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# Using Pre-K to Advance Education Reform:

## Opportunities for State Advisory Councils

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## Introduction and Purpose

The U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top competition for states and the impending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act herald a new era in education reform. Increasingly, pre-kindergarten—which provides a publicly funded, standards-based education for three and four year olds—is recognized as an entry point for public education because of its proven effectiveness in closing achievement gaps and improving school performance.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the 2007 Head Start Act reauthorization required creation of State Advisory Councils (Councils) to facilitate development of improved and comprehensive policies for a birth-to-five early childhood system, including state-funded pre-k.<sup>2</sup> Yet many states are only now beginning to create strong connections among pre-k, Councils, and education reform.

Cultivating such connections makes sense. Within the birth-to-five continuum, pre-k—as an organized, educational program tied to explicit learning standards and teacher qualifications—has a distinct connection to schools and public education systems. Therefore, even though Councils are multi-stakeholder groups with representatives from across the early childhood spectrum, they are well positioned to influence their states' school improvement activities by strengthening linkages between pre-k programs and education reform agendas. Moreover, the Councils also are charged with increasing coherence within the early childhood system, and in many states this includes a specific focus on pre-k education and school readiness.

This report, "Using Pre-K to Advance Education Reform," responds to this opportunity by identifying ways Councils can leverage states' pre-k policy goals and infrastructure to further education reform efforts. Early education and public education will be able to better serve young children when

Councils help design early childhood systems that explicitly link to the early elementary years.

The authors conducted interviews with active participants in select Councils and with individuals knowledgeable about them, focusing on the seven states<sup>3</sup> that discussed pre-k in their applications for federal State Advisory Council start-up funds. Those discussions explored how Councils planned to position pre-k as part of their states' education reform efforts and connect it to the later grades across different policy areas such as standards, assessments and data. Overall, these efforts proved to be relatively early in their development, with states enthusiastic about moving forward but recognizing that they have a great deal of work ahead.

After sharing what was learned from this exploration, this report identifies specific steps Councils can take to maximize their states' investments in early education. Because pre-k is such a central part of education reform, the recommendations include ways to create policy alignment prior to and following pre-k. This reflects the intention of Councils to facilitate a continuum of structured educational experiences for children from birth to age eight and the opportunity to position pre-k as a priority education reform strategy.

## Leveraging Change

### The Policy Context

Councils are uniquely positioned to coordinate early learning with education reform efforts—especially pre-k, which increasingly is being recognized as a starting point for public education. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, states took on a larger role in early learning, rapidly increasing the size of their pre-k programs, while federal funding for Head Start remained stagnant.<sup>4</sup> This state-level momentum coincided with significant increases in state responsibility for education policy.<sup>5</sup> In

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response, some states formed multi-stakeholder advisory councils to create coherence among early learning programs and connect them with the later grades in a Pre-K-12 continuum.<sup>6</sup>

Following the creation in 2007 of the requirement that states establish Councils, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided one-time start-up grants to Councils in the 45 states that participated in the voluntary, noncompetitive process.<sup>7</sup> Although created by the Head Start Act, the statutory language creating State Advisory Councils makes clear that their policy charge extends to a broad spectrum of early learning programs, not just Head Start.

More recently, the federal government announced the \$500 million Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge. This newest federal support for early education and care seeks to elevate the visibility of states' early learning system-building efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Since its beginning as a movement, state-funded pre-k has become a politically popular program. The interviews revealed that some Councils consequently opted to use their start-up grants to address issues in need of championing other than pre-k. Nonetheless, all Councils should consider how pre-k can better be aligned with the later grades in the Pre-K-12 system and with other early learning programs.

In fact, the inclusion of the Early Learning Challenge in the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top program sends a strong signal that early learning is an essential foundation of Pre-K-12 education. The Early Learning Challenge sought competitive plans for a comprehensive early childhood policy agenda, including system elements such as child assessment, data systems and career progression for early learning personnel. It also gave states the opportunity to show how their early learning reforms connect to public education, drawing attention to key points of connection between pre-k and the later grades.<sup>9</sup>

### The Program and System Context

The term "pre-k" conveys a direct connection to kindergarten and the education system. Yet children who participate in publicly funded programs are served not only by public schools but also by a wide range of other public and private settings. As a result, pre-k often is closely connected to other publicly funded early education and care programs that serve children of the same age or younger. The federal Head Start program provides education and development services for three and four year olds. Subsidized child care, funded in whole or in part by the Child Care and Development Fund, supports young children whose families meet state participation requirements. Many Head Start and child care providers offer pre-k in conjunction with their other services. This mixed delivery system offers Councils opportunities to bring greater coherence to the early education and care system and to facilitate collaborative partner-

ships between schools and a community's diverse pre-k providers.<sup>10</sup>

The federal government and states also invest in programs focused on infants and toddlers, including Early Head Start and home visiting programs. Children served by these programs often go on to enroll in state pre-k programs, creating an opportunity for Councils to broaden the scope of their states' education reform agendas.

Finally, the work of Councils can be coupled with state entities created to provide coordination from early learning through graduate school and into the workforce. Often referred to as P-20 Councils, many such structures have been created since 1996.<sup>11</sup>

## Opportunities for Using Pre-K to Strengthen and Advance State Education Reform Efforts

Given the system, policy and program contexts described above, Councils can use pre-k to advance education reform in several ways that share two common themes as described below.

### Connect Public Education Leaders with School Readiness Programs

On a broad policy level, Councils can provide a forum for informing state public education leaders about the array of early learning programs that can undergird reform efforts. While many in the education community may be familiar with pre-k as a school-based program, they may be less aware of the range of early learning programs and

services that support children's school readiness. Typically absent in the education community are relationships with private pre-k, child care and Head Start providers, home visiting programs and others. Councils can play an important role in creating those connections by building awareness, forging policy linkages and partnering with state agencies. Here are some examples drawn from the interviews:

- **Help education leaders and practitioners understand the educational impact of high-quality pre-k.** A rich body of research shows that pre-k can promote children's success in kindergarten, diminish the achievement gap and facilitate long-term outcomes such as high school graduation and college entry.<sup>12</sup> Councils can shift the conversation to how pre-k and other early learning programs fit into a state's overall education reform landscape. Rhode Island and Louisiana are two states where State Advisory Council leaders have recognized this opportunity and plan to strengthen pre-k's positioning as an education reform lever in the near future.
- **Build awareness among educators of the full range of early learning programs that support children's school readiness.** More school district leaders now understand that achievement gaps begin well before children enter kindergarten. Stronger connections between schools and early learning providers can strengthen practices in

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Information sharing facilitated by Councils should connect early learning with elementary schools.

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community-based settings and help increase kindergarten readiness. In Nevada, for example, Council grants to local early childhood councils are being used to encourage joint training for teachers of four year olds. In the process, these grants are increasing support for pre-k and a Pre-K–3 structure within the public education community.

- **Support school districts to create a strong Pre-K–3 education continuum.** Information sharing facilitated by Councils should connect early learning with elementary schools, taking into account children’s learning experiences prior to pre-k, as well as in kindergarten and the primary grades. Early learning providers often are unfamiliar with the expectations and practices that define kindergarten and the early elementary grades, and all elementary educators benefit from knowing more about the full continuum of learning and the developmental needs of young children that are beyond academic skills. Creating an exchange of ideas about best practices is of growing importance as states build coordinated standards and assessments that support children’s learning and development over time. Through local advisory groups across the state, Nevada’s Council awards competitive grants to align practices from pre-k through third grade. It also partners with the state department of education in encouraging districts to support pre-k programs using Title I dollars.
- **Facilitate ways for communities to build relationships between pre-k and the early primary grades.** Connections between early learning and public education can vary from one community to another, and Councils can help communities find the linkages that work best for them. In Massachusetts, for example, a Council committee identified low-income rural children and families as an under-resourced population. As a result, Rural Community Strategic Planning grants were distributed to local early childhood councils to promote partnerships between schools and early learning settings in these areas. These collaborations, in turn, seek to increase access, improve

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program quality, and more generally, support the Council’s birth-to-age-eight system-building agenda. Pre-k often serves as a starting point from which providers and school districts can build effective relationships.

### **Attend to Policy Alignment Between Pre-K and Public Education**

State early learning programs often leave many children unserved.<sup>13</sup> Yet the fiscal climate is making it difficult to advocate for program expansion at this time. While Councils still should develop long-term plans for financing pre-k expansion, now is an opportune time to focus on alignment between pre-k and the later grades, which can lay the groundwork for better child outcomes and help justify program growth as the economy improves.

Facilitating connections between public education and early learning becomes easier once education leaders understand the contribution of pre-k experiences to later academic outcomes. Some states are strengthening Pre-K–12 connections by aligning learning standards and assessments, connecting longitudinal data and improving the overall quality of their educator workforce. Performing this role is especially appropriate for Councils because one of their founding purposes is to facilitate connections across programs serving children birth to five and beyond.

For example, the Arkansas Council, called the Early Childhood Commission, has become a valued partner to K-12 leaders in conversations about implementing the Common Core State Standards (Common Core), developing age-appropriate assessments, and connecting early childhood data to the state's longitudinal data system.

Michigan's Council identified aligning the state's early learning and curriculum standards for infants and toddlers with those of its pre-k program as a priority. In turn, this continuum is being used to create aligned and developmentally appropriate standards for kindergarten through third grade. A cross section of state agency staff serving on the Council is meeting regularly to complete this task and plans to submit its recommendations to the State Board of Education.

## Recommendations

As Councils consider how to act upon these opportunities to strengthen connections among birth-to-five systems, pre-k and state education reform, they should give consideration to the political, historical, and structural contexts for Pre-K-12 education—past and future.

The ability to position pre-k as a starting point for public education depends on the maturity and effectiveness of a state's program. States with a well established and successful pre-k should think about how changes in education policy connect to early learning, with pre-k serving not only as an important element of reform but also as a key connection point between kindergarten and programs serving younger children. States with less mature programs may want to focus on how expanding and evaluating the long-term impact of pre-k could support reform efforts.

Another consideration is the nature of the Council's charge. Councils may be expected to develop a comprehensive and interconnected vision for services—or may be more narrowly focused on managing one or more grant-funded projects. Councils responsible for a broad agenda will be able to think about pre-k's role within that larger picture, while more narrowly focused Councils can consider how targeted projects connect strategically with state pre-k. The direction a Council has been given likely will be related to the state's existing early childhood governance structure.

Given these insights and those offered by the interviewees, Councils should become even more intentional in strengthening their states' pre-k and forging policy linkages with education systems. Toward this end, they are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

- **Define an overarching vision that includes a strong role for pre-k.** Councils are required to perform needs assessments. These should address how state pre-k fits within the larger early education system and connects to kindergarten and the primary grades.
- **Participate in communications plans discussing education reforms.** During the past few years, federal and state education reforms have multiplied, and state education agencies are working to communicate to their constituencies about new strategies and initiatives. While pre-k will not necessarily be a major focus of these communications, it can be incorporated in ways that build understanding of its role in diminishing the achievement gap and improving school performance.
- **Improve the quality of the pre-k workforce.** Many states require pre-k teachers to meet specific qualifications and receive ongoing professional development.<sup>14</sup> Councils can improve the qualifications for early learning personnel by facilitating the development of teacher competencies that can become part of policy. Councils also can help ensure that preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities are organized around

approved skills, which, in turn, can facilitate reform efforts in public education, especially the early elementary grades.

- **Build connections with the Common Core.** Most states are connecting their standards-based reforms with the Common Core, a set of learning standards intended to define a consistent and rigorous progression from kindergarten through high school graduation and to ensure that graduates are ready for college. Given overlapping interests, State Advisory Councils and P-20 Councils should consider joining in this work.

In the process of adopting the Common Core, states are changing expectations for what a kindergarten needs to know and be able to do. Additionally, many state education agencies are updating their early learning standards to align with the Common Core. Councils can help lead the work of determining how to develop and implement new standards for early learning programs. They also can play a role in shaping how implementation of the Common Core at the K-3 level builds on

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best practices in early learning, such as attending to children's social-emotional as well as academic development.

- **Improve the quality of early learning assessments.** Aligned child assessments in state pre-k and kindergarten can assist educators at both levels in improving children's learning and development. As states increasingly focus on child assessment in the years prior to third grade (when state accountability testing begins), early education offers the chance to ensure that children are assessed in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways and that the findings are used appropriately. Councils should be an important voice in ensuring that child assessments in state pre-k programs and in the early grades meet the standards associated with best practice.<sup>15</sup>
- **Design unified early childhood data systems.** As Councils advance efforts to build comprehensive early childhood data systems, they will want to ensure that data from early learning programs can be connected to their states' longitudinal data systems for public education. This is essential to tracking the long-term effectiveness of pre-k and other services supporting children's school readiness.
- **Improve state funding for pre-k.** Councils should consider ways to design and promote improved financing mechanisms for early learning programs. States revisiting their school funding formulas should use a Pre-K-12 frame and consider the essential place of pre-k in public education finance.<sup>16</sup> Leveraging Title I funds is another strategy Councils can apply to support early learning.<sup>17</sup>
- **Integrate pre-k in school turnaround efforts.** Taking dramatic action to improve the lowest-performing schools is an increasingly popular education reform strategy. States presently are implementing approximately \$1.4 billion in federal School Improvement Grants.<sup>18</sup> Councils can work to incorporate early learning into state school turnaround plans, which in turn can help improve children's school success in kindergarten and the primary grades.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

High-quality pre-k plays a crucial role in improving student outcomes. Its impact will be even stronger if states thoughtfully connect policies between pre-k and the early elementary grades. Many Councils already are performing a leadership role in this regard, which contributes in important ways to the design of comprehensive education reforms. In some states, Early Learning Challenge funds will further these efforts. Yet all Councils can seize the opportunity to create policies that support great pre-k programs and pave the way for children's success throughout their academic careers.



## Interviewees

**Annette Bridges**, Director  
Division of Early Childhood Development  
Kentucky Department of Education  
Lexington, KY

**Joan M. Blough**, Vice President  
Great Start System Development and Evaluation  
Early Childhood Investment Corporation  
Lansing, MI

**Lindy Buch**, Director  
Office of Early Childhood Education and Family  
Services  
Michigan Department of Education  
Lansing, MI

**Elizabeth Burke Bryant**, Executive Director  
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Co-Chair  
Rhode Island Early Learning Council  
Providence, RI

**Margot Chappel**, Director  
Head Start Collaboration and Early Childhood  
Systems Office  
Reno, NV

**JD Chesloff**, Executive Director  
Massachusetts Business Roundtable and Chair,  
Massachusetts Department of Early Education and  
Care Board  
Boston, MA

**Jessica Gillard**, Director  
Early Learning and Innovation  
Early Childhood Investment Corporation  
Lansing, MI

**Barbara Gilkey**, HIPPIY State Director  
Arkansas Children's Hospital and Chair  
Arkansas Early Childhood Commission  
Little Rock, AR

**Cindy Heine**, Associate Executive Director  
Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence  
Lexington, KY

**Sherri Killins**, Commissioner  
Massachusetts Department of Early Education  
and Care  
Boston, MA

**Kerry Laster**, Deputy Superintendent  
Louisiana Department of Education  
Baton Rouge, LA

**Geoff Nagle**, State Director  
BrightStart - Louisiana's Early Childhood  
Advisory Council  
New Orleans, LA

**Amy O'Leary**, Campaign Director  
Early Education for All  
Strategies for Children  
Boston, MA

**Michele Palermo**, Coordinator of Early Child-  
hood Initiatives  
Rhode Island Department of Education  
Providence, RI

**Tonya Russell**, Director  
Division of Early Childhood  
Arkansas Department of Human Services  
Little Rock, AR

**Anna Severns**, Education Programs Professional  
Nevada Department of Education  
Carson City, NV

**Nancy Topping-Tailby**, Executive Director  
Massachusetts Head Start Association  
Taunton, MA

**Tracy Tucker**, Director of Curriculum and In-  
structions  
Arkansas Department of Education  
Little Rock, AR

## Endnotes

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## About the Authors

**Stacie G. Goffin** is Principal of the Goffin Strategy Group. Established in 2004, the Goffin Strategy Group is dedicated to building early care and education's ability to provide effective programs and services for young children through capacity development and leadership. Prior to forming the Goffin Strategy Group, Stacie led the five-year effort to redesign the National Association for the Education of Young Children's [NAEYC] early childhood program accreditation system. She is a former senior program officer at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, higher education faculty member, and preschool educator. More information can be found at [www.goffinstrategy-group.com](http://www.goffinstrategy-group.com).

A Chicago-based partner of EducationCounsel LLC, **Elliot Regenstein** served as co-chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council for over four years, and as Director of Education Reform for the State of Illinois from 2004 to 2006. At EducationCounsel, Mr. Regenstein has worked with and presented to early childhood work group and advisory councils in numerous states, as well as presented on the topic of State Advisory Councils for several national organizations. His background includes extensive experience working with state education leaders on a variety of policy initiatives, including early learning and college and career readiness. More information can be found at [www.education-counsel.com](http://www.education-counsel.com).

## Pre-K Now at a Glance

### Mission

Pre-K Now collaborates with advocates and policy makers to lead a movement for high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three and four year olds.

### Vision

Pre-K Now's vision is a nation in which every child enters kindergarten prepared to succeed.

### Leadership

Marci Young  
Project Director

### Funders

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
The McCormick Foundation  
The Nellie Mae Education Foundation  
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