; the second on children three years of age through third grade and their families. The conferences provided information on children’s overall development, the need to ensure continuity of education and services, collaborative relationships, and implementation of practices based on the science of child development and learning.



Working with Governor Tim Kaine’s office, the Virginia State Board of Education collaborated with key agencies and constituencies to address the need for a high-quality early education workforce. As a result, Virginia brought together a working committee to outline a set of strategies that would improve the quality of early learning environments. First, the state tackled the issue of ensuring that teacher competencies for the PK–3 and PK–6 endorsements were aligned with foundational documents for establishing teacher competencies (including *Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive Standards for Four-Year Olds* and the recently produced document from the state’s Early Childhood Education’s Alignment Project, *Milestones of Child Development and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*).

The committee added core competencies that reflected research on quality adult/child interactions and proposed an “add on” endorsement to an elementary teacher’s license in the area of Early Childhood Education. The committee’s recommendations included requirements for teachers to provide for the unique social and educational needs of young children and to understand how student-teacher interactions and relationships serve as the foundation for learning in the early grades. Following review and approval by the Advisory Board on Teacher Education and Licensure, the proposed changes were adopted by the Virginia State Board of Education on March 29, 2007. Virginia’s Teacher Licensure Regulations are available online at www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Compliance/TeacherED/nulicvr.pdf.

As its second priority, Virginia began drafting the curriculum rubric that would align with the *Foundation Blocks*, soliciting input from stakeholder groups throughout the process. As the committee began working on the rubric, the grant team found it essential to take a step back to add several important elements to the *Foundation’s* blocks: the physical/motor and personal/social domains. The revised *Foundation Blocks* were submitted to the State Board of Education on February 28, 2007. The Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Social Services disseminated the *Foundation Blocks* to public and private programs serving four-year-olds in Virginia; the document is available online at www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf.

Work on the *Curriculum Review Rubric and Planning Tool* resumed and was subsequently piloted in several Virginia Preschool Initiative programs to help teachers create rich, responsive learning environments for young children. The curriculum review rubric and planning tool was distributed to all Virginia Preschool Initiative Programs and is available online at www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/preschool_rubric.pdf.

Subsequently, the grant team convened stakeholders from two- and four-year institutions regarding how to advance a coordinated system of earning a degree toward teacher licensure. The state succeeded in facilitating articulation agreements between teacher training institutions in order to create a path for early childhood professionals to have the knowledge and skills to create high-quality learning environments for all young children.

The NASBE grant team worked with Virginia’s community college system to create vehicles to disseminate information regarding these opportunities to pursue career opportunities in early childhood education. A website and companion brochure were created to communicate with prospective early educators about the transfer requirements and opportunities between community college early childhood associate degree programs and four-year-colleges and universities that partner with these programs. The brochure, *Early Childhood Transfer Programs: Where Opportunity Begins*, can be downloaded at myfuture.vccs.edu/Portals/0/ContentAreas/Transfer/k12-brochure-page1n2.pdf.

As a by-product of these collaborative efforts, a number of Virginia’s community colleges have adopted a common early childhood curriculum for an associate in applied science (AAS) degree in early childhood education. The statewide curriculum for early childhood can be found at myfuture.vccs.edu/Portals/0/ContentAreas/AcademicServices/Early_Childhood_System-Wide_Curriculum_April_2008.pdf.

Finally, Virginia adopted a Quality Rating and Improvement System that is aligned with the revised teacher licensure regulations. The system also requires measures to assess classroom interactions, learning environments, instructional practices, and staff qualifications. More information about “The Star Quality Initiative: Virginia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System” is online at smartbeginnings.nonprofitoffice.com/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={56DE82A5-9F30-4390-B6CD-4C90C8D2D282}.

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