

# A PreK-3rd Coalition

HOW THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ACCOMPLISHED MORE TOGETHER THAN ALONE



By Paul Nyhan

## OVERVIEW

In public education, school districts are often islands where leaders manage waves of new policies, reforms and initiatives with little cooperation among neighbors. Two years ago, educators in Edmonds, Everett and Seattle connected their islands to work together on a promising education reform: PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment.

In many ways, these three districts were natural allies in early education, unified by proximity, the challenges of running urban schools, and a growing interest in the potential of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> strategies and early learning programs. Each district was already working on aligning PreK and elementary schools and struggling with many of the same issues. There was not enough support and understanding of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> among senior leaders or effective training for teachers. Relationships between preschools and elementary schools were sometimes weak or non-existent.

Given this common ground, Edmonds, Everett and Seattle formed a coalition among the three districts in 2011. They

realized they could accomplish more together on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> than alone.

The PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition developed a dual focus. It concentrated on top leadership by building understanding and support of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> among district leaders, since without their backing sustained progress would be nearly impossible. It also worked on the ground level by helping teachers and school administrators align these grades with practical and collaborative solutions to challenges shared by all three districts.

On both levels, the coalition made striking progress during its first 18 months. It built bridges between early learning providers and elementary schools, improved teacher training while cutting its cost, and spread effective strategies. It also helped to implement Washington state's new assessment and transition program for incoming kindergarten students (WaKIDS). Among its greatest accomplishments was that Edmonds, Everett and Seattle district leaders increasingly championed PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> inside and outside their districts.

## What Is PreK-3rd?

In the coalition's work, PreK-3rd aligns and connects a district's K-3 system with its early learning community. The strategy has three broad goals:

- Connect and collaborate with the PreK community to improve school readiness.
- Develop, improve and align high-quality instructional strategies.
- Connect leaders across early learning and K-12 and build their support for an aligned approach

The coalition's first chapter was the story of how three districts together created an entrepreneurial agent of change that could, at times, operate more quickly and with greater flexibility than any one school system. In fewer than two years, the new coalition propelled these districts to take critical intermediate steps - improving how teachers, early educators, leaders, families and school boards work together. The coalition is helping drive more seamless transitions to school, sustained student achievement in the early elementary years, and an approach to leadership and resources that maximizes the strengths of early learning and early elementary.

## Laying the Foundation

In 2009, the Edmonds School District planted the seed for the coalition with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to expand its kindergarten transition program, Jump Start, and strengthen its relationships with the early learning community. The district's goal was to improve school readiness for at-risk children by using the grant to enhance Jump Start at its six schools with the highest needs. Within Jump Start it created learning labs where kindergarten and early learning educators worked side by side and shared information about students.

Over the years, Edmonds has fine-tuned Jump Start at all levels, including reducing the cost per school from \$10,000 to \$4,000.

The grant work, however, went well beyond Jump Start. Over two years, the district built bridges between its K-3 teachers and the area's diverse early learning providers. Ultimately, it wanted early learning and early elementary teachers to share a common language and vision, and one of its first steps was to get teachers from both worlds in the same room for training.

To accomplish this, district officials knocked on doors of local preschools and child care programs and invited early educators to one of three Saturday morning joint training sessions held in the grant's first year. They even promised free lattes from their rented coffee cart.

They might not have needed the free coffee. More than 100 educators packed each meeting, and they appeared as eager as the district to connect. At the sessions, kindergarten and PreK teachers discussed skills students need when they start school, exchanged classroom materials and traded ideas and observations about child development and instruction.

## Scope of the PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition:

- Edmonds, Everett and Seattle school districts.
- More than 250 sites
- Approximately 85,000 students, roughly 8 percent of students in Washington state public schools.

"This is what we have been looking for in the child care community, a connection with the school district," said Bonnie Senter, who has worked in early learning for 35 years and runs Helen's Daycare in Lynnwood. "This is what we have been looking for (for) years."

While the Edmonds grant team reached out to the early learning community broadly, it started small within the district, a strategy the coalition later adopted. The staff of two's mantra was 'Go with the goers,' which meant focus on leaders and staff who already believed in the importance of early education, and then expand.

This focus on building and expanding existing support was a defining characteristic of the coalition's early success. Even though it did not have every leader and strategic piece in place, it built momentum, according to Kristie Kauerz, a national expert on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> and research assistant professor at the University of Washington, who works with the coalition.

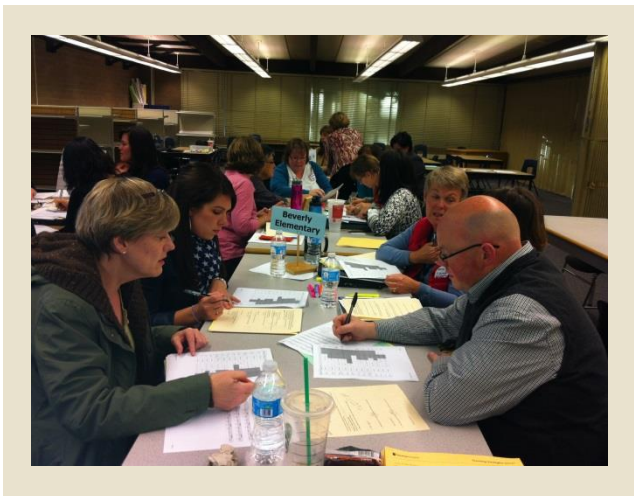
"You are not going to get everyone on board initially. You just have to go with who you've got," said Anne Arnold, Edmonds' Early Learning Liaison.

One of the people they got was Edmonds School Board member Susan Phillips, a strong supporter of early education. When the team met to plan their next steps, Phillips often showed up. When the grant team sponsored Saturday morning training sessions, she sometimes was

there. And most importantly, when the school board, which was generally supportive of early learning investments, debated early education, she voted.

The role of Phillips and a supportive school board in Edmonds' success is an important lesson for any district aligning PreK and K-3. Since a board sets a district's budget and has only one employee, the superintendent, it plays a decisive role in developing and sustaining education reforms. Even as the Edmonds School Board cut roughly \$30 million from the district's budget over the last five years, it invested in early education by increasing funding for Jump Start and converting five half-day kindergartens to full-day.

As the Edmonds School District strengthened connections with the early learning community it became clear there was a broader opportunity.



### Common Ground to Build a Coalition

As Edmonds implemented its plan, Seattle and Everett School Districts developed their own visions of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>. In Seattle, the school district and the city created a five-year action plan to integrate PreK and the first four elementary grades. It already had a model PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> school, South Shore School. In Everett, the school board was studying PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> and the district was developing an early literacy program. Early learning leaders in Everett were already talking.

Even though these three school districts were working on the potential and challenges of the same idea, each was too often unaware of what the other two were doing.

“There is just not an easily accessible vehicle for districts to work together, especially if they are not in the same educational service district.” Edmonds’ Anne Arnold said.

But, these districts had a lot in common, and in many cases more than with nearby smaller districts, particularly in professional development. A rural district, for example, may have four to six kindergarten teachers, while an urban district may have 60 or more. Simply getting 60 teachers to training sessions, often held 70 miles from Edmonds in Anacortes, was expensive and disruptive to classrooms. Plus, larger districts, such as Edmonds, Everett and Seattle, have internal experts and resources that could be shared to make training easier and less expensive.

Urban districts also have flexibility to weave together a wide range of funding streams - Title I, special education and English Language Learners funds – under a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> strategy, but this work is not always easy. An urban coalition can help multiple districts build support among departments that control these funds.

Finally, three districts working together have a stronger voice to push for both local and statewide PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> changes.

“We have been able to attend Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) meetings as a coalition and ask for support as a coalition, which has been more powerful than doing it as single district,” said Kimberly Kinzer, the coalition lead for Seattle Public Schools and its Director of Early Learning. “We are together serving a whole lot of children. Having once voice helps us to have more influence.”

Possibilities for cooperation among the districts emerged as Edmonds developed a second grant proposal that would build on its PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work. The three districts could help one another build support among district leaders, improve professional development, and develop smoother transitions between PreK and elementary school.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had been looking for these types of opportunities since 2008 when it made its first investments in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> in Washington. The foundation wanted to make targeted investments that not only showed the potential of better connections between PreK and K-3, but also how districts could work together to improve classroom instruction and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> leadership at all levels.

To advance that work, the foundation asked Edmonds to add a coalition of three to five urban schools to its proposal. It would have two primary goals: Expand understanding and support of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work among superintendents, assistant superintendents, and other district leaders and support that work around the Puget Sound region. In June, 2011, the PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition was launched when the foundation approved a second grant for Edmonds.

“The coalition was really driven by the need to have interaction with larger urban districts that had common needs and challenges,” said Edmonds’ Anne Arnold. “Our big vision was to connect with a stream of school districts committed to PreK-3rd all along the I-5 corridor.”

The coalition also had a more specific goal. It would help these three districts explore how to integrate the state’s new kindergarten assessment program, the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills or WaKIDS, into the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> continuum. The program was a natural part of a bridge between early learning and K-3 because it assessed incoming students’ skills, engaged their families, and supported collaboration between early learning and kindergarten teachers. It could connect other pieces already in place: Jump Start in Edmonds; early literacy professional development in Everett; and collaboration among early education partners in Seattle.



### First Steps: Building Understanding and Support

One of the coalition’s first goals was to break through the demands that compete for the attention of district leaders in Edmonds, Everett and Seattle to explain why PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> was worth their support. The coalition brought them together for a one-day meeting at the Gates Foundation, where national and local experts explained the strategy’s potential. They highlighted:

- Kindergarten can be too late because achievement gaps can begin at nine months of age. Low-income four-and-five-year-old children, on average, are more than a year below national norms in language development when they enter kindergarten.

- Research has repeatedly shown high-quality early education prepares students for school, supports long-term achievement and reduces costs, such as special education placement.
- Once PreK students enter the K-12 system, high-quality instruction is critical in the early elementary years.

At the meeting, how these ideas were discussed was as important as the ideas themselves. Experts placed PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> in a superintendent’s context by discussing how it can boost high school graduation rates and prepare students for careers. They explained, for example, how students who attended one of the nation’s longest-running PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> programs, Child-Parent Centers in Chicago, were more likely to graduate from high school, stay out of jail and have health insurance as adults than those in a control group.

They also introduced one of the coalition’s more influential tools, model school districts with established and successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> systems, including Bremerton School District in Washington and Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. After a decade of reforms that linked PreK with K-12, in Montgomery County roughly 90 percent of the district’s high school seniors graduated and 77 percent went on to college.

“Suddenly, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> made a whole lot more sense and became a lot more important to them,” Cynthia Jones, Director of Categorical Programs for Everett Public Schools, said.

Montgomery County’s story resonated with Bree Dusseault, a Seattle Public Schools executive director. Dusseault brought the lessons back to the 12 public schools she oversees in Southeast Seattle, where 90 percent qualify for federal Title I funding. The story encouraged Dusseault and principals to have conversations about their focus on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work and she is seeking more professional development for principals in this area.

While success stories helped, school leaders said perhaps the most valuable part of the meeting was the time it gave them to think about one strategy.

“I think part of the power in attending was that kind of time and space to plan together is absolutely irreplaceable. We don’t have opportunities in the system even to hear the same message,” said Marni Campbell, executive director for northwest schools in the Seattle district. “Here is the point where we can move forward.”

They were inspired to move forward because they saw their peers come together around that point, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>, which, in

turn, helped them envision investing in this idea across three of the largest school districts in Washington, said Tony Byrd, Assistant Superintendent for Student Learning in the Edmonds School District.

“People at my level, assistant superintendents and directors, now have this network. It helped us talk with people about how to manage system change,” Byrd added.

Through this meeting the coalition encouraged leaders to begin building a cross-district network that could develop and support PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work and to expand their view of public education to include PreK.

“It is defining the boundaries of education beyond the traditional lines,” said Nick Brossoit, Superintendent of the Edmonds School District. “It makes the rest of the system more powerful.”

### An Early Opportunity to Work Together: WaKIDS

As soon as the PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition formed it had a defining and unifying challenge: WaKIDS.

In 2011, Washington was in the midst of rolling out WaKIDS, a statewide program that provides teachers and parents with a clearer sense of the skills of incoming kindergarten students and improves the transition from early learning to elementary school. It has three main components:

- A whole-child assessment: It provides teachers and parents with an inventory of the social/emotional, physical, cognitive, language, literacy and math development of kindergarten students.
- Family Connection: It connects families with the K-12 system as students begin kindergarten.
- PreK-K Collaboration: It builds stronger relationships between early learning and elementary teachers, aligning their practices to encourage smooth transitions from early education to K-3.

The system creates opportunities to improve the quality of early learning, so students are better prepared for school, and early elementary grades by aligning instruction to meet identified needs of students. It also provides information on the skills of kindergarten students to other key stakeholders: principals; superintendents; school boards; policymakers; the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Department of Early Learning.

WaKIDS was the type of common challenge the coalition was created to tackle. All three school districts would have to implement WaKIDS, but instead of doing all of the work

on their own, Edmonds, Seattle and Everett could join forces.

“We can do a much better job of supporting teachers in this work in nearby districts by leveraging our resources so that all of our teachers can tap into the training and support without having to drive so far,” said Edmonds’ Anne Arnold.

Like Edmonds’ work on its original grant, the coalition focused on professional development. The three districts held joint WaKIDS training sessions that were conveniently located and open to Seattle, Edmonds and Everett teachers. They shared trainers and highlighted lessons about what was and was not helping educators, saving both time and money, while improving the effectiveness of training.

“We have people who want to do WaKIDS next year,” Arnold said.

The coalition effectively tailored support to teachers because its leadership came from the classroom - all of the coalition’s three leaders were former teachers. This is another lesson from the coalition. A successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> coalition needs leaders with strong connections to the classroom and the passion and commitment to connect classrooms within a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> continuum, Edmonds’ Brossoit said.



All three districts also used the coalition as a tool to secure additional support for WaKIDS. Instead of struggling with WaKIDS on their own, staff in Edmonds, Everett and Seattle worked together on a request to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for WaKIDS assistance. This cooperation allowed each district to use the strengths of the others and

spurred the coalition to develop seven common priorities for other districts working on WaKIDS:

- Provide multiple training dates and convenient locations to increase the participation of kindergarten teachers.
- Make differentiated training support available to kindergarten teachers to ensure that data is reliable, complete and informs instruction.
- Use Teaching Strategies Gold to monitor progress of the highest needs students.
- Use Jump Start to collect student data.
- Delay the start of kindergarten to establish family connections.
- Establish a fall PreK-K Early Learning event on assessment to connect with PreK partners and share assessment information.
- Pilot the use of electronic tablets for data collection.

Together, these seven strategies dovetailed with one of the reasons the Gates Foundation supported the coalition. It wanted to help three of the state's larger school districts, but it also wanted the coalition to have a wider impact by developing lessons for other districts around Washington.

"This project builds on the unique strengths of each district. Now, the coalition will share its best practices and training resources. The idea is to work together and creatively to help make WaKIDS a success," said Jodi Haavig, the Gates Foundation program officer who works with the coalition.



## Planning Broader Action

While the coalition worked on WaKIDS in the winter and spring of 2012, it developed a broader plan to support PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work across all three school districts.

The plan came into focus when the Edmonds, Everett and Seattle school districts sent a team to Harvard University's PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Institute in May, 2012. The districts applied together, using resources from all three to win one of only 12 team spots.

The team that traveled to the institute reflected the growing network of leaders the coalition was knitting together across all three districts around PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>. The team included: Kimberly Kinzer, Seattle's coalition leader and director of early learning for the Seattle School District; Wendy London, director of curriculum and assessment, Seattle district; Sharon Knight, city of Seattle's Human Services Department; Tony Byrd, assistant superintendent, Edmonds School District; Susan Phillips, Edmonds School Board member; Anne Arnold, coalition lead and early learning liaison for Edmonds School District; Lynn Lahey, coalition lead and curriculum specialist, early childhood education, Everett School District; Terry Edwards, associate superintendent and chief academic officer, Everett School District; and Cynthia Jones, director of categorical programs, Everett School District.

Once again, one of the most valuable aspects of the four-day institute was time. Leaders had an opportunity to think deeply about PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> alignment and plan the coalition's next steps, work they turned into a Theory of Action.

The Theory of Action was part of an effort to craft a message and vision for the coalition's work. It emphasized common challenges, such as WaKIDS implementation and teacher training, where the districts could make progress together.

"I think they have shown the truest form of collaboration. They are practical about it," said Jodi Haavig from the Gates Foundation.

Priorities included:

- Define and communicate school preparedness.
- Improve instructional practices of teachers across PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>.
- Establish benchmarks for students before and after WaKIDS.
- Develop clear transitions among PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>.
- Expand leadership capacity.

- Strengthen family/community engagement.
- Influence state level support and decision-making around PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> work.

The time at Harvard served another important purpose. It deepened support and commitment among district leaders who would drive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> reforms.

“It really made a difference in terms of our common understanding. We developed relationships,” said Lynn Lahey, Everett’s coalition leader. “We actually had time to talk to one another.”

Two weeks after returning to Washington, the coalition’s work at Harvard fed into its third leadership convening at the end of May. This meeting was designed to help districts build PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> systems focused on strengthening PreK-K connections and whole child assessment. It also introduced the idea of a Principals Institute focused on birth-age eight child development, and the opportunity of WaKIDS.

At the one-day meeting, district leaders voiced their support for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>, even as they recognized the challenges of implementing the strategy.

“I think the devil is in the details. That will be really hard work,” Edmonds assistant superintendent Tony Byrd said during the meeting held at the Gates Foundation. “But, I think we are excited to do it.”

Even as supporters planned their next steps at the meeting and Harvard, the coalition’s influence began to show up in all three school districts:

- The Seattle School District launched Edmonds’ Jump Start model as a pilot program at seven schools in the 2012-13 school year.
- Thanks to growing support among leaders, the Everett School District doubled its early learning staff in June, adding a full-time early learning facilitator and a full-time administrative assistant, as it cut staff in other areas.
- Even as the weak economy led the Edmonds School Board to cut spending, it voted to fully fund Jump Start – Gates Foundation grants had paid for it during the last two years - and convert five half-day kindergarten classrooms to full-day.

### Engaging Drivers of Change: Principals

As the coalition’s work began to impact district decisions, its supporters knew they needed to engage school leaders, who would actually build PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> systems.

In many ways, principals drive school reforms because they advance a strategy by creating a common language, vision

and purpose around it within their schools. They also implement a strategy’s new systems, curriculum and professional development.

Like superintendents, though, principals juggle many responsibilities every day. The coalition’s goal was to break through that crush of budget, personnel and policy issues by giving them time to think more deeply about PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> at a one-day institute modeled partly on its first three convenings. At that meeting in November, national experts once again explained the potential of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> and helped principals plan ways to align with early learning providers.

The ideas resonated with the dozens of principals in the conference room that day, including those who were not connected with local preschools. At one point, the room buzzed with so many ideas about how to connect principals refused to put their hands down when a moderator tried to move on to a new subject. Principals also heard from their peers about how PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> can change a school.

At Seattle’s Leschi Elementary School, teachers told Principal Cashel Toner: “Whatever you did to bring Jump Start to our school, please do it again. It has changed the start of school season.” For the first time in years, Toner did not suspend any kindergarten students during the initial months of school because transitions were smoother.

In six months, the Principals Institute went from an idea on a whiteboard to a reality, another example of how quickly the coalition can move. Since the coalition often has greater flexibility than school district departments, it can move more quickly in some areas, such as professional development.



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## Conclusion

In two years, the PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition made strides toward creating sustainable PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> systems in Edmonds, Everett and Seattle. But, its work is just beginning.

The coalition built support among leaders in all three districts, but nowhere near all that it will need. Elementary school teachers received valuable training and support from the coalition, particularly on WaKIDS, and that work will only expand in coming years. Finally, good ideas, such as Jump Start, reached new schools, but only a fraction of what is possible.

Overall, the coalition quickly built momentum. Now, it is setting new goals to sustain that momentum and implement PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>, including:

- **Define school readiness:** The coalition plans to develop a clear and usable definition of school readiness for parents, the PreK community, elementary school teachers, principals and other educators.
- **Use Title I:** It will develop strategies and forums to help school districts determine if and when to shift federal Title 1 funding from elementary schools to early learning.
- **Roll out WaKIDS:** It will continue to support implementation of WaKIDS across all three districts and around the state.
- **Educate:** It will hold two more convenings this year in February and April.
- **Long-term:** The coalition will help other districts learn how to collaborate to drive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> changes

Bigger and tougher tests lay in the future. Once PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> systems are in place, will scores on standardized third grade and fourth grade math and reading tests improve? Will PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>'s promise of stronger educational starts create more on-time high school graduates, college students and successful adults?

The PreK-3 Cross District Leadership Coalition is off to a strong start toward reaching those goals and showing that three urban school districts sometimes can accomplish more together than alone.

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

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