

A Framework That Works:

How PreK-3rd Can Be A Smart Strategy for Black Kids, Families and Communities

In the past fifty years, communities across the United States have engaged in an extensive series of educational reforms designed to raise achievement levels and close achievement gaps. Yet the gap between Black and White students, in particular, has proven to be “pervasive, profound and persistent.”ⁱ According to the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Black 4th graders continue to score 27 percent behind their White peers. While less than one-third of all 4th graders performed at or above the level of proficiency, just 15 percent of Black children performed at that level.ⁱⁱ This disparity, however, does not suddenly emerge at nine years old; rather, it begins as early as nine months, is already evident at school entry, and grows across the early elementary years.ⁱⁱⁱ Still, educators, policymakers, and parents believe that progress in eliminating them is possible, if we “set high standards and do what it takes to achieve them.”^{iv}

“Doing what it takes” includes establishing a strong foundation for learning in the early years. The PreK-3rd agenda premises its effectiveness in improving and sustaining educational attainment on the notion of linking and integrating high quality early education with high-quality elementary education through the third grade. The concept is simple; yet the development and implementation of successful strategies remains difficult, made more so by the fact that despite our knowledge about the importance of the PreK-3rd grade years as the foundation for all subsequent learning and development, these years are often overlooked by education reformers.^v



The PreK-3rd movement aims to change that, having developed a loose framework of core elements that provides ongoing research, evidence and guidelines for states, districts and schools to strengthen teaching and learning across these critical years. In both theory and practice, this framework can be a meaningful one for Black children, families and communities, because it is designed to establish a context for strengthening instructional practices by building on strengths and recognizing cultural patterns. While primarily understood as an agenda to enhance the alignment and coordination of standards, curricula, instruction and assessments across ages and grades, when successfully implemented, the broad PreK-3rd grade framework includes the following six areas that are critical to the positive growth and development of Black children:

- ✓ Effective and Aligned Instruction Across Consecutive Years
- ✓ Positive Relationship Development Between Children and Teachers
- ✓ Strong Family and Community Engagement
- ✓ Importance of Social-Emotional Development
- ✓ Access to Full-Day, High-Quality PreK and Kindergarten
- ✓ Successful, Supportive and Seamless Transitions

What is a PreK-3rd Grade framework?

The PreK-3rd terminology encompasses a variety of efforts dedicated to improving systems for children birth through age 8; ensuring continuity for children and families through child care, PreK and K-12; and seamlessly connecting high-quality early childhood and PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools. The Foundation for Child Development has identified major components of a successful PreK-3rd strategy, comprising a loose “framework” which includes, at a minimum: voluntary full-school-day PreK and required full-school-day Kindergarten; standards, curriculum, instruction & assessment that are aligned within and across the early childhood to early grades continuum; curriculum that integrates academic and social skills; teachers who are qualified to teach PreK to Third grade; and families, schools, and communities who share accountability for student success.

Effective and Aligned Instruction Across Consecutive Years

The core of the PreK-3rd framework is built on the critical importance of instructional quality within and across the PreK-3rd grade continuum. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that “high-quality instruction has special significance during the PreK-3rd years, when children master foundational skills and concepts, develop attitudes towards school, and form ideas about themselves as learners.”^{vi} Our collective understanding of the importance of instruction has been manifested at the highest levels – in 2010, when President Obama and the Department of Education released their *Blueprint for Reform*, to guide the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, they placed strong emphasis on the need to “measure, develop and improve the effectiveness of teachers, leaders and preparation programs.” Indeed, in both the early education and K-12 systems, we know that effective teaching and high-quality instruction is a central component of children’s achievement, and, further, that consistent access to effective teachers and leaders can narrow the achievement gap and provide particularly strong benefits for children from low-income communities.^{vii} As the *Blueprint* notes, and as research has demonstrated, “having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row may be enough to completely close the Black-White test score gap.”^{viii}



Yet research has also shown that teachers vary dramatically in the quality of their classroom practice; their content knowledge; and their capacity to engage young children – and that these variances are not evenly distributed.^{ix} Rather, equitable access to effective teaching and high-quality instruction has been limited, in a pattern that has held true for decades, in study after study, within and across states.

Black Students and Their Less Qualified, Less Effective Teachers

Across the nation, teachers in schools serving poor and minority children in large cities are more likely to be inexperienced, less likely to be certified, and less likely to have graduated from competitive colleges than are suburban teachers.^x They also score lower on standardized exams and are more likely to be teaching subjects for which they are not certified.^{xi} Nearly fifteen years ago, Linda Darling-Hammond found that White students were twice as likely as their African-American or Latino

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counterparts to be taught by the most highly qualified teachers (in terms of prior preparation and specific subject certification), and half as likely to have the least qualified instructors in class.^{xii} Now, in New York, teacher qualifications vary considerably across schools and are strongly correlated with student race and income; 21 percent of nonwhite students' teachers, for example, initially failed the certification exam compared with 7 percent of White students' teachers.^{xiii} In North Carolina, the CLASS classroom assessment tool demonstrated that teachers were observed to be less sensitive to children's needs and instructional quality was lower when a larger percentage of children in poverty were enrolled in the classroom.^{xiv} And in Tennessee, which looks at the "added-value" of teachers, beyond their qualifications, "low income and minority children have the least access to the state's most effective teachers and more access to the least effective."^{xv} In essence, on nearly every available measure, we can be confident that Black students are being taught by less qualified and less effective teachers over time – precisely at the points when they need the most effective teaching and instructional quality to close the achievement gap and raise their academic achievement levels.



Achieving High-Quality Classroom Instruction

Several components of the PreK-3rd grade framework are dedicated to reversing this trend and promoting effective teaching and high-quality instruction across consecutive years, by advocating for a PreK-3rd grade certification and license; ensuring that all teachers and assistant teachers are considered highly-qualified, with appropriate degrees; building joint planning time for teachers within and across grades to align their instruction and curriculum; and promoting professional development around instructional practices that includes a focus on early education and child development principles.

In addition, high-quality classroom instruction must be based on a foundation of aligned standards across grades; curricula that connect to those standards; and assessments that inform the instruction of those standards and the implementation of the curricula, all of which are integral pieces of the PreK-3rd grade framework. Yet the agenda reaches deeper, having identified four characteristics of what high-quality instruction looks like in PreK-3rd.^{xvi}

1. Teachers observe and respond to individual children's development over time
2. Teacher provide emotional support to individual children
3. Teachers foster engagement in learning activities and keep classrooms running smoothly
4. Teachers support higher order thinking and advanced language skills

These elements of effective teaching are essential for the healthy development of all children, but while the PreK-3rd framework identifies the fact that "relationships between children and teachers matter," it also provides space to give special consideration to the questions of (a) what it means to be an effective teacher specifically of young, Black children, and (b) how we help all teachers get there.^{xvii}

Positive Relationship Development Between Children and Teachers

The research is overwhelming: positive childhood development is built on positive relationships between and among students, parents, caregivers, teachers and peers. PreK-3rd strategies are built on a foundation of recognizing the importance of each of these connections and strengthening the bonds

necessary for children’s growth. The core of these relationships in the context of the educational experience, however, is the relationship children have with their teachers, a critically important component of achievement, particularly for Black children. Indeed, from the earliest education and care experiences, “a consensus has emerged...that the relationship a child has with a teacher or caregiver...is the central and most critical component of quality.”^{xviii} These relationships maintain their centrality into the elementary sphere, where “teacher-reported closeness with students was positively related to growth in children’s receptive vocabulary and reading abilities from preschool to second grade, especially for children of color.”^{xix}

Relationship Building in a Cultural Context

What is behind the research suggesting that “the performance of African-Americans, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement they receive from teachers?”^{xx} The answer lies at least partly with the cultural values and traditions held among African-American communities about the role of the teacher in relationship to the child, and to that child’s family. Lisa Delpit writes, “Beliefs about what constitutes good teaching vary across different cultural communities. Mainstream thinking holds that teaching begins with teachers’ awareness of and ability to transfer knowledge. However...many [teachers from communities of color] believe teaching begins instead with the establishment of relationships between themselves and their students.”^{xxi}



Ever since Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson’s 1968 experiment demonstrated the self-fulfilling prophecy in the classroom, educators have known that teachers’ expectations have an impact on student performance. More than forty years later, evidence continues to demonstrate that teachers, across races, expect less, on average, from Black students than Whites^{xxii} Given this disparity, Dr. Ronald Ferguson, an expert on the achievement gap, makes a convincing argument that relationship development which helps to raise expectations will benefit children’s achievement because teachers hold higher standards for students they expect to perform at higher levels.

As part of their strategy for achieving at high levels, schools must therefore recognize the importance of relationship development among teachers and students, based both on cultural expectations, and also on evidence that it works. Indeed, “researchers on effective schools for low-income African-American students cite the supportive relations that exist between teachers and students and the ethos of caring and accountability that pervades such schools as essential ingredients of their success.”^{xxiii}

Strategies built into the PreK-3rd grade framework to allow for and encourage the development and strengthening of relationships include system-based parameters such as teacher-child ratios, which allow each child to receive individual attention and foster strong relationships with adults in the school, as well as classroom-based strategies that encourage instruction which balances child-centered approaches with teacher-directed approaches. In addition, the framework embeds a focus on supporting professional development and preparation programs that help all teachers and leaders become effective teachers of young, Black children by

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building a deep knowledge of child development principles and culturally relevant practices – which can be taught and intentionally implemented.

Black Students and Black Teachers

There is a significant mismatch between Black students and teachers, with Black students making up 17 percent of the student body in K-12 public schools across the nation, while Black teachers comprise only 8 percent of the teaching force.^{xxiv} In urban schools, however, the discrepancies are increasingly stark, with students who are all Black and mostly low-income being taught by teachers who are primarily White and often from upper- or middle-class backgrounds. While there is little empirical evidence on the relationship between students' exposure to teachers of their own race and their subsequent academic performance, a review of studies by the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force suggests the presence of teachers of color is essential for schools.^{xxv} According to this review, students of color tended to have higher academic, personal and social performance when taught by teachers from their own ethnic background, while teachers of color, who serve as role models and cultural brokers, had higher performance expectations for students from their own ethnic group.^{xxvi} For this reason, and other, often intangible benefits to students, families, and other staff members, it is clear that the recruitment of an increasingly diverse teaching force is a laudable and necessary goal. Yet it is also critical to structure policies that support both Black teachers and non-Black teachers in building and strengthening their relationships with students to further their academic and social-emotional development.

Black Students and Non-Black Teachers

Indeed, because “teachers from different ethnic groups have demonstrated that when students of color are taught with culturally responsive techniques...their academic performance improves significantly,” it is important to ensure that non-Black teachers are equipped with the cultural tools they need to successfully reach and support their Black students.^{xxvii} Both schools and teachers need to value and understand the role of culture and community context as it influences their relationships, and shapes the expectations that students and families have of them, and vice versa. As Delpit again notes, “there are different attitudes in different cultural groups about which characteristics make for a good teacher...In many African-American communities, teachers are expected to show that they care about their students by controlling the class; exhibiting personal power; establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships; displaying emotion to garner student respect; demonstrating a belief that all students can learn; establishing a standard of achievement and ‘pushing’ students to achieve the standard; and holding the attention of their students by incorporating African-American interactional styles in their teaching.”^{xxviii}

“This is very difficult work because teachers tend to deny, defend or shut down when you bring up issues of race. They’ve chosen this profession because they want to help children, but what is not understood is that despite our good intention, our teaching practices don’t always have a positive impact on the student.”
-Donna Graves, MCPS

Difficult Discussions and Changes in Practice

There is growing evidence to support the belief that children’s development and learning benefit from culturally competent teaching, which reduces misunderstandings between students and teachers, provides a bridge between what students know and what they are expected to learn in school, and may contribute to the development of trust crucial to the socio-emotional climate for learning.^{xxix} To build towards a fully culturally competent staff, schools and preparation programs need to prioritize professional development opportunities and conversations that support difficult discussions about race and culture within and across the PreK-3rd grade continuum.

In Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), held up as an example of a district that has successfully modeled a PreK-3rd framework, much of the early and ongoing success in achieving teacher, school and community buy-in is attributed to Superintendent Jerry Weast, who is White, and his ability to “talk explicitly about race and ethnicity.”^{xxx} As he has said, “I am going to get right down into the race issue, and I am going to talk about *Hispanic* and *African-American*. And if it hurts, I’m sorry. I apologize respectfully, but I am going to talk about it. You need to talk about it. You need to have that [conversation] because we are going to [work] together to destroy institutional barriers that have sorted kids for way too long.”^{xxxi} As Montgomery County Public Schools demonstrated, the consequences of not having these discussions at the district, school and classroom level are not simply academic; rather, they can have serious negative effects on classroom teaching, on teacher-student and family relationships, and on the achievement levels of Black children. Conversely, learning and performance contexts that are more responsive to children’s familiar and existing home and cultural experiences may facilitate cognitive functioning and, consequently, achievement.^{xxxii}

As Donna Graves, the leader of the Diversity Training and Development initiative in Montgomery County noted, “when we put interventions in place for a student of color based on our own White, middle-class perspectives and the intervention doesn’t work, we then unconsciously or sometimes consciously say, ‘Well see, we did this fabulous intervention and it didn’t work. It must be the kids.’”^{xxxiii} Without explicit attention to issues of race and culture as they influence the development of relationships, this belief becomes pervasive and problematic, affecting students at both the systems and classroom levels.

In one example, “problems arising from culturally different interactional styles seem to disproportionately affect African-American boys, who, as a result of cultural influences, exhibit a high degree of physicality and desire for interaction.”^{xxxiv} As Wade Boykin has noted as well in his research on the Afro-cultural themes of *communalism*, *movement* and *verve* – defined as particular receptiveness or preference for heightened levels of physical stimulation – more than 70 percent of African-American children reported preferring school contexts that support communal learning, music and movement, and high-energy pedagogical and learning strategies.^{xxxv} In other words, “a classroom that allows for greater movement and interaction will better facilitate the learning and social styles of African-American



boys, while one that disallows such activity will unduly penalize them.”^{xxxvi} With pervasively dismal test scores for Black boys, it is more important than ever that teachers within the PreK-3rd continuum are able to comfortably identify and engage in a range of classroom management and relationship-building strategies that support the learning of Black students – and of the diverse range of all their students and families.

Strong Family and Community Engagement

Because relationships are not only about the bond between teacher and student, it is important to consider as well the relationships developed between the schools, families, and the community at large within the PreK-3rd grade context. Family plays an undeniably key role in children’s social and academic experiences, particularly in the early years; research has demonstrated that differences in early parenting practices explain approximately one-third of the achievement gap between Black and White children in kindergarten, and that parenting remained a strong predictor of outcomes until at least the sixth grade.^{xxxvii} Further, as a

report by Civic Enterprises demonstrates, “high-performing schools maintain strong communication with families, but low-performing schools are weak in communication and family engagement. Given the importance of family contributions in the education of their children, the preparation of teachers for family engagement becomes not only an issue of good practice, but also one of equity.” Yet current policies and practices at the federal, state, district and school levels do not provide sufficient support to teachers and parents, nor do they hold schools accountable for comprehensively and consistently engaging a diverse range of families. Indeed, while family and community engagement is a pillar of the PreK-3rd framework, it is nevertheless a struggle for many schools and districts, particularly those serving primarily low-income, Black populations. “More often than not...at urban public schools, parents are described as uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive and part of the problem. Rather than being seen as partners capable of making meaningful contributions to the education of children, they are more likely to be seen as obstacles in the way of progress and problems to be overcome.”^{xxxviii}

Building Systemic, Culturally-Responsive Family Engagement

Schools and districts committed to a PreK-3rd framework must work towards changing this dynamic and achieving the type of family engagement that is defined as a “systemic and sustained commitment that occurs across time, spans many settings, and requires shared responsibility from all parties.”^{xxxix} They must learn how to better utilize and report on Title I funding that is dedicated

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to parent involvement activities, supporting best practices in family engagement that are culturally relevant, age-specific, and reach beyond the traditional means of involvement and communication. As the PreK-3rd framework emphasizes, there must be opportunities for teachers and families to work together to set goals for their children, and for the school to be open and transparent in sharing information and reporting on student progress. There are several strategies that build upon good cultural practice – such as including children’s extended family members, engaging in summer-time home-visiting, leading school-based playgroups, encouraging parent-led workshops, and holding regular cultural celebrations – that result in strong home-school relationships beginning before children enter school and continuing throughout their educational journeys.

Learning from Early Education Systems in Grades K-3

In “Making a Difference: Ten Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System,” authors from Bremerton, Washington, where PreK-3rd grade is deeply embedded, make a particular note about the need to extend successful family engagement strategies from early childhood education through K-3, and even K-12. There is no reason that family engagement should drastically decrease as children advance through elementary school, as is typically expected and accepted. As the book notes, “one parent talked about how [in her early education program] teachers and support staff provided services in her home. The plan was based on the strengths and needs of her child as well as the needs of her family...[but] when her child entered the ‘land of public school,’ the interest shifted to how her child was doing...in the context of the classroom not the family. She was encouraged to volunteer in the classroom and invited to family nights. However, she felt disconnected from the learning process.”^{xi} Without more meaningful engagement opportunities, modeled upon those in the early education and care systems, this feeling of disconnection may be transmitted to the parent’s children, and, further, may manifest itself in several harmful ways that can impede student learning and prevent teachers and parents from connecting and reinforcing the same messages at home and at school. Although racial and cultural divides may not be the cause of a particular disconnect, “social barriers related to differences in race, culture and class can create a tremendous gulf between school and community.”^{xii}

Professional Development Opportunities Support Deeper Understanding of Families' Race and Culture

As a new brief by the Harvard Family Research Project indicates, “many new teachers underestimate the importance of family engagement and contribute to the unequal distribution of supports outside the classroom.” In order to counter this perspective, it is critical for schools and districts with large Black populations to provide opportunities to explicitly teach teachers from all backgrounds how to develop and strengthen productive relationships with parents and the community at large. In the Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP), for example, “one of the most significant learning opportunities pre-service teachers have around family engagement comes in the second year, when a group of approximately ten economically and racially diverse parents sit on an expert parent panel to talk with the mostly non-minority Chicago UTEP teaching candidates. Parents communicate their experiences with and expectations of teachers, and issues related to race, culture, and class often emerge. Although this is a difficult topic to facilitate skillfully, teachers report that this experience is transformative and one of the most profound of their career preparation.”^{xlii} The issue here is helping teachers learn the roles of institutional forms of racism and bias as sources of underdevelopment of children. Teachers, with the support of administrators, must be able to create a climate in the school where it is comfortable to talk about these issues as a piece of children’s development.^{xliii}

This is not to imply that race must, or should, be at the forefront of conversations between teachers and family members, but rather to insist that teachers learn about the context of race and culture bias in which their children and families are embedded so that they can make conscious decisions about



engaging with family and community members in ways that demonstrate a deeper and more complete understanding. One White teacher at a PreK-3rd school reported that her first *fifteen* calls to a child’s home are always positive, thus reflecting her knowledge of and simultaneously overturning the ways in which typical teacher interactions are perceived by Black families, for whom negative feedback is far too common. As one parent memorably commented, “Educators need to know that our work as Black parents is to prevent racist ideology from negatively shaping our children’s schooling experiences. Educators also need to know that for parents of Black boys, resisting the relentless rumors of inferiority about our children and about ourselves as parents is exhausting.”^{xliv} It is the responsibility of schools and districts committed to a PreK-3rd framework not to contribute to this

perspective, but to build positive relationships with families that ensure parent engagement is an ongoing series of supports that help families and children build on strengths and create a strong foundation of connection in the early years.

Importance of Social-Emotional Development

A major strength of the PreK-3rd framework, which provides an opportunity to build on strengths of Black children as well, is the inclusive focus on social-emotional development. As with family engagement, schools and districts operating in a test-driven, measurable-results culture do struggle to prioritize social-emotional supports for children, but the PreK-3rd framework includes components that encourage schools to weave in developmentally-appropriate curricula and assessments at least through the 3rd grade. A focus that includes social-emotional development may be particularly important for

Black students, given our understanding not only of Black children’s needs in this area, but also their strengths. Although research in this area is slim, there is evidence concerning the moral strengths of Black children that schools and teachers can use to combat the notions of inferiority, as expressed by the parent above.

Moral Strengths of Black Children

Richard Weissbourd, in writing about this issue, notes that “popular images and stereotypes have obscured the strong or exemplary moral qualities of many poor children and of immigrant and African-American children across economic classes...Our research suggests that African-American kids have moral strengths that have been obscured by the stereotypes. Many White children describe Black children as more honest, less hypocritical, more independent-minded, more willing to assert their views, and as less concerned about popularity than about respect in comparison with their peers.^{xlv} Yet it is easy to see how some of these characteristics – “independent-minded,” and “willing to assert their views,” for example – may be viewed by teachers as disruptive, if not understood as strengths and opportunities that are rooted in the history and behavioral expectations of Black families and communities. These attributes, when fostered appropriately, are indeed strengths, and should be recognized as such in the context of the PreK-3rd continuum, where children are forming their educational outlook. Instead, however, schools and districts are too often implementing “character education” programs that do not build on the moral and character strengths already demonstrated by their Black students, and may in fact attempt to squash some of those strengths. As Janie Victoria Ward asserts, “in order to increase moral behavior, it is best to examine it in connection to racial identity development.”^{xlvi} In other words, how can schools serving Black children learn about and support moral development in ways that reflect the strengths and expectations of their children’s cultural, familial and communal context – instead of trying to change it?

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Creating a Positive School Climate

One way is to build a positive school climate, since research has indicated that “a positive school climate is especially important for African-American and low socio-economic status students.”^{xlvii} There are different ways to build school climate and culture, however, and it is important for teachers and schools to understand how to create a school culture that targets high achievement, while not sacrificing the social-emotional strengths and connections, particularly in PreK and the early grades. As one researcher notes, referring specifically to Black boys, “efforts to improve the academic performance of African-American males must begin by understanding the attitudes that influence how they perceive schooling and academic pursuits. To the extent that this does not happen, attempts to help Black males based primarily on the sensibilities of those who initiate them are unlikely to be effective and may be no more successful than campaigns that attempt to reduce drug use or violence by urging kids to “just say no.”^{xlviii}



So what, in the context of school climate and culture, can support efforts to improve the academic performance of Black children? Some evidence, including Boykin's assessment of the importance of *communalism*, indicates that "motivation in African-American children from low socio-economic groups is more influenced by the need for affiliation than for achievement."^{xix} Similarly, "African-American children have a stronger sense of communal orientation over an individualistic or minority orientation."ⁱ This may be in contrast to the motivation factors typically assigned to White children, and so it is important, when creating a school culture, to build a sense of community that addresses the motivations of diverse students, from slogans and posters to curricula and the communication of values.

The key to a positive school culture, however, is neither the more superficial elements such as the posters and slogans, nor the curriculum itself, but rather the people who are leading those slogans and delivering the curriculum. In keeping with the importance of relationship development identified above, "African-American children in the 3rd grade viewed teacher-child relationships as the most important dimension of school climate. For them, caring teachers listened to them, were available to comfort and help with school and personal problems, and acknowledged their best efforts."ⁱⁱ Teachers should be encouraged and supported to continue this type of pro-social behavior, which typically begins and is expected in the context of preschool and kindergarten.



Access to Full-Day, High-Quality PreK and Kindergarten

The combined importance of high-quality early education experiences and high-quality, full-day kindergarten for Black children is recognized and emphasized in the context of the PreK-3rd framework. Black children spend a significant amount of their early childhood years in non-parental care; compared with both White and Hispanic children, a higher percentage of Black children are in both relative care (25 percent) and center-based care (66.5 percent) between the ages of 3-5 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ

Given our understanding about the importance of child development in the early years, and the extent to which low-income and Black children tend to be behind before they begin kindergarten, the quality of care in these early childhood, non-parental settings is of critical importance. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that high-quality preschool, dedicated to building social-emotional, literacy and motor skills, can have strong positive short- and long-term effects, particularly for low-income children and children of color. In addition to immediate outcomes demonstrated by higher school readiness, a recent longitudinal study revealed that children from low-income families placed in high-quality preschool programs have fewer behavioral problems in middle childhood, and that such settings were especially important for boys and Black children.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

These outcomes extend far beyond middle childhood as well, as demonstrated by a recent update to the Chicago Longitudinal Study, which tracks adult outcomes for the low-income, primarily African-American children who participated in the Child-Parent Center Education Program (CPCEP), a publicly funded early childhood development program that begins in preschool and provides up to six years of service in the Chicago public schools. Now 28 years old, those who had participated beginning at age 3 showed higher levels of educational attainment, socioeconomic status, job skills, and health insurance coverage as well as lower rates of substance abuse, felony arrest, and incarceration than those who received the usual early childhood services.^{liv} Though statistically significant outcomes were reported for those who received only one year of preschool, many of the most meaningful differences were seen among

students who participated in CPCEP from preschool to third grade. Compared to the control group who received less than four years, the study found that of these students:

- 18 percent more achieved moderate or higher level of socioeconomic status
- 23 percent more had some level of private health insurance coverage
- 55 percent more achieved on-time high school graduation
- 36 percent fewer had been arrested for violence

In response to this research and evidence base, the PreK-3rd framework supports not only voluntary high-quality early childhood education for all 3- and 4-year olds, but also required participation of all children in full-day kindergarten (FDK) as a critical piece of the educational continuum. Increasing evidence shows the efficacy of FDK, in comparison to half-day kindergarten, in boosting children's cognitive learning and academic achievement, especially among low-income children and children of color.^{lv} Although only 12 states require the provision of FDK, full-day programs are more likely to be offered in schools with higher concentrations of Black and Latino students. Indeed, 80 percent of Black children attend a full-day program, compared to 52 percent of White children.^{lvi} While this reflects a high level of access, which meets both the child's needs and, importantly, those of working parents, the variations in quality are significant and must continue to be addressed in order for FDK to reach its potential in supporting achievement, reducing gaps, and providing the key link between early education and the early grades.

Successful, Supportive and Seamless Transitions

Although high percentages of Black children enter kindergarten with some preschool experiences, they are also typically behind in their school-readiness, and often experience difficulty transitioning to the school environment. Robert Pianta, whose research demonstrates that children face discontinuities between preschool and kindergarten that can negatively affect the child's early learning, cites additional studies indicating that almost half of young children experience some difficulty adjusting to school, while problems are even more prevalent among children from low-income families.^{lvii}

The solutions for this adjustment, or transition, period typically evoke a field trip or an open house; yet within a successful PreK-3rd grade continuum, typical transition activities will give way to a seamless system of supports, where the flow from year to year will be natural and supported by aligned and sequenced standards, curriculum, instructions and assessments. Indeed, successful and supportive transitions from early childhood settings through each year of elementary school happen because of system-wide, shared policies and ongoing relationship-building among teachers, parents, providers and children. There are a number of ways in which schools and districts can contribute to this seamless system and to building and strengthening these relationships, including creating expectations, incentives and/or requirements for PreK-3rd grade components such as joint professional development opportunities for providers, teachers, principals and administrators across Head Start, community-based early education and care settings, and elementary schools; integrated data collection and reporting systems from early education through K-3 (and beyond); opportunities to engage families; and schedules that provide shared teacher planning time within and across systems and grade levels.



High Rates of Mobility Among Black Children

These elements are also important when considering another type of transition, based on the mobility of students and families. Aligned standards across schools, districts and states are a key component of the PreK-3rd grade framework, and help to set the stage for mobility that allows children to come into

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classrooms wherever they are and be met with similar curricula, assessments and expectations. Yet more can be done to support teachers and children in the context of mobility, which is a significant issue, particularly for Black children, who “consistently exhibit the highest mobility rates of all racial/ethnic groups.

Overall, only 45 percent of Black third graders are enrolled in their kindergarten school, as compared to nearly 60% of White and Asian third graders.”^{lviii} Not surprisingly, “mobility rates are related to family socio-economic status: socially disadvantaged children change schools more frequently than their more advantaged peers, especially during their first two years in school.”^{lix}

Yet, despite the clear evidence that school mobility has the potential to disrupt the educational experience of mobile children, teachers, and non-mobile children, there is little indication that schools or districts implement any type of systematic approach to supporting teachers of mobile children or to ease the transition of children who are new to a school.^{lx} Teachers in schools with high rates of mobility report that in the vast majority of cases, they are given no advance notice when a new student will arrive in their classrooms and no indication of a child’s past or current performance in the form of records or assessments.^{lxi} Just as teachers of mobile children are given little support, mobile children do not consistently experience organized or planned interventions designed to help them adjust to the new educational context.^{lxii} Although it is not practical to build relationships across districts and states to minimize the transition issues associated with mobility, there are structural elements proposed by the PreK-3rd grade framework, including data sharing, that can be used to address this substantial lack of transition supports as children – particularly Black children – move not only between grades, but also between schools, districts, and even states.

Key Recommendations

1. Promote Effective and Aligned Instruction Across Consecutive Years

- Base instruction on a foundation of aligned standards across grades; curricula that connect to those standards; and assessments that inform the instruction of those standards and the implementation of the curricula.
- Ensure that all teachers and assistant teachers are considered highly-qualified, with appropriate degrees.
- Build schedules that provide joint planning time for teachers within and across systems and grade levels to align their instruction and curriculum.
- Promote professional development around instructional practices that includes a focus on early education and child development principles.

2. Recognize the Importance of Positive Relationship Development Between Children and Teachers

- Strive for low teacher-child ratios.
- Value the role of culture and community context, by prioritizing and facilitating conversations that include discussions of race, class and culture.
- Support the recruitment of an increasingly diverse teaching force, seeking out and promoting talent from within schools and surrounding communities.

- Support teachers to identify and engage in a range of classroom management strategies that specifically support the learning of Black students.

3. *Create Strong, Culturally-Relevant and Systemic Family and Community Engagement*

- Build upon good cultural practice, such as including children’s extended family members, engaging in summer-time home-visiting, leading school-based playgroups, encouraging parent-led workshops, and holding regular cultural celebrations.
- Provide opportunities to explicitly teach teachers from all backgrounds how to develop and strengthen productive relationships with parents and the community at large.
- Insist that teachers learn about the context of race and culture bias in which their children and families are embedded so that they can make conscious decisions about engaging with family and community members in ways that demonstrate a deeper and more complete understanding.

4. *Prioritize the Importance of Social-Emotional Development*

- Support children’s moral development by recognizing how strengths can be obscured by stereotype, and be wary of character education programs that are not reflective of the strengths and expectations of children’s cultural, familial and community contexts.
- Create a positive school climate and culture that addresses the motivations of diverse students by focusing on children’s need for affiliation and community as well as the drive for individualistic achievement.

5. *Advocate for Access to Full-Day, High-Quality PreK and Kindergarten*

- Support voluntary, high-quality early childhood education in community and school-based settings for all 3- and 4-year olds.
- Require participation of all children in full-day kindergarten (FDK).

6. *Plan for Successful, Supportive and Seamless Transitions*

- Create expectations, incentives and/or requirements for joint professional development opportunities for providers, teachers, principals and administrators across Head Start, community-based early education and care settings, and elementary schools.
- Integrate data collection and reporting systems from early education through K-3 (and beyond).
- Engage and reach out to families early, often, and with different means of communication.
- Implement a systematic approach to supporting teachers of mobile children and to supporting children who are new to a school.

Conclusion

The case for a PreK-3rd framework has been made clearly and eloquently across a range of publications, and in a number of states, districts and schools that have incorporated elements of the framework into their daily practice, with positive achievement results for students. It is critical, however, to maintain the richness of the framework as it is increasingly used in communities struggling to close their achievement gaps, and effectively serve and educate their Black children and families. By viewing the PreK-3rd framework through a cultural lens, and understanding its elements in a cultural context, the framework itself becomes stronger and more meaningful for Black children, families and communities.

Note

Due to the fact that the descriptive terms “Black,” “African-American” and “culture” are defined and used in so many different ways in social science literature, we believe a note of explanation is in order with respect to their use here. At the National Black Child Development Institute, we operate from the assumption that race and culture are separate concepts -- race being based on skin color and culture being based on socialization. Because the characteristics and trends we are most concerned about in this discussion are both racial and cultural in origin, we use the term “Black” to describe children and families who are both racially black and of African origin throughout the diaspora. To stay true to the language of other writers, however, African-American also appears in their direct quotes and references to their original research, even where their descriptive reference is both racial and cultural.

When, however, we are specifically talking about cultural patterns, we use “African-American” to describe learned values, traditions, beliefs and behaviors with specific reference to Black people of African ancestry, recognizing that there is variation between and within groups of specific geographic and historical origin as well as generational variations.

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