



AASA Early Learning Cohort

# Early Childhood & Learning Toolkit

**AASA**<sup>®</sup>

THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION





# **AASA Early Learning Cohort Early Childhood and Learning Toolkit**

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Extended Resources can be found at  
[www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx)

# About the AASA Early Learning Cohort Early Childhood and Learning Toolkit



Every child has a right to his fifth year of life, his fourth year, his third year.  
He has a right to live each year with joy and self-fulfillment.  
No one should ever claim the power to make a  
child mortgage his today for the sake of tomorrow.

- Jimmy Hymes, NAEYC (2009, p.334)

Early Childhood Matters Most! This is the vision statement for the AASA Early Learning Cohort, a group of professionals committed to establishing an organic ecosystem of individuals and organizations committed to making a positive difference for young children everywhere. Since 2017, this group of Superintendents, Central Office Administrators, Building Principals, Teachers, and Educational Leaders from around the United States have assembled with one single goal in mind: improve the way schools understand and interact with young children and their families.

Through on-site visits, collaborative meetings, virtual webinars, the Early Learning Cohort (EL Cohort) this collection of dedicated professionals has assembled the best research based strategies to support school systems nationwide in their work with young children and their families, to ensure all children matter and that each learning circumstance is committed to making a difference in the lives of our young children. Using the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) definition of 'early childhood' as the age range of birth through age eight, the EL Cohort worked to redefine public school systems' reach from K-12 to P-20. Early childhood education means so much more than offering students, children, toddlers, babies and their families the status quo. Using Head Start, the first comprehensive early learning program of its kind in the U.S., as a bellwether for understanding comprehensive services in early childhood programs, the EL Cohort identified seven strategies to support school systems across the country, regardless of their current commitment to early learning. The ideas, strategies, and actionable items from this toolkit will allow a Superintendent the ability to lead their district in early childhood education because all you need for success lies at your fingertips within the pages of this specially designed toolkit.

Respected and esteemed colleagues and partners from outside the world of the AASA came together to offer the readers of this resource the best of the best in actionable practices determined to make a difference in the lives of the nation's 50 million public school children and their families. The AASA created this resource to be the "go-to source" for leaders to enact meaningful change to support and prepare their districts for success in early childhood education, which is the cornerstone on which all other success is built, thus making Early Childhood Matter Most!

## How To Use This Resource

Using the toolkit as a gateway to exploring and defining ways to improve your district or organization's practices for children from birth through age eight is imperative to the success for all students. The AASA Early Learning Cohort and its thought partners throughout the course of the work to design this resource have outlined seven essential strategies for any Superintendent to learn about, implement and monitor to assist any district or organization in making positive differences for young children.

A baseline of knowledge must be understood; therefore taking the time to review the research that has been meticulously described is a great first step. Understanding district-wide early learning assessments like the ELPAT © that examine the quality of programs that are in place and then taking action steps or taking time to strategically think of how to review the results from these tools can be a great starting point. Next, using the stories from leading districts that the AASA has highlighted from three school districts from around the nation, West Valley Schools in Yakima, Washington, Wichita Falls, Texas, and Ann Arbor, Michigan will allow the reader to examine practices that have been well established and allow for children and families to be successful. Understanding how Equity and ECE are irrevocably linked is another way to foster a deeper appreciation for what work lies ahead if one is to implement a successful program. Once there is a firm base established, then familiarizing oneself with the common terms and definitions that offer one a shared sense of vocabulary where being able to speak to other agencies or organizations will aid in building bridges that connect resources, programs, and ideas.

Seven strategies are offered that are backed by research and resources designed to offer Leaders a blueprint for success. Each one of these strategies is tied directly to resources that were shared from leading national organizations that are committed to and have demonstrated success for young children. Each strategy has as specific and unique symbol assigned to it and therefore as you review the resource section some of these resources will have multiple symbols that can be tied directly to one of the seven identified strategies, thus making it very easy to locate these resources to learn more about, exploit and use to benefit your district or organization. Please see the key for the Strategy Symbols below:

-  Strategy #1 - Promote Equity from the Start
-  Strategy #2 - Improve Alignment and Transitions
-  Strategy #3 - Establish Partnerships with ECE Community
-  Strategy #4 - Engage Families and Communities Early
-  Strategy #5 - Support Strong Executive Function and Social Emotional Learning
-  Strategy #6 - Provide Ongoing Professional Development for Early Educators
-  Strategy #7 - Self-Assessment Tools for ECE



## What is ECE?

Early childhood education or ECE is the field of development of children that is defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as birth through age eight. Recently, the NAEYC has released a very important resource called *Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 4th Edition* that dedicates the entire resource to discuss the development of a baby to a child who is eight in many distinct and different ways. By demonstrating what is developmentally appropriate practice at the various developmental stages of a child it offers insights and practices into what is considered to be the right practices and teaching and learning strategies to be applied at the best possible time at the best possible moment to accurately and precisely allow a child to become the best possible version of themselves.

“A great many school administrators (elementary principals, superintendents, district staff) lack a background in early childhood education and their limited knowledge of young children’s development and learning means they are not always aware of what is and is not good practice with children at that age” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p. 5). Due to this lack of knowledge, it is the intent of this toolkit to become an aide in the search of what makes early childhood matter most for these professionals.

The AASA has released the work of *The Learning 2025: National Commission on Student-Centered, Equity Focused Education* highlights on two key areas that impact early childhood education: Access to Early Learning and Whole Learner Focus. Having a working knowledge of early childhood education is an imperative that each current and future Superintendent **MUST** demonstrate to be successful in the districts and communities they lead. A redefinition of understanding that schools in education are P-20 institutions and not just K-12 school districts follows the works of many partner organizations like the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and Education Development Center and the National P-3 Center. Friends at the Office of Head Start (OHS) are considered the leaders in the field of early childhood education and in December of 2019, the AASA entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to build sustainable partnership to continue to exploring deep and lasting bonds between the AASA and OHS.



*Learning 2025: National Commission Report*

In short, ECE is the catalyst that drives success in any P-20 institution by setting a solid foundation on which all future academic, social, emotional, physiological, and bodily-kinesthetic success is built upon. A knowledgeable leader must embrace the principles of ECE and learn to apply them in the mission, vision, and strategic plan development of a P-20 institution.

## ECE and Equity



All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity and diversity.

- NAEYC Position Statement on Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education (NAEYC, 2019)

Historically, funding has been an area that causes inequity. “Since 2003, researchers in 25 states and the District of Columbia have conducted 41 “adequacy” studies that quantify the resources and conditions that students need to succeed in school” (Dingerson, 2018 p. 3). Funding discrepancies are preventing public schools from allowing them to address the needs of early childhood education and early learning. “Because schools depend on state funding for about half of their revenue, they must drastically cut spending when states provide less, especially when local districts cannot cover the gap” (Partelow, Shapiro, McDaniels, & Brown, 2018 p.1).

As Morgan and Amerikaner (2018) explored further the state of Michigan, it is considered the fourth most regressive in their funding approaches to students of color or low socio-economic means. Michigan is last in showing the difference in state revenues per student between districts serving the most and fewest students in poverty. Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland and Yoshikawa (2017) have stated there are now strong findings that basic skills development, school readiness, and lifelong learning trajectories are tied to early learning opportunities. “The ways in which dollars are spent matter too, and making sure that students have equitable access to other resources, such as high-quality rigorous curricula, effective teaching, and safe and supportive learning environments, is just as important for fulfilling our commitment to achieve education equity for students from low-income families and students of color” (Morgan and Amerikaner, 2018, p. 11).

The Washington Center for Equitable Growth released an article in March 2016, authored by Lafortune, Rothstein, and Whitmore-Schanzenbach where they drew upon the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP student-level data to examine whether or not reforms affected the relative achievement of students in high and low income school districts. Their concluding estimates demonstrated that additional funds distributed through finance reforms are more productive than funds targeted to class size reduction. It is noted that when these reforms are implemented, the result is increased funding in low-income districts. “To make substantial progress on closing overall achievement gaps, policies to address disparities in outcomes within school districts are still needed” (Lafortune, Rothstein, and Whitmore Schanzenbach, 2016, p. 6).

Weiland (2018) offered seven specific takeaways on how to pivot and improve children’s experiences in early childhood education programs. She reviewed the Tennessee study and Brookings consensus statement and expressed knowledge over 70 reasonably well-conducted trials since the 1960s in how to improve either current programming or make changes to existing ones. These seven takeaways are: public preschool better prepares children for Kindergarten; some public preschool programs work better than others – most studies have found that preschool non-attenders partially or fully catch up to attenders on test scores in early elementary school; regardless of the medium-term pattern, studies that have followed preschool attenders into adulthood have found benefits on outcomes such as school attainment and earnings; we do not know if today’s preschool programs will reap the same benefits as older programs; quality is mixed; and there is growing evidence that what happens after preschool matters for whether the preschool boost lasts into elementary school (Weiland, 2018). She further recommends that, “Policies should fund, incentivize, and/or require curricula and training that match the science of early learning” (Weiland, p. 190). She does share that public preschool programs have a track record in responding to guidance, since 2003, the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) has provided the “floor” not the “ceiling” with quality benchmarks.

“Over the last couple of decades, integration took hold across the country in smaller districts whose student bodies have been predominantly white” (Rabinowitz, Emamdjomeh, and Meckler, 2019). These authors referenced the Census Bureau and shared that in 2020, there are more children of color in the United States than white children. They go on to state that a district is considered to be diverse when no one race makes up more than 75 percent of the total population of the students that attend that school district. They go on to report that in 1995, 45 percent of the districts in the nation were considered diverse. By 2017, this number had risen to 66 percent. It is imperative that the size, setting, location, and demographics of each participating district in this research are clearly defined and recorded.

## Research About the Impact of ECE

Today’s schools are inundated with many demands. It isn’t a wonder that due to them being stretched beyond repair that they just don’t snap. Many schools are not equipped to handle the needs of their youngest learners, let alone the children who are not yet their students. “Investment in early childhood education for disadvantaged children from birth to age 5 helps reduce the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall social costs” (Heckman, 2011, p. 32). Children early in their lives face many hardships including, but not limited to poverty and ongoing opportunity gaps (D. Jacobson, 2019). Due to this, schools have begun to take matters into their own hands in attempting to address opportunity gaps and identifying ways to support these young learners and their families. This type of intervention is becoming more and more prevalent.

Accountability systems are now set in motion across the nation at unprecedented levels. Since *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1984, our country’s school systems have had to address an intense focus on accountability and transparency. Each administrative change appears to bring about a new set of expectations and circumstances. “In the No Child Left Behind era, accountability and school improvement systems were clearly designed to apply to only to third grade and up” (Regenstein, 2019 p. 9). “Fourteen states require that struggling readers be held back, but some state policies are shifting toward a preventative, intervention-based approach in which retention is optional” (Keily, Evans, & Atchison, 2019, p. 4). There is a mismatch with those placed in building leadership positions, especially those tasked with leading early childhood education. The

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) administered a survey to its membership asking whether they felt comfortable with their knowledge of child development for children birth-to-eight range. Results from the survey indicated that only 20% admitted being confident in their knowledge as shared by Regenstein (2019). This is alarming and as this study investigates how confident do Superintendents feel about their knowledge base in early childhood education?

Budgetary pressure is yet another significant factor that affects outcomes often associated with early childhood education. This is despite research (Regenstein, 2019; Bartik, 2011) that demonstrates the “Return on Investment” for money spent on Early Childhood Programs from a three to one and up to a sixteen to one ratio. “But as Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman has explained, investment in young children is most likely to be effective if it is made earlier” (Regenstein, 2019, p. 11). Heckman himself shares how educational equity is often seen as a social movement, but in all actuality, it is an economic investment (Heckman, 2011). However, with a great emphasis placed on getting students ready to read by third grade there is often state legislative pressure and local Board of Education pressure to have scores that are above the state of national average in third grade reading, thus affecting funding and budgets for early childhood education. Birth through three-year-old services are typically the most expensive to run, but birth-to-three services are actually the best opportunity to make the largest impact, because they lay the foundation for all that follows (Regenstein, 2019).

“In many communities, elementary schools, early childhood centers, and community organizations are forming partnerships to focus on the needs of young children and their families” (D. Jacobson, 2019). Creative solutions are being implemented and tried out to thwart the hardships experienced by children. The Buffett Early Childhood Institute, partnered with the University of Nebraska, is attempting to do coalition building amongst various schools and districts within the greater Omaha area. Their goal is to increase opportunities for young children to learn and eliminate income and race-based achievement gaps by the end of third grade. By leveraging their relationships with these local providers and service minded organizations they are attempting to recoup some of their time spent monitoring others. As stated in the Foresight Law and Policy Guide, *Why The K-12 World Hasn’t Embraced Early Learning* (Regenstein, 2019, p. 3) “The K-12 world has fundamentally underappreciated how the early years shape long-term educational outcomes.”

Even the federal government is getting involved. In 2019, the Office of Head Start funded the Collaboration Demonstration Project. Thirteen school systems and their Head Start feeder programs participated for one year, aiming to strengthen their relationships and learn from each other. The results were astounding. School systems began increasing their focus on comprehensive services, introducing families to the schools much earlier than the typical summer transition events and shared resources, like professional development and coordinated enrollment systems with Head Start. Two states responded to these outcomes by funding this work at the state level, deepening the impact of this work at a local level. More information about the Collaboration Demonstration Project can be found [here](#).

“When allocating resources for Pre-K learning, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs as one of the most important and effective policies available to improve population health” (City Health and NIEER, p. 4). This report shared by City Health and NIEER continued to share that the CDC recognizes the longer-term benefits of high quality ECE, such as reductions in obesity, child abuse and neglect, youth violence, teen birth rates, and emergency room visits. They also shared that access to high quality programs is only evident in 24 of the 40 largest U.S. cities offering Pre-K programs, such as Head Start, that reach 30% of the 4-year-old population with only 58% of the largest U.S. cities meeting quality benchmarks for Pre-K class size. (City Health and NIEER, p. 12). “Few cities ensure that children are receiving critical health screenings. Less than a quarter of cities ensure that children receive vision, hearing, health, and developmental screenings and referrals,” City Health and NIEER, p. 13). Increased funding and support for high quality preschool programs would make substantial differences.

Many states have had long standing success with Pre-K programs. One such state is Georgia. Georgia offers universal preschool by partnering with early learning programs, like Head Start and child care centers, and funding school systems to create a comprehensive system of high quality early learning for all children throughout the state. Even with this vast experience, leaders in this program are still learning how to balance resources within the program with balancing quality improvement efforts, while expanding preschool access to more children (L. Jacobson, 2019). Despite it being offered to every child, some students attended preschool and others did not. Students enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) who did attend preschool outperformed students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch who did not attend preschool. However, students who attended preschool who were not eligible for reduced-price lunch (FRL) did not score higher than those students who did not attend the universal four-year-old program (L. Jacobson, 2019). These results emphasize the importance of early learning for low-income students. Going back to the NIEER State Preschool Yearbook, Georgia Pre-K meets eight out of the ten benchmarks for quality and serves a total of 61% of the eligible students (L. Jacobson, 2019). These outcomes are impressive but still fall short of meeting all children’s needs, which has created long waiting lists in urban areas for the program. Just recently on October 5, 2020, the state of Michigan was one of four states awarded the prestigious NIEER credential for the state sponsored four-year-old program, Great Start. Michigan along with Rhode Island, Mississippi, and Alabama met all ten of the quality standards for pre-kindergarten set forth by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). The 10 Standards Include:

- Comprehensive, aligned, supported, and culturally sensitive early learning and development standards
- Curriculum supports
- Requirement of a bachelor’s degree for staff
- Teacher specialized training
- Assistant teacher degree
- 16 hours of staff professional development per year
- A maximum class size of 18
- A staff-to-child ratio of 1:8 for four-year-old program
- Vision, hearing, and health screenings
- A consistent quality monitoring system of structured classroom observations and use of data for program improvement

Schumaccher, Bernhard, Wallen, Reidt-Parker, and Kohler (2019) of The Ounce of Prevention Fund (now called The Early Years) shared in their research report highlighting federally funded Early Head Start (EHS) in 2014, that EHS funding had only provided for 4% of age-eligible slots for children birth through age three, meanwhile the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) only reached 15%. Therefore, Congress acted to allocate more funds to expand high quality experiences for infants and toddlers in 2014. One state highlighted in the report was Georgia, along with six other states (Alabama, District of Columbia, Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Washington). Schumacher et al. (2019) found that state policymakers see the positive impact of implementing these partnership programs that benefit children and families who are of low-socio-economic status. The authors drew their conclusions from interviews with the state leaders. These states were all found to support continuity of care without interruptions for infants and toddlers in working families earning low incomes, they raised the bar for what quality infant and toddler child care could and should be, and they built a higher education pathway for infant and toddler workforce. Schumacher et al. (2019) concluded that the increase in funding for these states provided a blueprint for expanding high-quality infant and toddler care if they use the examples that these seven states initiated from 2015-2020.

## Key ECE Implementation Insights from Leading Districts

Three public school districts were highlighted for their exemplary work in early childhood education with case studies written about promising practices that are research based, proven, and effective to make differences for their students and families. Please see the links below to learn more about these amazing leaders and their staffs that are making positive differences for their students and families every day.

### **Ann Arbor Public Schools, MI:**

[https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership\\_Development/Early\\_Childhood\\_Learning/EL-CaseStudyAnnArbor.pdf](https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership_Development/Early_Childhood_Learning/EL-CaseStudyAnnArbor.pdf)

### **West Valley School District #208, WA:**

[https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership\\_Development/Early\\_Childhood\\_Learning/EL-CaseStudyWestValley.pdf](https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership_Development/Early_Childhood_Learning/EL-CaseStudyWestValley.pdf)

### **Wichita Falls, TX:**

[https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership\\_Development/Early\\_Childhood\\_Learning/EL-CaseStudyWFISD.pdf](https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Leadership_Development/Early_Childhood_Learning/EL-CaseStudyWFISD.pdf)

# Key Terms and Definitions

**Community Leadership** - Individuals, organizations, and agencies that identify ways to work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders and partners for the betterment of the entire community.

**Coordinated Enrollment** - Attempts made by individuals, organizations, and agencies to work toward a systemic approach to ensure that children are afforded the best possible education in an early learning setting as possible. They work to deliberately deemphasize territorialism when recruiting children for a specific program or opportunity.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice** - A framework of principles and guidelines for practice that promotes young children's optimal learning and development. DAP is a way of framing a teacher's intentional decision making. It begins with three core considerations (1) what is known about general processes of child development and learning; (2) what is known about the child as an individual who is a member of a particular family and community; and (3) what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which the learning occurs. (NAEYC, 2021)

**Early Childhood Education** - A term defined using the developmental definition of birth through approximately age 8, regardless of programmatic, regulatory, funding, or delivery sectors or mechanisms. (NAEYC, 2021)

**Early Learning Settings** - These include programs serving children from birth through age 8. Setting refers to the locations in which early childhood education takes place - child care centers, family child care programs, elementary schools, religious-based center, and many others. (NAEYC, 2021)

**Equity** - The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, ability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. In practice, equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in a timely fashion so they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential. (NAEYC, 2021)

**Equitable Access** - Providing students, children, and families what they need, when they need it, to help eliminate barriers to transition (see transition defined below) and overcome obstacles that may include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, gender, or other identifying factor that may cause them hardship. It is the elimination of these barriers and allowing all the access to become who they can, when they can.

**Executive Function** - The network of abilities that allow for children to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behavior as they pursue goals. These include attention, working memory, self-regulation, reasoning, problem solving, and approaches to learning. (NAEYC, 2021)

**Head Start** - Head Start is a program administered by the United States Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children and families. Head Start (ages 3-5) and Early Head Start (birth-3, including pregnant women) programs promote children's development through services that support early learning, health and family wellbeing.

**High Quality** - This subjective word is used often to describe programs, organizations, or agencies that meet a certain criteria of achievement in their preparedness when creating early childhood programs. With the use of some of the examples of systemic district/organization frameworks or tools as described in this toolkit, leaders can reach and achieve high quality as defined by these resources for their children under their care and supervision.

**Learning 2025 National Commission Report** - Published on April 8, 2021 by the AASA, this national commission report brought together leaders in education from around the nation to redesign the public school system experience by 2025.

**Pre-K through 3 continuum** - Many examples of systemic alignment exist throughout this toolkit. From the National P-3 Center, EDC First Ten or the example used from the NAEYC in Appendix D involving Boston Public Schools.

**Return on Investment** - Return-on-Investment analysis is a tool for improving resource efficiency—which is to say, improving the impact of your limited resources. Widely used in the business world, it compares the expected gains (returns) per unit of cost (investment) of a variety of potential actions. In recent years, there has been growing interest in adapting this approach to education—sometimes called educational productivity, academic-ROI, or K-12 ROI. (Frank and Hovey, 2014 p.1).

**School Readiness** - The educational preparedness for children who enter any transition that may have a skill set that encompasses the whole child including physiological, cognitive, bodily-kinesthetic, emotional, academic, and social skills and determines are they ready for whatever starting line that they may have awaiting them.

**Shared Professional Development** - Collaborative efforts made between programs, organizations, and agencies to coordinate time spent learning together, that aides all participants toward gaining knowledge about the topic that can be used mutually and with reciprocity for the betterment of all involved in a shared sense of community and ownership.

**Transitions** - When a child moves from one program, organization, agency, classroom, grade level or non educational environment to an educational environment and can do so with success that is defined with eagerness, anticipation, curiosity, and a spirit of adventure. It is any program, organization or agency's goal to achieve fluid and supportive movement not just for the student but for the family as well.



# Key Action Strategies



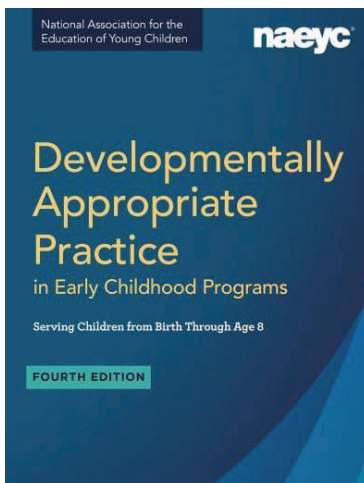


## Key Action Strategy #1 - Promote Equity from the Start

Equity is a complex issue but it is critical for creating environments where all students and families thrive. Three resources that support enhanced equity for districts are highlighted below.

On Dec. 13, 2021, the National Association for the Education of Young Children released their 4th Edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in Early Childhood Programs. This is a MUST-HAVE for any educational leader who is serious about transforming their program, organization, or agency into a program that is equity-driven and focused. This resource can be found here: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/dap-fourth-edition>

DAP is specifically mentioned in this key strategy because it clearly defines how practitioners in the field can implement developmentally appropriate practices and illustrates why equity-driven practices are important to researchers and educational leaders, making Early Childhood Matter Most!



As shared in the NAEYC edition (NAEYC, 2021, p. 19), “Without a strong focus on equity (within and beyond the early childhood program setting), it is impossible to implement developmentally appropriate practice - to help each and every child achieve their full potential.” (NAEYC, 2021, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, pg. 19) The United States is becoming increasingly more diverse and this resource embraces the premise.

Another resource that is available comes from EDC and can be found here: <https://first10.org/2021/12/14/promoting-educational-and-racial-equity-through-cross-sector-partnerships-for-children-and-families-post-2/>. The Buffett Early Childhood Institute also has the Metro Omaha Birth-through-Third grade pilot project, focused on under-resourced communities, which

is supported by a half-cent levy by two counties to fund a plan that was required by the state legislature to encourage equity throughout the 11-district Metro Omaha region. More resources from the Buffet Early Childhood Institute can be found in the resources section of the online digital version of this toolkit found here: <https://www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx>

An additional resource for promoting equity is First Book, a national non-profit organization working to ensure educational equity by breaking down barriers to quality education for children and youth in underserved communities. The organization connects students, families, teachers and administrators with free and affordable new, high-quality books, educational resources, and basic needs items. The online version of this toolkit includes a description of First Book’s offerings – all to ensure that children have what they need to be successful. For more information visit <https://firstbook.org/>





## Key Action Strategy #2 - Improve Alignment and Transitions

Our youngest learners and their families and educators will feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for the next several years. 2020 was not just disruptive and uncertain, for many, especially in BIPOC and low-income communities, it was disastrous. And for young children, the trauma, uncertainty, and loss they endured will last a lifetime. As decision-makers look forward and plan for the next several school years, supportive and effective transition from early childhood programs into kindergarten and the early grades will be crucial to begin to address these issues. States, school districts, center-based and family child care programs, Head Start programs, and the communities in which they are located, must plan together and thoughtfully connect children's and families' experiences across these years. Families and educators will need more support as they work to meet young children's needs and help them thrive.

To enable this kind of work, policy is needed at the state and local level to strengthen systems that prioritize it. Without leadership, vision, supportive policy, and careful planning, transition work is not the direct responsibility of any one official in school districts or at state departments of education or equivalent agencies. Despite its importance, this means transition is often overlooked or neglected in policy and too often minimized to discrete activities leading up to the start of a new school year. In order to ensure a seamless transition for children, families, and educators, state and local actors must work cooperatively to establish effective and supportive transition policy that recognizes it as a year-long process that includes collaboration across early childhood settings and elementary schools and alignment of what children and families experience and how they experience it, as well as efforts to continually improve the process.

The above statements were taken from a toolkit recently published by Education Counsel and New America. Laura Bornfreund, New America and Danielle Ewen of Education Counsel and other colleagues shared their toolkit on how to best assist districts with alignment and transitions. Here is a resource that was published July 20, 2021 from Education Counsel and New America as a Toolkit for Effective and Supportive Transitions for Children, Families, and Educators in Fall 2021 and Beyond: [https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Toolkit\\_for\\_Effective\\_and\\_Supportive\\_Transitions\\_for\\_Children\\_Families.pdf](https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Toolkit_for_Effective_and_Supportive_Transitions_for_Children_Families.pdf)

### **Ensuring Effective and Supportive Transitions into Kindergarten for Children, Families, and Educators**

When early learning experiences are connected from birth through third grade (B–third), children and their families can more easily transition into pre-K, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades. Improving transitions for children and families requires careful planning, effective policies and practices, and sustainable funding. Educators can establish practices that put families more at ease, but the planning must begin well before the first day of school. On day one, teachers and schools should already have enough information to begin tailoring instruction, strategies, and environments to meet the needs of every student.

Undoubtedly, children and families need activities that engage them early and provide them with information and comfort as they begin the school year. But when enacting policy, state and local decision-makers and administrators must address the systems that support young children's learning and development and establish

conditions that ensure consistent learning environments and experiences across settings and sectors before school, in kindergarten, and beyond.

Educators across PreK–third are key to making this happen. District efforts that bring adults together to align expectations, discipline strategies, curricula, assessments, instructional strategies, family engagement approaches, and learning environments and to share data, jointly plan, and participate in PD may be less visible to children and families but no less significant. In fact, these pieces may be the most critical for creating effective and supportive transitions into pre-K, kindergarten, and each early grade thereafter.

Despite evidence illustrating the importance of intentional kindergarten transition plans, many schools take a haphazard approach to this process. A 2016 study found that, to the extent that kindergarten transition activities take place, they are frequently low-intensity practices such as sending brochures home rather than more effective, high-intensity activities such as arranging for pre-K students to visit a kindergarten classroom or allowing for joint planning time between pre-K and kindergarten teachers. The same study found that schools located in districts serving large numbers of low-income students were less likely to provide kindergarten transition activities compared to wealthier schools, meaning that students and families who might benefit most from transition activities are the least likely to receive them.

Young children and their families need activities that engage them early and provide them with information and comfort as they begin the school year. But such activities are not enough. Decision makers must address the systems that support young children’s development and establish conditions that ensure consistent learning environments and experiences across settings and sectors before school, in kindergarten, and beyond.

Local education agencies and communities play the critical role of implementing state transition policies as well as organizing local partners to ensure that the plans are developed with input from the community, including people from marginalized communities, and are responsive to locally identified needs and priorities.

Education leaders should start by identifying a self-assessment tool and using it to take stock of current transition activities at the state and local levels. This self-assessment process should include listening to families of young children and tailoring investments to address their greatest needs. Next, it’s important to involve a range of stakeholders in the policy design process to help ensure that children and families across the state or district experience a successful transition into kindergarten.

Turning to planning for improvement, any plans related to the transition into kindergarten should identify the policy changes needed to help strengthen not just school programs, but also local community programs. State and local improvement plans should include three buckets for policy action: (1) alignment, coordination, and collaboration between school and community programs; (2) transition planning and direct support, and (3) guidance, evaluation, and resources for school and community programs.

When deciding on strategies to adopt, all relevant team members and stakeholders that are part of the broader system for supporting young children and their families should be in agreement regarding how any proposed plan will be implemented. For that reason, plans should account for the existing capacity and responsibilities of the school district and community partners and consider any funding streams already in place that could be repurposed or expanded to support transitions. For example, Title I (ESSA) funds include support for early childhood education. Districts should ensure that these funds are used to support ongoing transition planning for young children.

Next, it is important to determine a timeline for implementing transition activities. Any transition plan should be nimble enough to respond quickly to new funding opportunities, information revealed from data and evaluation, and other local challenges.

Finally, and possibly the most important step in any transition program is evaluating success to ensure initiatives are working as intended. Transition planning is not “one and done” — rather, it is an ongoing process that takes place each year and is constantly being improved. Behind-the-scenes efforts that matter

Strengthening transitions in a meaningful way will require redirecting investments and potentially some new dollars. Numerous federal funding streams already exist that can be used to support transition activities including funding that may be available through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), new funding for Coronavirus relief, state and local virus relief funds, and more. States and localities can coordinate these different funding streams to meet their goals for supportive and effective transitions.

For more on transition as an important lever during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond visit this [toolkit](#) and [resource](#) page.

In addition to these resources, the Office of Head Start has myriad free resources to support transition from Head Start/early learning programs into kindergarten. Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) require programs to create effective transition programs starting well before a child leaves Head Start to ensure the child, the family and the school are prepared for a smooth transition. The Collaboration Demonstration Project mentioned above focused a great deal of its work on transitions as well.



State and local improvement plans should include  
Three Key Buckets for Policy Action:

- (1) alignment, coordination, and collaboration between school and community programs;
- (2) transition planning and direct support, and
- (3) guidance, evaluation, and resources for school and community programs.



## Key Action Strategy #3 - Establish Partnerships with ECE Community

Three examples that demonstrate key elements of cultivating and sustaining partnerships lie with fellow thought leaders who have been partners with the AASA Early Learning Cohort. The Buffett Early Childhood Institute out of Omaha, Nebraska, the First 10 initiative at Education Development Center (EDC), and the Waterford Research Institute out of Salt Lake City, UT have provided shining examples of what occurs when there are meaningful and well-intended partnerships that cultivate. They all are and have provided models for replicability, scalable actions, and are designed to be inclusive of all community partners.

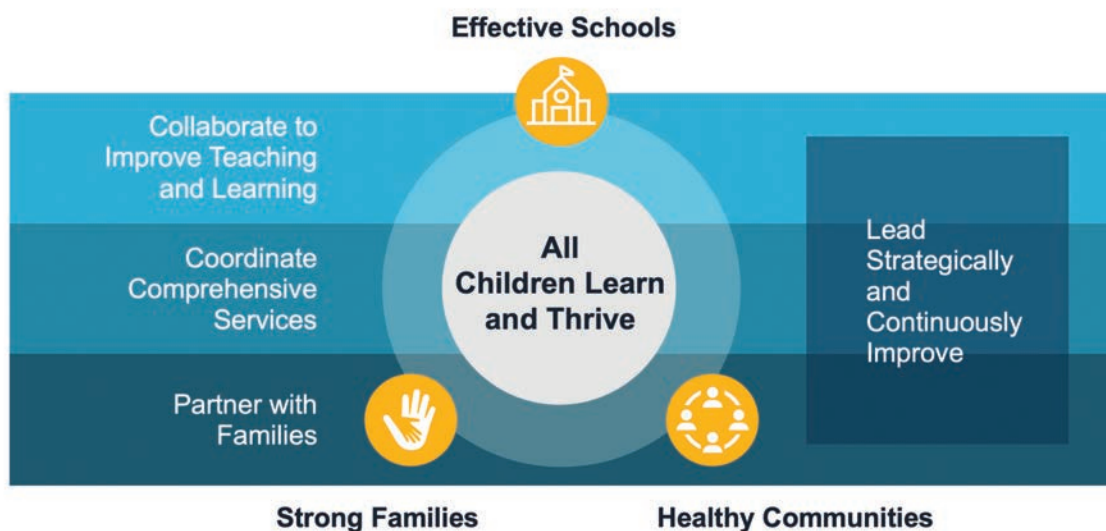
The vision of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute is that they want the state of Nebraska to be the best place to have a baby. Why not make the United States the best country to have a baby? Since 2016, they have worked tirelessly to redefine K-12 systems into P-20 agencies that act as a “hub” where the spokes of their wheel then begin to affect all aspects of the community. When asked how do they determine success, of course they have metrics and data they collect, but they provided a simple answer: When you have a new mother who is pregnant showing up at her local elementary school because she knew there would be things for her to learn and see and do at their Open House, we know success has been reached. What an original and simple, yet highly effective strategy to include all of your community partners when constructing the optimal early childhood program. Here is their website: <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/about-us>

The disjointed patchwork of early childhood and early elementary programs in the United States leaves many children vulnerable and at risk. [Inspired by innovative communities](#), EDC’s [First 10](#) brings together school districts, elementary schools, early childhood programs, and community agencies to build coherent systems of support for young children and their families.

The goal of First 10 is for all children to learn and thrive. This goal encompasses academic and social emotional learning and physical and mental health as priorities. Communities work toward all children learning and thriving by forming First 10 partnerships. First 10 initiatives begin by mapping community assets and then developing and implementing plans that tailor three broad First 10 strategies to address the specific needs of their communities. These strategies are implemented **as a coherent package across the early childhood-elementary school continuum**:

- Collaborate to improve teaching and learning
- Coordinate comprehensive services for children and families
- Partner with families in culturally responsive ways

## The First 10 Theory of Action



**Typical First 10 practices** include providing play and learn groups linked to elementary schools, coordinating connections to health and social services, improving the quality of early childhood programs, coordinating the transition to kindergarten, building family engagement structures, conducting joint pre-K and kindergarten professional development, and improving early grades curriculum and instruction.

First 10 partnerships draw on the strategies and practices pioneered by exemplar communities as well as other peer communities implementing the First 10 approach ([See \*All Children Learn and Thrive: Building First 10 Schools and Communities\*](#)). Communities build the capacity to implement strategies effectively as partnerships through both school-based and community-wide structures managing plan implementation and using progress benchmarks to drive change. First 10 partnerships work to strengthen communities while improving outcomes for children and families by explicitly attending to developing trust, social capital among families and organizations, and a service-to-our-community orientation.

For examples of First 10 strategies at work, see [Four Strategies for Getting the First 10 Years of a Child's Life Right](#) (*Education Week*), [First 10 in Action in Maine Communities](#) (*New America*), and [Taking Action for Children and Families: Learning from the First 40 Communities](#).

Our last shining example of sustaining and cultivating partnerships is the Waterford Research Institute. This forward thinking educational solution and technology driven organization brings together the best solutions that match opportunity with need. They instill a desire for families to become actively involved in their child's education by offering training for parents/guardians in their programs like Waterford Upstart, that level the playing field of access to quality preschool learning opportunities, especially for children in rural areas of the country. We are proud to have partnered with this organization since the beginning of the AASA Early Learning Cohort in 2017. Here is their website: <https://www.waterford.org/>

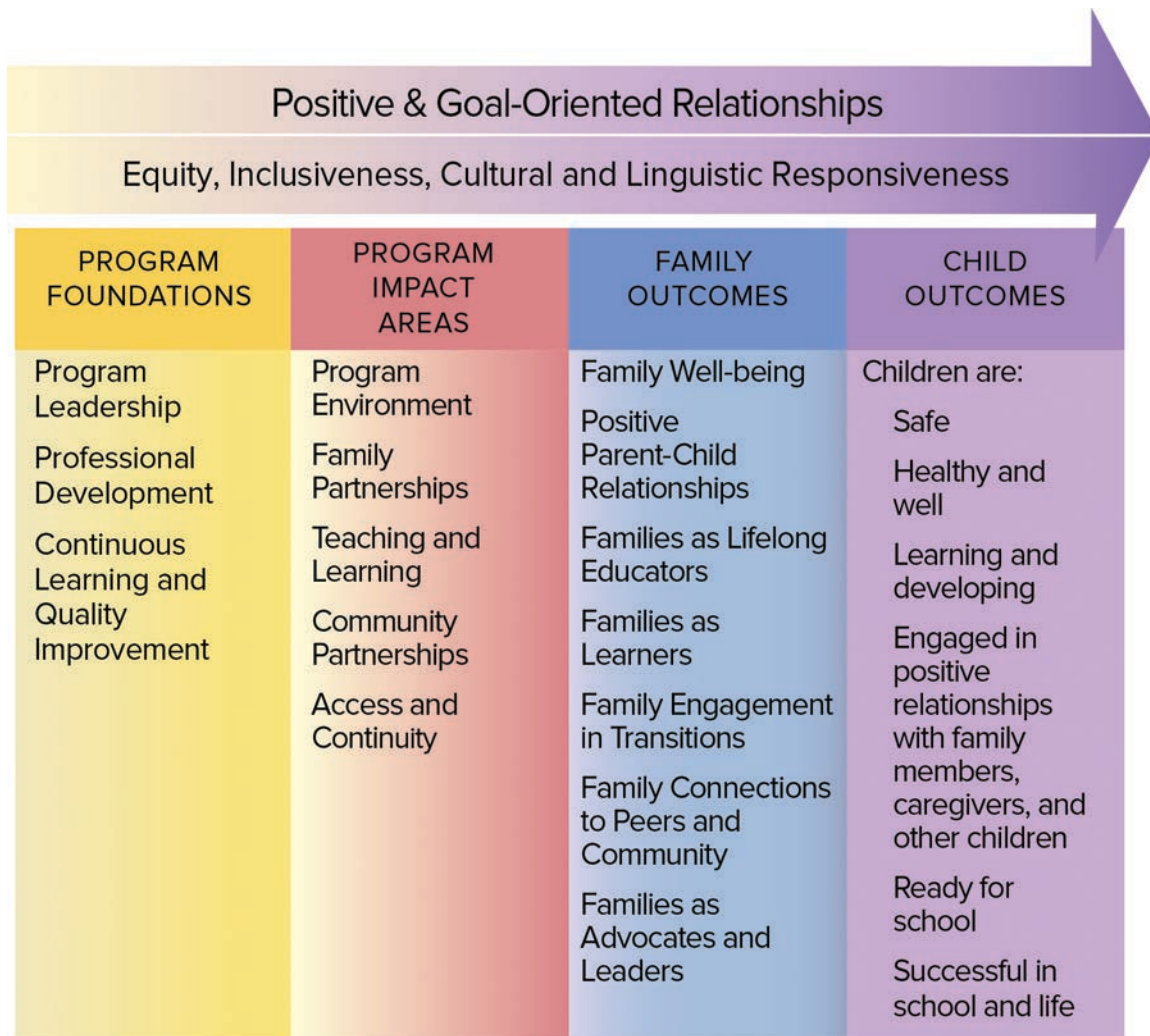
Strong partnerships can happen with varying levels of commitment, but the overarching advantage is improved communication and collaboration. When we come together around the common goal of creating high quality early learning opportunities for all children, our collective energizes change that cannot occur in a silo.



## Key Action Strategy #4 - Engage Families and Communities Early

Head Start is the nation’s first universal early childhood program. In 1965, the framers of Head Start knew parent, family and community involvement in the program was key to its success, and required such engagement from the beginning. Over the past five decades, we’ve seen involvement of families in schools’ ebb and flow, but as we look to our school systems to implement high quality early childhood programs, family and community engagement must be at the center of that work.

The Office of Head Start’s [Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework](#) can support school systems in determining how family and community engagement. This research-based framework focuses on building trust-based relationships with parents and families, welcoming them into the school system as partners, ensuring they understand how to best support their children, linking parents, families and the schools to the community, considering the wellbeing of the family and linking all of this work to child outcomes.



*PFCE Framework, Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services*



Relaciones positivas y enfocadas en las metas			
Equidad, inclusión, receptividad cultural y lingüística			
CIMIENTOS DEL PROGRAMA	ÁREAS DE IMPACTO DEL PROGRAMA	RESULTADOS DE LA FAMILIA	RESULTADOS DEL NIÑO
Liderazgo del programa	Ambiente del programa	Bienestar familiar	Los niños son o están:
Desarrollo profesional	Asociaciones con las familias	Relaciones positivas padre-hijo	Seguros
Aprendizaje y mejoramiento de calidad continuos	Enseñanza y aprendizaje	Familias como educadores de por vida	Sanos y bien
	Asociaciones comunitarias	Familias como estudiantes	Aprendiendo y desarrollándose
	Acceso y continuidad	Participación de la familia en las transiciones	Inmersos en relaciones positivas con los miembros de la familia, sus cuidadores y otros niños
		Conexiones de la familia con los pares y con la comunidad	Preparados para la escuela
		Familias como defensores y líderes	Exitosos en la escuela y en la vida

In December of 2014, President Obama and the White House convened an Early Childhood Education Summit, and the result was a 46-page recommendation report entitled *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments*. It stated, “existing research suggests expanding early learning initiatives would provide benefits to society of roughly \$8.60 for every \$1 spent, about half of which comes from increased earnings for children when they grow up” (Council of Economic Advisors, 2014, p. 3). This report demonstrates that numerous programs have been rigorously examined since the 1960’s; however, there have been no studies on how research-based tools influence attitudes of district level leaders. “In fact, the latter combination of programs is precisely what President Obama proposed in his 2013 early learning agenda, expand Head Start to serve 3-year-olds while helping states to increase their educational investments in 4-year-olds” (Jenkins, Farkas, Duncan, Burchinal, and Vandell, 2016, p. 89). “Few things matter as much to the prospects of a person, a family, a community, or the nation than the learning, health, and development of young children” (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, Yoshikawa, 2017, p. 8). During the preschool years as mentioned by the authors Gillanders and Procopia (2019) that all children come to school with culturally rooted knowledge and that educators must create bridges that allow both teacher and student new ways to adopt for understanding. In the following National P-3 Framework, Kauerz and Coffman (2013, 2019) share how important it is for families, schools at a program level and district administration that family engagement is an explicit goal or priority and that families must be included in the development and updating of family engagement policies and expectations at the district, community, and site levels.

# Engaged Families



## P-3 Strategies

## Example Implementation Indicators

### Core Priority

Teachers, administrators, and all staff in schools and programs understand the importance of, and employ strategies for, engaging families.

#### District/Community Administrators

- Incorporate family engagement into strategic plans.
- Incorporate family engagement into evaluations of principals and site administrators.
- Support the development and use of professional learning, tool kits, materials, and other resources that reflect family engagement research and best practices, including differentiation for families' diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Designate a senior-level officer responsible for family engagement.

#### Principals/Site Administrators

- Incorporate family engagement into evaluations of teachers and other staff.
- Provide ongoing professional learning and technical assistance focused on family engagement to all school and program staff.
- Designate dedicated and welcoming space where families can gather and teachers and families can meet.
- Provide opportunity and time for teachers to engage with families.

#### Teachers

- Regard family engagement as an essential element of their job.

### Two-Way Communication

Schools and programs establish regular two-way communication approaches to share data with, and to learn from, families.

#### District/Community Administrators

- Link family engagement to district's or community's instructional goals.
- Establish expectations and processes that provide families with a rich array of data on their child (e.g., attendance; academic progress; social connections).

#### Principals/Site Administrators

- Link families to support resources (e.g., GED training, mental health services) through collaborations with community partners.

#### Teachers

- Provide regular, accessible, and multi-modal opportunities for engaging families in understanding and supporting their child's progress (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, home visits, parent-to-parent events).
- Initiate opportunities to engage with families in order to develop deeper understanding of each child's progress from home, community, and cultural perspectives.

#### Families

- Perceive there are adequate opportunities for engagement in their children's education.
- Sustain their engagement over time from P-3.

### Shared Leadership/ Decision-making

Families, teachers, and administrators share decision-making for student success.

#### District/Community Administrators

- Designate teams of teachers, administrators, and families that build site-level capacity for family engagement.
- Host (with community partners) parent academies or family leadership institutes in which parents learn how to guide their children's educational success.
- Support families to share their cultural wisdom to inform definitions of and strategies to achieve educational success.

#### Teachers

- Engage families in the setting of educational goals for their children.

#### Families

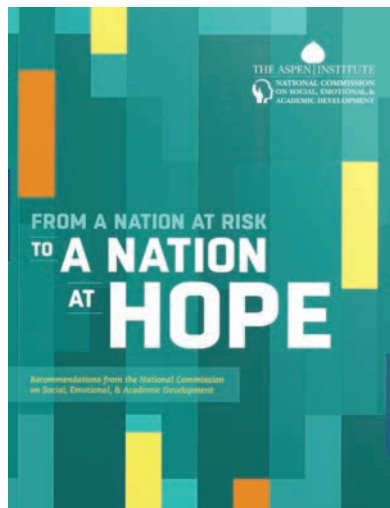
- Participate in setting goals for their child's school/ program through leadership roles on site-based management teams.
- Perceive themselves to be partners with teachers and schools/programs in setting goals for their own children.



## Key Action Strategy #5 - Support Strong Executive Function and SEL

“Life today can be all of these things - complex, distracting, fast moving, 24-7, and stressful. It is also joyful and full of exciting possibilities. WE know that if it is this way for us, it is only going to be more so for our children. We all want the best for our children, but how do we help them not only survive but thrive, today and in the future?” (Galinsky, 2010, p. 1) The importance of executive function is paramount and is considered the cornerstone of building the foundation for a successful life. See the following seven skills that Ellen Galinsky the author of *Mind in the Making* has laid out for this level of success and use them in your district/organization/agency as your cornerstone for success. See page 22 for the 7 Executive Functions.

“The caregiver’s response to the child’s temperament can play a big role in the child’s emotional development” (Lally, 1994, p. 7). Caring for young children also requires understanding that infants have the attachment period (0-9 months), exploration stage (7-18 months), and the self-definition stage (15-36 months) (Lally and Mangione, 2017). While older students should have equitable access to learning environments that are physically and emotionally safe and have meaningful relationships among and between adults and students (National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development, 2019). A nationwide commission dedicated to promoting social emotional health called The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (The Aspen Institute) released *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope* in 2019. This resource draws research and promising practices from around the nation to meet the needs of our youngest learners and their social and emotional needs. Not only does this report offer practices that are proving to be successful, but it also offers recommendations for action. This resource can be located here: <http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation-download/>



# What are MITM's 7 Essential Life Skills?

Life skills are based on executive functions; they bring together our social, emotional and cognitive capacities to problem solve and achieve goals. Studies have found they are critical to success in school and life.

## 1 Focus and Self-Control

Children need this skill to achieve goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload. This includes paying attention, exercising self-control, remembering the rules and thinking flexibility.

## 2 Perspective Taking

This involves understanding what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children's understanding of the intentions of parents, teachers and friends. Children with this skill are less likely to get involved in conflicts.

## 3 Communicating

Much more than understanding language, reading, writing and speaking, communicating is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how it will be understood by others. It is the skill teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

## 4 Making Connections

This Life Skill is at the heart of learning: figuring out what's the same, what's different, and sorting them into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity and moves children beyond knowing information to using information well.

## 5 Critical Thinking

This skill helps children analyze and evaluate information to guide their beliefs, decisions and actions. Children need critical thinking to make sense of the world around them and to solve problems.

## 6 Taking on Challenges

Children who take on challenges instead of avoiding or simply coping with them achieve better in school and in life.

## 7 Self-Directed, Engaged Learning

By setting goals and strategies for learning, children become attuned and better prepared to change as the world changes. This helps children foster their innate curiosity to learn, and helps them realize their potential.



## Key Action Strategy #6 - Provide Ongoing Professional Development for Early Educators

“High quality professional learning systems encompass a coherent series of activities to prepare professionals for practice, assess and ensure their competency to practice, and continuously enhance the quality of their ongoing practice” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 17). Leaders within a system or organization must continuously develop the skills to offer high-quality PD to their staff, but also must continue to learn themselves so they can be knowledgeable about the most current research and trends within early learning.

Gracie Branch, Associate Executive Director of the NAESP and Kristie Kauretz of the National P-3 Center have entered into a partnership to offer ongoing professional development for leadership with their Course 101 and 102 of the Pre-K through 3 Leadership Academy (please see this resource in the digital edition of this toolkit or you may find the weblink here: <https://www.naesp.org/programs/professional-learning/pre-k-3-leadership-academy/>)

Equally of importance is making sure to coordinate professional development offerings for your staff and include agencies, organizations and programs that are also considered your partners. Head Start programs are funded with specific requirements around professional development. Coordinating with programs like these could support more efficient spending of all professional development dollars, while increasing the effectiveness of the training overall. When early learning educators are learning together, children have more continuity to their own learning experiences, making transitions easier on the learners and the educators. A final benefit to coordinated professional development is a little more basic: When teachers learn together, they develop relationships that cultivate better collaboration. It's organic and over time supports a more streamlined process from birth through the public school experience.

Foundations, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization serving children, educators and families since 1992. They offer many programs and professional development not only to educators but to families as well. They have cultivated hundreds of partnerships throughout the nation over this time and also offer an annual national education conference called Beyond School Hours. Their expertise includes **program design and development** (designed successful learning acceleration programs to support schools and districts with learning recovery), **professional learning** (supporting tens of thousands of educators across the county each year), and **leadership coaching and mentoring** (assisting school leaders with navigating work challenges while increasing their effectiveness as school leaders, problem solvers, communicators, and decision-makers). More information can be found in the on-line version of of this toolkit or at: <https://foundationsinc.org/>



## Key Action Strategy #7 - Self Assessment Tools for ECE Organizations

The Early Learning Program Assessment Tool © (ELPAT ©) is designed for school districts to be used by School Superintendents or Central Office Administrators who wish to identify whether they are implementing programs that are based on practices proven to be successful in research. The Early Learning Program Assessment Tool will identify if school systems are meeting the needs of their youngest learners. It provides a clean and easy way to identify age ranges and outcomes that meet the needs of your students and families and suggests ways that the system can improve practices to ensure the success of our youngest and arguably most important learners. This resource is a web-based platform, co-branded by the AASA and Standard for Success (SFS) and is available for all districts to review and implement. The table below illustrates all areas measured by the ELPAT ©, which provides district leaders a guide to see what their districts are doing well and what areas could need improvement. It has the capability to be used in small, mid-sized, and large districts.

Instructional Practice - Engaged Play Based Learning	0 - Y5	K - 3
Instructional Practice - Literacy & Language	PreK - Y5	K - 3
Instructional Practice - Language Development	0 - 3	
Instructional Practice - Math	PreK - Y5	K - 3
Instructional Practice - Science	PreK - Y5	K - 3
Instructional Practice - Social Studies	PreK - Y5	K - 3
Family and Community Engagement and Outreach	0 - Y5	K - 3
Professional Development Instructional Strategiesg	0 - Y5	K - 3
Professional Development for Leadership	0 - Y5	K - 3
Social Emotional Development	0 - Y5	K - 3
Curriculum and Resources	0 - Y5	K - 3
Learning Environment	0 - Y5	K - 3
Developmental Assessment - Student Assessments	0 - Y5	K - 3
Assessment and Feedback - Vertical Alignment	0 - Y5	K - 3
Health and Wellness Development	0 - Y5	K - 3

**0- 3 Years Old**  
Self Assessment  
11 Total Indicators

**Pre-School & Y5**  
Self Assessment  
14 Total Indicators

**Kindergarten**  
Self Assessment  
14 Total Indicators

**Primary Grades 1-3**  
Self Assessment  
14 Total Indicators

Instructional Practices within the ELPAT © has six specific measured areas, one of which appears in all four age bands, “engaged play based learning.” As shared within the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Third Edition (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p. 81) specifically referencing infant and toddlers, “Caregivers put infants in cribs mainly to sleep, not to play. During play periods, they place babies on firm surfaces where they can move freely and safely.” “Caregivers are honoring each child for who they are now as they play while also keeping in mind who the child will become” (McMullen, 2014, p. 4). This then varies widely as children become older as “engaged play based learning” for older children ages five through eight by providing lots of active exploration and hands-on activities and connects them to their previous learning experiences (NAEYC Guide for First, Second, and Third Graders, 2016, p. 2). It is with a level of detailed guidance that children are afforded areas to grow.

The ELPAT © also identifies, under Instructional Practices, the difference between Literacy and Language and Language Development. Language Development includes birth through age three whereby, “Caregivers do everything they can to support toddlers’ play so that children stay interested in an object or activity for increasing periods of time (Bredekamp and Copple, 2009, p.98). This is in stark contrast to older children in grades one through three whereby, Dr. Nell Duke recommends six key elements of improving literacy and language developments the second sharing word-reading skill and its foundations, consists of phonological awareness, which is the conscious awareness of the sounds in words (Duke and Block, 2012). As evidenced, these are in stark contrast to one another completing the differences between language and language development in zero to three and literacy and language in the grades one through three portions of the ELPAT ©. The other areas under Instructional Practice are Math, Science and Social Studies. Each of these areas is not a measured indicator under birth through age three.

Family and Community Engagement and Outreach is an indicator under all four age bands. This provides a foundational and cornerstone area within the ELPAT ©. During the preschool years, all children come to school with culturally rooted knowledge, and educators must create bridges that allow both teacher and student new ways to adopt for understanding (Gillanders and Procopia, 2019). In the previously mentioned National P-3 Framework, Kauerz and Coffman (2013, 2019) share how important it is for families, schools at a program level and district administration that family engagement is an explicit goal or priority and that families must be included in the development and updating of family engagement policies and expectations at the district, community, and site levels. Finally, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has done extensive research about the impact of Head Start and Early Head Start programs using rich family engagement practices (OPRE, 2018).

Professional Development is another critical area that the ELPAT © measures. It has two distinct tracks, instructional strategies and leadership. “Staff training and support are especially important. Toddlerhood is a developmental stage different from either infancy or preschool age” (Bredekamp and Copple, 2009, p. 107). Specialized professional development for teachers and leadership is essential. Because personalized professional development for leadership is so important, the tool includes a stand-alone indicator. “High quality professional learning systems encompass a coherent series of activities to prepare professionals for practice, assess and ensure their competency to practice, and continuously enhance the quality of their ongoing practice” (National Research Council, 2015, p. 17). Leaders within a system or organization must continuously develop the skills to offer high-quality professional development to their staff, but also must continue to learn themselves so they can be knowledgeable about the most current research and trends within early learning.

The Social Emotional Development indicator within the ELPAT © also must be very precisely documented to show the differences in the levels support one would offer a baby versus an eight-year-old. The younger the child, the more the caregiver must have full command of their responses to any situation. “The caregiver’s response to the child’s temperament can play a big role in the child’s emotional development” (Lally, 1994, p. 7). It also recognizes that infants have the attachment period (0-9 months), exploration stage (7-18 months), and the self-definition stage (15-36 months) (Lally and Mangione, 2017). While older students should have equitable access to learning environments that are physically and emotionally safe and have meaningful relationships among and between adults and students (National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development, 2019).

Other identified indicators within the ELPAT © that are measured within all four stages include curriculum and resources, learning environment, developmental assessment (student assessments), assessment and feedback (vertical alignment), and health and wellness development. The overall learning environment for students who are older can focus on reflecting a strong commitment to literacy (General Education Leadership Network, 2017). For infants and toddlers, creating an environment that feels like home is necessary where indoor and outdoor spaces are clean, welcoming and pleasing to be in (Lally et al., 2008).

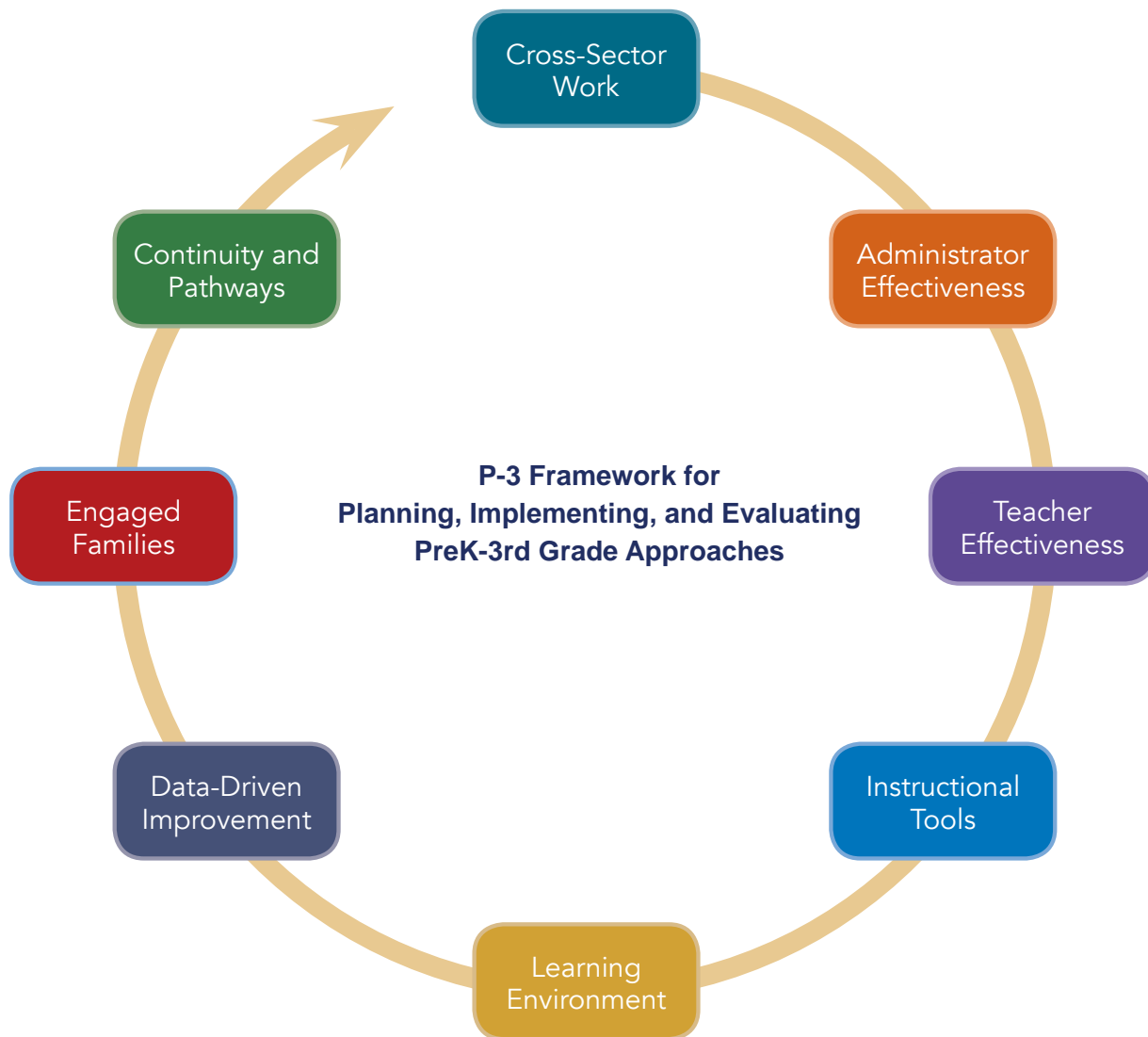
All of these factors are vital for cultivating an amazing approach to creating, maintaining, and cultivating a successful early learning program for all children birth through age eight, regardless of the size, setting, location, and demographics of any organization. The ELPAT © shares all of these resources so that leaders who use this tool will be given information that they can then apply to the programs that they either currently run or are planning to implement. For more information you can visit the following weblink to learn more about the ELPAT ©: <https://www.standardforsuccess.com/software/analysis-program-assessment-software/early-learning-program-assessment-software/>

There are other frameworks that are useful such as the National Institute of Early Education Research framework guide states in implementing effective Pre-K programming, while the Boston Public Schools and their Department of Early Childhood have showed great promise with the Focus on Early Learning. Each of these frameworks are either offered nationally, regionally, or without the intent to be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of programming that incorporates the idea of the whole child.

Lastly, the National P-3 Center has created two different frameworks that can be used by districts to self-assess their P-3 alignment efforts. The Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches, originally released in 2013 and then updated with a greater focus on equity in 2019, has been shared on a national scale. This Framework is divided into eight major categories of effort that have been identified as essential to high-quality and comprehensive P-3 approaches: cross-sector work, administrator effectiveness, teacher effectiveness, instructional tools, learning environment, data-driven improvement, engaged families, and continuity and pathways. The authors of the Framework also offer suggestions for ways to use the framework in planning, implementing, and supporting the strategies and outcomes of this toolkit.

The National P-3 Center has also developed a resource, the District P-3 Audit Tool, that could be used by districts interested in understanding their organizational infrastructure and supports for P-3. Please see the following website for more information beyond what is loaded into this toolkit: <https://nationalp-3center.org/>





## Looking Ahead

These seven strategies are a start to the process for districts and organizations to begin exploring how to best promote healthy child development and support all children and families, right from the start. High quality early childhood education is essential for school readiness and academic success. Together, we can elevate early childhood education to the level which all children and families deserve and promote thriving learning communities.

If you have any questions about this toolkit, please reach out to any of the contributors listed herein, or editor and organizer of this toolkit, Edward Manuszak.

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