

for Michigan's Children

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Linking Early Childhood to the Early Elementary Years to Improve Student Outcomes and Reduce the Achievement Gap

Education is a lifelong process that begins at birth – from cradle to career. The children of Michigan will be our future scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and elected officials. With our next workforce set to be the most diverse yet, improving educational outcomes for all children, particularly children of color and children from low-income communities is critical to Michigan's future economic vitality.

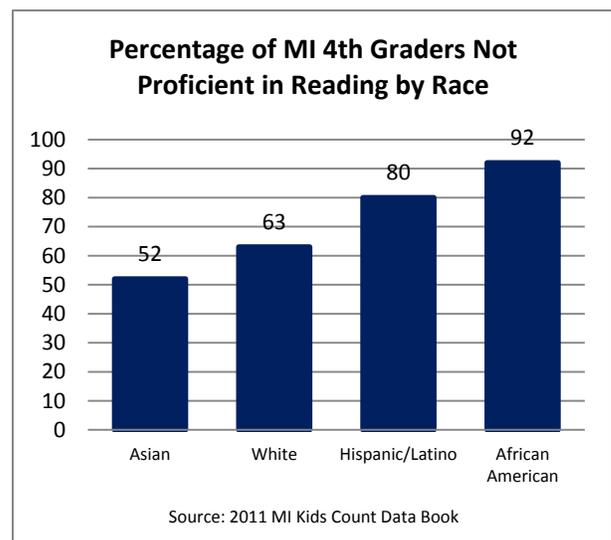
The race, ethnicity and income level of families predict disparities in child outcomes that begin before birth and continue to worsen as children grow older. Inequities in language development are evident as early as nine months of age and result in differences in intellectual functioning throughout children's educational careers. This gap contributes to differences in school readiness, educational success, high school graduation and college enrollment, leading to clear disparities in lifetime earnings. As Michigan's population becomes more diverse, intentional action becomes more and more critical to provide proven prevention and early intervention supports.

Third Grade Reading, A Benchmark for Success

Measuring a child's success on standardized reading tests in the fourth grade assists in understanding disparities in early childhood and can predict future outcomes in school success. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child's educational development. Up until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read; and beginning in fourth grade, they are reading to learn.

With nearly half of fourth grade textbooks of any subject requiring grade-level proficiency in reading, children who struggle to read will struggle in the classroom. Because of inadequate literacy resources to combat poor reading outcomes throughout later elementary and middle school, 75 percent of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school.

Unfortunately in Michigan, many children – particularly children of color and low-income children – struggle to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Only three of every ten Michigan fourth-graders demonstrated reading proficiency on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the standard for measuring



academic proficiency across the states. Michigan had the second largest achievement gap in the nation between White fourth graders and African American fourth graders, with only 8-20 percent of African American and Hispanic/Latino children reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

High Quality Early Childhood Critical to Building Literacy Skills and Reducing the Achievement Gap

Fortunately, studies have shown that students who enter kindergarten with the literacy skills necessary for success will fare better; and early education programs have proven results to improve those skills, particularly for children at-risk of school failure, effectively narrowing the achievement gap. With Michigan teachers reporting that on average, only two out of three entering students are ready for kindergarten, preparing children for school is a critical step toward improving third grade literacy and long-term educational success. High quality early childhood education programs have demonstrated improvements in early language development and literacy. For example:

- Children who participated in Early Head Start – a community-based program for low-income families with infants and toddlers – scored higher on standardized measures of cognitive and language development at 24 and 36 months.
- Children who participated in Parents as Teachers – a parent education program featuring in-home visits with parents and children – were more advanced at age three in language, scored higher on kindergarten readiness tests, showed better school readiness at the start of kindergarten, and achieved higher reading readiness at the end of kindergarten.
- Children who participated in the Great Start Readiness Program – Michigan’s preschool program for four-year-olds at-risk of school failure – had increased print awareness in kindergarten, had higher fourth grade reading test scores based on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test, and were more likely to graduate high school on time.

Why a Birth to Third Grade (B-3rd) Frame Matters

Capitalizing on the literacy gains attained in early childhood through elementary school is essential to making substantial strides in student achievement and reducing the academic achievement gap. High quality early childhood programs show the greatest impact among children of color and children from low-income families. Unfortunately, many students who benefit from high quality early learning programs go on to achieve varying educational success in elementary schools. A seamless early childhood to early elementary educational experience that maintains components of quality over that transition and beyond can ensure that gains made in early childhood continue through K-12. Current investments in early childhood alone cannot ensure that the achievement gap is reduced, and the K-12 system alone does not have the capacity to tackle educational disparities in a bold way.

Michigan’s existing high quality early childhood programs aren’t sufficient to reduce disparities due to vastly insufficient funding and access to these programs.

- Currently, the state under-invests in services for infants, toddlers, and their families – programs that ensure that parents have the support they need to be their child’s first and best teacher and to begin laying the foundation for literacy and healthy development.

- Michigan’s extremely low payment rates and income eligibility requirements make it difficult for low-income families to access the high quality child care programs that ensure that parents can work while children learn.
- 30,000 low- and moderate-income four-year-olds eligible for Michigan’s Great Start Readiness preschool program are unable to access the program due to insufficient state funding.
- Too many children from low-income families and children of color can’t access a pediatric medical home to address health and development needs.
- Between 10 and 14 percent of all young children birth through age 5 experience social, emotional and behavioral problems, yet most do not receive mental health services due to limited access to services—even when their mental health conditions have been identified.

As disparities continue to persist, the K-12 education system has not successfully tackled the achievement gap. K-12 system challenges include the following.

- Too many children start school unprepared due to limited access to high quality early learning programs.
- With nearly one out of four Michigan children living in poverty, too many students are distracted by hunger, housing insecurity, and family mobility issues.
- Under-invested public health care and mental health systems result in too many students with unidentified and/or untreated socio-emotional and behavioral health issues, physical health issues, and learning disabilities.
- Various family and community issues result in too many students who miss significant instructional time due to chronic absence.
- The traditional calendar school year and lack of consistent support for extended learning programs result in missed opportunities for learning outside the school day and significant academic ground lost during the summer months.

What a B-3rd Frame Looks Like

The purpose of a B-3rd system is to merge the best and most critical components of early childhood and K-3/K-12 that result in better outcomes for kids, and to ultimately eliminate educational achievement gaps. A successful B-3rd system will ensure that students develop strong foundational skills in literacy/communication and math, develop social and emotional competence, and establish patterns of engagement in school and learning while having the supports they need at home and in their communities.

Since the early childhood system was created to serve children who are most at-risk of adverse outcomes like being unprepared for kindergarten, ensuring quality across all early learning settings has become a key component to improving child well-being. Key quality components of early childhood programs that can continue into elementary schools include:

- Activities and an environment that promote all domains of children’s development: cognitive, physical, social, emotional, language and literacy, and approaches to learning.
- Small group sizes and low child-to-provider ratios.
- Parent/family engagement and responsiveness to the needs and issues of parents /families.
- Culturally competent policies and practices.
- Developmental screenings at regular intervals.
- Linkages for families to health, mental health and other community supports.

The K-12 education system, on the other hand, was created for mass public education; and the structures, policies, and practices that have been in place for many years have made it more difficult for the K-12 system to adapt to students’ changing needs. However, in an ever changing political world where politics has resulted in scrutiny of taxpayer spending, accountability and data-driven outcomes have become critical components of the K-12 system. Thus, some key components of the traditional K-12 system that early childhood could learn from include improved data collection and use of data to inform practice, use of age-appropriate assessments, and increased understanding of the common core curriculum in K-3rd and what that means for learning expectations before kindergarten.

For children who begin kindergarten without the tools they need to succeed, providing opportunities for students to catch-up in the early elementary years is vitally important as well to ensure all children are on track and can read proficiently by the end of third grade. Many programs such as high quality before- and after-school programming are important opportunities for young students to gain the literacy foundation they need to be on track in the early grades. Ensuring that options are available for students in the elementary years to get “on-track” is just as essential as high quality early education to ensure that more costly and more difficult remediation efforts later in the K-12 years – including grade retention – are unnecessary.

Strategies to Advance a B-3rd Frame

- *Foster and promote leadership* that will embrace sectors outside the traditional education system to push for a

Montgomery County Public Schools: Evidence of Success

Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland began implementing a PreK-3rd approach in 2000. This approach began with establishing a clear district-wide goal of getting 80 percent of their students college-ready by 2014, and then crafting and aligning its early learning strategies to better connect to K-12, providing teacher support to ensure effective and consistent implementation of this new strategy, and engaging in continuous quality improvements to reach its goal.

Since 2000, the district’s population of English Language Learners increased by over 100 percent and the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch nearly doubled. At the same time, they began aligning the early childhood program with the early elementary years, yielding astonishing results.

- The proportion of 3rd graders reading proficiently or above improved to 88.9%.
- MCPS’S 3rd grade reading achievement gap shrank by 29 percentage points.
- The number of students taking at least one Advanced Placement exam increased by 25 percentage points to 61.5% – almost 2.5 times that of the national average.
- Nearly 77% of all graduating seniors enroll in college.

coordinated and integrated B-3rd system. This includes leadership at the local school building level, school district level, intermediate school district level, and state and federal levels to foster leaders who will support a B-3rd structure that embraces multiple sectors such as health, mental health, and family supports.

- *Adequately fund a B-3rd system* that ensures access to high quality early care and education programs for all eligible children and families, and adequately funds the K-12 system to provide a premiere education.
- *Create common understanding of core quality components* that must be part of a B-3rd system that expands upon the evidence-base of quality in the early childhood system and extends those elements of quality into elementary schools.
- *Align common standards, curricula, and age-appropriate assessments* to ensure common understanding of the developmental and learning needs of children across the birth through third grade continuum.
- *Create a data system* that strengthens and extends the current K-12 data system down to early childhood to inform policies and practices, and assists with individualizing the needs of students within classrooms and programs.
- *Provide professional development* that focuses on the needs of a B-3rd system with a developmentally appropriate, child and family-focused lens across the entire spectrum.
- *Encourage co-location of early childhood programs within elementary schools* to foster collaboration and joint professional development opportunities to ensure a seamless transition from the early years to early elementary school.
- *Ensure family and community engagement* throughout a B-3rd system that not only engages families but also adequately addresses family needs utilizing community networks.

Policymakers are responsible for making informed decisions to ensure that Michigan children have opportunities to succeed in school and be prepared to enter the workforce. Third grade reading proficiency has huge ramifications in terms of educational success, and is a benchmark that can be achieved for all students by having access to high quality early education programs that transition to high quality early elementary schools. The future of Michigan's economy depends on a skilled workforce, and equitable public policies that help to reduce the achievement gap and better prepare all students for educational success are key components. An aligned birth to third grade system is a key strategy to doing so.