

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL P-3 INITIATIVES

Foundations and Catalysts for Systems Change



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: BUILDING SUCCESSFUL P-3 INITIATIVES

Foundations and Catalysts for Systems Change

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Across the United States, there is a growing recognition that early education and K-12 systems require transformative changes to address racial, ethnic, linguistic and economic disparities in school readiness and success.^{a-h}

Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) initiatives address these disparities by coordinating, strengthening and aligning fragmented support systems for families and children from birth through third grade.^{e,h-o}

These increasingly popular initiatives:

- **Are based on accumulating evidence** that stand-alone early childhood and school-based programs are not sufficient to sustain long-term success for children facing early childhood inequities
- **Take a collective impact approach** that brings families, early childhood providers, K-12 staff and other partners together to work toward the shared goal of improving school readiness and success
- **Build on the strengths of diverse programs and partners**, identifying and addressing gaps in the system of supports and working together — rather than in isolation — to foster school readiness and success

Since 2010, Portland State University's P-3 evaluation team has partnered with Oregon communities to collect information on the implementation and outcomes of P-3 initiatives. In reviewing this information and related national research, we have identified two sets of key elements for successful P-3 initiatives.

- **Foundations** are the basic functional elements needed to establish a successful P-3 initiative.
- **Catalysts** are elements that promote and sustain the initiative's progress toward improving educational systems, programs and outcomes.

Using a school bus as an analogy, foundations are functional features such as the tires, seats, engine and travel route. Catalysts are energizing factors that move the bus from point A to point B, such as fuel, a driver and a feedback system that provides information on course corrections and progress toward the destination.

This summary describes both types of elements and offers examples of their use in P-3 work. We believe this framework provides a useful set of organizing principles to maximize the effectiveness of P-3 initiatives.

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

We have identified six foundations for P-3 work:

- 1 Stakeholders with a strong understanding of the P-3 approach**
- 2 Dedicated, willing leadership**
- 3 Effective collaborative teams**
- 4 A shared vision for long-term success**
- 5 An informed action plan**
- 6 Meaningful inclusion of family and staff voice**

Foundation 1: Stakeholders with a Strong Understanding of the P-3 Approach

Clearly defining the P-3 approach is an essential early task for the leadership team. From the outset, successful P-3 initiatives strive to build a shared understanding of the P-3 framework and goals.

These efforts should reinforce the message that P-3 is not a single program. Rather, it is about connecting the dots between early childhood, K-12 and other support systems. P-3 initiatives that lack this core understanding risk overlooking the transformative potential of the P-3 approach — namely, its focus on building systems, partnerships and connections that support children's development and address disparities in school readiness.

Foundation 2: Dedicated, Willing Leadership

P-3 work is typically led by a collaborative leadership team and involves a broad array of community partners. Ideally, this team should have at least a few early champions from the K-12 and early learning sectors who are dedicated to bridging these sectors and to investing time and resources in collaboration. Trying to advance P-3 work without buy-in and leadership from a school district, principal or early learning partner is difficult, if not impossible. Teams that start by finding early champions coalesce more readily. These champions can also build momentum by increasing buy-in from peers.

Foundation 3: Effective Collaborative Teams

Effective P-3 teams are characterized by strong administrative and relational capacity. **Administrative capacity** includes:

- Leadership that shares power and defines decision-making processes
- Infrastructure for communication and logistics
- A clear understanding of partner roles and how collaboration serves organizational goals^{p,q}

Relational capacity is the ability to establish trust and a sense of allyship that fosters long-term sustainability. Members must navigate tensions between **organizational self-interest** (leaders' allegiance to their own organization) and **collaborative self-interest** (allegiance to collaborative work).^{p,q} Although some organizations may have a shared history, P-3 partners often operate

HOW ONE COMMUNITY DEFINES P-3 WORK

“*[We are] thinking about how we integrate other programs and partners... how do they work together? How do we holistically meet the needs of families — not just providing programs, but how do we provide a better network of supports for families?*”

independently and lack knowledge of one another. Therefore, it is very important for P-3 partners to learn about each other's programs, practices and goals; identify common ground; and establish respectful and trusting relationships.

Foundation 4: A Shared Vision for Long-Term Success

P-3 work should be guided by a clear vision statement that all cross-sector partners understand and can articulate. Without a shared vision, it will be harder to prioritize needs and make strategic decisions. A shared vision provides the big picture from the outset; this ensures that each partner sees clearly how their organization or professional role will support this vision and keeps them engaged in the collaborative work.^h

Foundation 5: An Informed Action Plan

A common pitfall in P-3 work is jumping to implementation without carefully planning and prioritizing resources and activities. To avoid this, an action plan should be organized around the vision statement. It should detail task responsibilities and timelines, as well as necessary resources and how they will be obtained. It should also be informed by data and information reflecting multiple voices and perspectives, especially from early learning providers, K-12 staff and families (see Foundation 6).

Foundation 6: Meaningful Inclusion of Family and Staff Voice

An informed action plan incorporates the perspectives of the families, teachers and early learning providers who are most likely to be affected by P-3 work. Implementing strategies without guidance from these stakeholders can have negative consequences, which



include low participation by families and staff, as well as implementing strategies that are not valued or that conflict with existing practices or cultural beliefs.

P-3 leaders must create opportunities for this input to shape initial planning.^{j,l} Early work should explicitly address how ongoing input from these groups will be incorporated, especially if they are not initially at the table. Options include parent focus groups, Community Cafés and one-on-one outreach.

Building P-3 Foundations

Communities that have been able to build these foundations more quickly have proceeded more directly to implementing effective P-3 strategies. Depending on their individual history, context and partnerships, communities will develop these foundations at different times and in different ways.

Moreover, this foundational work is seldom finished. Even communities that have been engaged in P-3 work for many years continue to revisit these elements as they incorporate new partners, build new relationships and governance structures, and refine and re-prioritize their action plan.

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

We have identified three catalysts for P-3 initiatives:

- 1 Capacity to support P-3 work
- 2 Intentionality
- 3 Ongoing, data-informed shared learning

Catalyst 1: Capacity to Support P-3 Work

Building P-3 foundations takes time, resources and effort. P-3 leaders typically have a full plate even without these added demands. The most successful P-3 initiatives have been supported by additional resources, including dedicated staff time to advance the work.

Having a key individual be responsible for basic organizational tasks — such as scheduling cross-sector meetings and communications — is critical. It is also helpful if this person can oversee the implementation of the action plan. Communities that have identified and used resources to build this capacity have been better able to move from planning to implementation.^f

Catalyst 2: Intentionality

In the P-3 context, intentionality is defined as a focused, strategic approach to partnership development, planning and implementation. Intentional P-3 initiatives maintain a sharp focus on short- and long-term objectives while remaining flexible enough to respond to lessons learned and contextual changes.

In particular, P-3 work requires an intentional focus on racial, ethnic and other disparities in order to drive progress toward equity. Reducing disparities in outcomes is often more difficult, or at least requires a different approach, than improving outcomes for all. Given the scope of possible P-3 work, ensuring that efforts align with community priorities is essential to staying focused on the most important issues.

SHARED DECISION-MAKING

“ Our Community Cafés have really been a very strong process for focusing in on two or three specific goals. When we work together with partners and parents in the decision-making process, it makes them feel more involved and have a better understanding of what we're trying to do. Before, [partners were] involved through background listening — [they were] outside looking in. Community Cafés involve them in the decision-making process.”

Catalyst 3: Ongoing, Data-Informed Shared Learning

The value of collecting and using community-specific data has been noted by other researchers.^{e,h,k,l,s,t} We define this catalyst more broadly to include a commitment to shared learning and data-informed decision-making. This may include traditional data collection, synthesis and review; the use of published and unpublished research on effective P-3 practices; and formal and informal sharing of P-3 strategies and lessons learned. This can prevent the implementation of strategies that are either unnecessary or unlikely to engage participants. It can also focus resources where they are most needed and identify areas for improvement.

Utilizing P-3 Catalysts

P-3 initiatives in which the collaborative environment is energized by these catalysts can build more quickly on initial successes and move more quickly toward desired outcomes. They can also avoid false starts, failures and wasting resources on activities that are unlikely to achieve meaningful change. When ongoing attention is paid to these catalysts, P-3 work is more likely to become a sustainable community-driven endeavor that achieves lasting changes in the systems that support families and children from birth to grade 3.

CONCLUSION

Although P-3 initiatives hold significant promise for improving and sustaining school success, achieving ambitious goals requires considerable time, commitment and resources. We believe that by establishing each of the six foundations and embedding all three catalysts in P-3 work, communities will move more effectively toward system changes that reduce disparities and improve school readiness and success.

Funders, policymakers and other key leaders investing in the P-3 approach should understand its scope and complexity and have realistic expectations. Instead of focusing on immediate service delivery outcomes, they should invest in helping communities build the foundations and catalysts needed to implement P-3 work in a focused and strategic way, moving steadily toward short-term successes that will in turn serve as building blocks for long-lasting and meaningful changes in the lives of Oregon's children and families.

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LINKING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

How to Strengthen P-3 Initiatives

Across the United States, there is a growing recognition that early education and K-12 systems require transformative changes to address racial, ethnic, linguistic and economic disparities in educational outcomes for children.¹⁻⁸ Researchers, practitioners and policymakers are increasingly acknowledging the critical need to expand, strengthen and connect early childhood programs and elementary schools.^{1,9-12}

Due to difficulties in sustaining longer-term program benefits for very young children^{13,14} — as well as the challenges schools face in supporting success for children who lack equal opportunities to develop social, cognitive and other skills before starting kindergarten — there has been a national movement to create Prenatal-through-Grade-3 (P-3) initiatives. P-3 work strengthens,

expands and coordinates fragmented support systems for families and children, starting at the critical prenatal period and extending through third grade.^{5,8,15-17}

These initiatives are based on accumulating evidence that although stand-alone early childhood and school-based programs are often effective in achieving short-term benefits, they are not a sufficient strategy for addressing disparities in long-term educational outcomes for children of color and children from economically disadvantaged families.^{8,15-19}

P-3 initiatives take a collective impact approach that brings families, early learning providers and K-12 staff together to work toward the shared goal of improving school readiness and success. This collaborative,



systems-focused approach sets P-3 strategies apart from stand-alone programs designed to improve outcomes for children. At their best, they build strategically on the strengths of diverse programs and partners, identifying and addressing gaps in the system of supports, and working together — rather than in isolation — to foster school readiness and success.

STARTING AND STRENGTHENING P-3 WORK

This research-to-practice brief brings together national research and ongoing evaluations of P-3 work in Oregon to identify the key foundations for collaborative, community-driven P-3 work and the catalysts that create change in P-3 systems. It provides practical examples that communities can use to strengthen and expand their P-3 efforts and move more efficiently toward achieving desired outcomes for children.

Foundations are the basic elements needed to establish a successful P-3 initiative. Using a school bus as an analogy, foundations are the functional features a bus must have to achieve the goal of safely transporting children to school. These include tires, seats, an engine, a sturdy frame and a travel route. Although a bus may work without some of these features, it will not operate efficiently over the long haul. For example, a bus may run for a while with low tire pressure, but it will be less safe and have lower fuel efficiency. Similarly, a bus without enough seats can serve some children but will leave others behind. For long-term success, all foundations must be firmly in place.

In addition to foundations, a school bus requires energizing factors — which we call **catalysts** — to ensure that each trip is successful, efficient and repeatable. These include fuel and a driver, as well as ongoing guidance



and feedback to address route changes and course corrections.

In the P-3 context, foundations are the structural supports that frame the initiative in a given community, while catalysts are the resources and feedback loops that help the initiative create change. Whether the goal is to transport children to school or to maximize school readiness and success by improving support systems for children and families, foundations and catalysts must both be in place to ensure a good outcome.

IN ONE STRONG P-3 INITIATIVE...

“ *State and local leaders established big-picture goals for children's achievement, which informs systems-level change in how agencies, programs and services are organized and operated. Consequently, implementers are able to leverage new and existing resources and partnerships to support widespread alignment efforts. At the district and school levels, implementers focus on creating a cadre of leaders and increasing cohesion in approaches to professional development, instruction and family engagement across grades. Finally, implementers incorporate data collection and analysis into practice to guide systems change and inform instruction in the classroom.*”¹⁷

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FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

Building Strong P-3 Initiatives

Since 2010, Portland State University's P-3 evaluation team has partnered with Oregon communities to collect information on the implementation and outcomes of P-3 initiatives.²⁰ In reviewing this information and related national research, we have identified six key P-3 foundations:

- 1 Stakeholders with a strong understanding of the P-3 approach**
- 2 Dedicated, willing leadership**
- 3 Effective collaborative teams**
- 4 A shared vision for long-term success**
- 5 An informed action plan**
- 6 Meaningful inclusion of family and staff voice**

Like the tires, frame and engine of a school bus, each of these foundations must be in place for a P-3 initiative to implement strategies that improve the P-3 system.

We acknowledge that P-3 work can, and often does, begin before all these factors are fully in place. We also recognize that these foundational elements will sometimes act as catalysts, driving and sustaining change over time.

However, based on the data and our experiences with P-3 initiatives in Oregon, it is clear that communities without these foundations will find it hard to advance a P-3 agenda and even harder to sustain this effort. Like a school bus, P-3 initiatives will not move forward unless these foundations are firmly in place.

Below, we describe the importance of each of these foundations and present examples of how communities in Oregon have established them.

FOUNDATION 1: A STRONG UNDERSTANDING OF THE P-3 APPROACH

P-3 work is inherently complex. Because it can involve such a large number of partners and be operationalized through such a wide variety of activities, early learning and K-12 partners often have difficulty understanding exactly what it entails.

Primarily, partners need to grasp that P-3 is not about a specific, individual program. In some Oregon communities, we have seen P-3 initiatives operationalized too narrowly, often as a single, stand-alone program or strategy that bridges early childhood and elementary school settings (e.g., school-based preschool or kindergarten transition programs).

Although such programs can be an important part of P-3 initiatives, partners need to understand that at its core, P-3 work is about transforming systems. The goal is not simply to improve the availability or quality of early learning experiences, nor is it to improve the quality of instruction or the degree of family involvement in the K-12 system.

Rather, P-3 connects these dots by considering how these supports can build on one another to sustain children on a positive trajectory from birth through third grade and beyond.

Because P-3 initiatives are more than the sum of their parts, all partners need to understand the big picture and to recognize how collaborative planning — focused strongly on coordination, access and quality across the early learning and K-12 sectors — can help them to achieve their goals.

Getting There: A Strong Understanding of P-3

Methods used in Oregon to educate partners about the P-3 approach include:

- Hosting community kickoff events that include experts and information-sharing opportunities as a starting point for broader conversations about P-3
- Participating in technical assistance and educational events relating to P-3
- Participating in demonstration site visits and learning opportunities with P-3 implementers
- Reinforcing partner learning through regular reminders of the P-3 approach's mission and goals



OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building Understanding of P-3

Some Oregon communities have helped partners learn about the P-3 approach by convening kickoff events with representatives from various sectors, including families, early learning providers, K-12 educators, Department of Health & Human Services, libraries, health care providers, and housing organizations.

At these events, local and national experts explained what P-3 work typically entails and emphasized the importance of taking a collective impact approach. In some cases, they also shared community-specific cross-sector data (such as incoming kindergarten assessment scores, census data, and summaries of existing prenatal and early childhood services) to facilitate conversations about specific community needs and strengths.

In addition, these events gave cross-sector partners — such as early learning providers, K-12 staff, librarians, health care providers, parents and caregivers — an opportunity to express their priorities for school readiness and success.

As a result of these kickoff meetings, partners were better able to recognize their role in the P-3 system and to contribute to the planning for next steps.

HOW ONE COMMUNITY DEFINES P-3 WORK

“ [We are] thinking about how we integrate other programs and partners... how do they work together? How do we holistically meet the needs of families — not just providing programs, but how do we provide a better network of supports for families?”

FOUNDATION 2: DEDICATED, WILLING LEADERSHIP

Like other collective impact efforts, P-3 initiatives rely on a core team of partners (which we will call the **P-3 leadership team**) to identify common goals and establish an action plan for implementation.^{21,22}

Typically, P-3 work starts with one or two leaders who want to bring the P-3 approach to their community. The critical role of leadership, ideally representing both the early learning and K-12 sectors, has been noted by other P-3 researchers.^{17,19} It seems clear that to be effective, P-3 leadership teams must include at least one representative from both the early learning and K-12 sectors, each of whom has the power to commit resources and make program and policy decisions. By explicitly acknowledging the importance of bridging these two systems, these leaders set the tone for the work.^{8,17,19}

Unfortunately, bringing these sectors together can be challenging. In some communities, schools have struggled to identify local early learning leaders. In others, early learning providers report challenges in connecting with K-12 administrators and teachers.

Creating a P-3 leadership team can be especially difficult if initial leaders feel that work cannot start until other cross-sector partners — such as social services, health care providers, and business leaders — are fully on board. Although broadening engagement with these partners strengthens P-3 work, initiatives may stall if early adopters struggle for too long to engage too many other sectors.

Engaging early childhood and K-12 leaders is essential to developing an effective leadership team. Expanding cross-sector involvement, while important, may need to happen incrementally.

Getting There: Dedicated, Willing Leadership

Dedicated, willing leadership cannot be forced, but it can be cultivated. Ideally, a community that wishes to launch a P-3 initiative will have at least a few key leaders who are willing to dedicate adequate time and resources to collaborative P-3 work. Given the central importance of bridging early learning and K-12 systems, deep and sustained work will be difficult without key leaders from these sectors.



The following strategies have fostered P-3 leadership development around Oregon:

- Draw on the skills of natural leaders who share their enthusiasm with others.
- Move forward with early adopters and a coalition of the willing, instead of waiting for reluctant leaders to come on board.
- Cultivate buy-in through peer-to-peer learning with P-3 champions from other communities.
- Use contractual agreements to establish leadership commitments for P-3 work.

STARTING WITH THE P-3 CHAMPIONS

“ For our county leadership, it is really [former principal]. He has embraced this whole concept and is very excited to make this happen. He is the person really spearheading things and has a great support system behind him, like community members, schools and different organizations. That county team is very strong.”

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building Dedicated, Willing Leadership

The Oregon Department of Education's Early Learning Division funds 16 regional Early Learning Hubs (ELHs)²³ that strengthen the early learning system by building collaborations and funding key programs around the state.

When deciding where to invest P-3 funding, some ELHs have acknowledged the strategic importance of strong leadership support by working to identify the local school districts and early learning providers that were most interested in cross-sector P-3 work.

Instead of recruiting all school districts and early learning providers to participate in initial cross-sector conversations about P-3, these ELHs went through a request for proposal (RFP) process. The RFP required a clear commitment from district and program leaders, including specific activities and time commitments. As a result, the P-3 work started with partners who had already demonstrated interest and a willingness to commit time and resources.

FOUNDATION 3: EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Effective P-3 work is based on strong cross-sector collaboration. It starts by bringing together early learning programs and K-12 schools and strives to include family members, agencies and other organizations.^{5,8}

All partners must understand and value the power of collaboration to create transformative change for children and families. They must also recognize that effective collaboration requires an ongoing commitment.^{8,15} Partnerships, especially between community organizations and schools or school districts, may face challenges rooted in a lack of understanding of each other's practices and goals, conflicts over resources, or past negative experiences. Resolving these tensions can take months, if not years.¹⁵

However, establishing an effective collaborative leadership team inevitably means addressing historical barriers. Failure to do so can undermine the initiative's ability to change systems.

The following aspects of effective collaboration were identified in prior research and are important foundations for the early phases of P-3 work:

- **Administrative capacity**, which is sometimes known as effective governance structure
- **Relational capacity**, which entails developing organizational relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect.^{24,25}

Foundation 3a: Administrative Capacity

In order for a P-3 initiative to function well, basic administrative processes must be in place prior to implementation. For leaders who are building this administrative capacity, an early task is to lay the groundwork for joint planning and decision-making in the P-3 governance structure. Research suggests that these characteristics are common to effective collaborative governance:

- Leadership that shares power and defines decision-making processes
- Infrastructure for communication and logistics
- A clear understanding of partners' roles²⁵

P-3 initiatives with these characteristics have a stronger foundation for collaborative implementation.

SHARED DECISION-MAKING

“ *Our Community Cafés have really been a very strong process for focusing in on two or three specific goals. When we work together with partners and parents in the decision-making process, it makes them feel more involved and have a better understanding of what we're trying to do. Before, [partners were] involved through background listening — [they were] outside looking in. Community Cafés involve them in the decision-making process.*”

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building Administrative Capacity for Effective Collaboration

Being explicit about how a P-3 collaborative will make decisions is an aspect of administrative capacity that can increase efficiency and prevent misunderstandings about how conflicts are resolved.

In one community, the leadership team created a transparent voting process to identify priorities for their P-3 work over the next year. At their kickoff meeting, they facilitated small group discussions that led to a range of possible priorities. After these possibilities were discussed by the full group, participants voted for the top three, which were then carried forward into the leadership team's strategic planning work.

In this instance, a clear decision-making strategy facilitated power-sharing and also built trust that leadership would listen and respond to community input.

Getting There: Administrative Capacity

Strong administrative capacity comes from explicitly establishing key aspects of group structure and function, which include:

- Defining and agreeing on a formal decision-making process
- Creating an organizational chart that defines leadership roles, and revisiting it as needed
- Setting clear expectations and mechanisms for communication with other team members

Foundation 3b: Relational Capacity

Like all collaborative work, P-3 initiatives rely on high-quality relationships. In particular, the nature of the relationships between cross-sector partners is key to laying a strong foundation.

Although some organizations may have a shared history, many P-3 partners (especially in the early learning and K-12 systems) operate independently and have little knowledge of one another.²⁶ For this reason, it is very important for P-3 partners to learn about each other's programs, practices and goals; to identify common ground; and to establish respectful and trusting relationships.^{27,28} Doing so creates a foundation that prepares the P-3 leadership team to overcome disagreements and creates a sense of allyship that contributes to long-term sustainability.

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

“*Schools need to understand that early childhood care is a mixed delivery system and the early childhood providers need to learn about the school. There needs to be an open conversation between the two. You have to have intentional learning about who you are and what you're doing because there are too many assumptions on both sides.*”

Partners must also navigate the inherent tensions between **organizational self-interest** (allegiance to their own organization) and **collaborative self-interest** (allegiance to the work of the group).²⁹ Effective collaboration sometimes requires putting the group's interest before the interest of one's own agency or program. This is more likely to happen when team members share a sense of trust and interdependence.

Getting There: Relational Capacity

Strategies P-3 leaders have used to support positive cross-sector relationships include:

- Recognizing and building on collaborative success
- Structuring early cross-sector meetings with facilitated opportunities for sharing organizational practices, culture and goals

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building Relational Capacity

Research on collaboration shows that when new groups are established, it is important for leaders to give participants opportunities to learn about each other's organizational goals, practices and history. One P-3 team accomplished this by asking meeting participants to complete and share a brief document describing their organization. They then allotted time for facilitated sharing between group leaders, including questions and answers about each organization.

Time spent sharing organizational information also helps partners understand logistical and programmatic differences that could lead to implementation challenges if not identified early. For example, communities wishing to create cross-sector professional development teams often face logistical challenges in bringing early learning providers and K-12 staff together. These groups may have conflicting work schedules as well as contractual restrictions on how they can spend professional development time. In particular, child care providers often have children in their care from early morning until evening, making meetings with kindergarten teachers difficult.

Team members who don't understand the causes of such challenges could easily interpret a lack of participation by child care providers as a lack of interest. But when partners understand each other's organizations, creative solutions — such as providing funds for substitutes or holding meetings over dinner or on weekends — can be applied at the outset of the planning process.

- Carefully surfacing misperceptions or historical tensions and addressing them early in the process
- Ongoing attention to maintaining relationships

FOUNDATION 4: A SHARED VISION FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

P-3 work should be guided by a clear vision statement that all cross-sector partners understand and can articulate. When there is no cohesive shared vision, the P-3 team will struggle to prioritize needs and to make decisions about implementation strategies.

A shared vision initially provides all partners with the big picture, identifying long-term changes the initiative seeks to effect while also ensuring that each partner sees clearly how their organization or professional role will support this vision.⁸ This collective vision then sets the stage for strategic planning and prioritization.^{8,17} In addition, a shared vision can help to prevent mission drift by serving as a north star that guides the P-3 work as it evolves.³⁰

Getting There: A Shared Vision

Developing a shared vision should be an early task for the P-3 leadership team. This typically happens through a series of meetings that results in an explicit vision statement. Leaders can facilitate this process by:

- Focusing discussion on the nature of P-3 and its intended outcomes (i.e., by revisiting Foundation 1)
- Reviewing and adapting the vision and roles of cross-sector partners developed in other initiatives
- Facilitating discussions that allow leaders to clearly state what they will do as an organization to support desired outcomes
- Writing explicit P-3 mission and vision statements

A STABLE VISION FOR EVOLVING WORK

“ *I don't know if the vision has changed so much as the strategies have become more real and more complex.*”



OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building a Shared Vision

New P-3 teams can learn from existing P-3 initiatives that have developed a clear and compelling vision statement for their work. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; these vision statements can easily be adapted to meet the needs and desires of other communities.

Taking advantage of opportunities to learn how other communities have articulated their vision statement — such as workshops, conferences and other P-3 events — is a useful starting point for P-3 work. Oregon communities with clearly articulated vision statements include the Early Works demonstration sites, Early Learning Multnomah, and Salem-Keizer Public Schools.

FOUNDATION 5: AN INFORMED ACTION PLAN

A common pitfall in P-3 work is jumping to implementation without carefully planning and prioritizing resources and activities. To avoid this, an action plan should be organized around the vision statement. This plan should explicitly state shared long-term goals (i.e., five years or more) along with plans for implementing strategies, programs and changes over one to two years. It should also detail task responsibilities and timelines, as well as necessary resources and how they will be obtained.

Finally, the action plan should be informed by data on community needs and strengths so that work can be prioritized appropriately. It is important that all P-3 partners be actively engaged in creating this plan. This includes administrators from the early learning and K-12 sectors, as well as other community-based partners, staff, parents and caregivers. The importance of including the voices of families and staff during the development of this plan is discussed in Foundation 6.

Getting There: An Informed Action Plan

Methods that organizations have used to create an effective P-3 action plan include:

- Using community data to define priorities
- Pursuing achievable short-term goals and objectives while also working on more complex problems
- Ensuring that strategies align with the vision and support the goals of P-3 work by articulating “if-then” statements that link strategies to outcomes
- Making the action plan a living document that is revisited and revised often
- Including family and staff voices (see Foundation 6)

BUILDING OFF THE ACTION PLAN

“ We always refer back to the plan and grant, and then we take suggestions and work on updating [the plan]. We brainstorm ideas for improvement and concepts that help meet goals. We prioritize. There are lots of good ideas as we brainstorm. We make sure we assign responsibility and follow through.”

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building an Informed Action Plan

Effective P-3 action plans use data to identify priorities. By sharing data in facilitated meetings, P-3 partners can better understand community strengths and challenges while also identifying and prioritizing gaps in systems and services.

Some P-3 initiatives in Oregon began by conducting an in-depth community needs and resources assessment.³¹ Others relied solely on publicly available information such as census data; state educational assessment data (e.g., the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment); or county-level statistics on child and family health, well-being and service availability. Some communities compiled the relevant data themselves, while others sought technical assistance with this phase of the work.

FOUNDATION 6: MEANINGFUL INCLUSION OF FAMILY AND STAFF VOICE

An informed action plan will incorporate the perspectives of the people who are most likely to be affected by this work (i.e., families, teachers and early learning providers). Seeking out these voices can be part of a comprehensive community needs assessment, but at the least, P-3 leaders must create opportunities for this input to shape initial planning.^{9,16}

In our experience, it is not necessary to have these stakeholders participate in leadership meetings at the earliest stages of the work. In many communities, an initial action plan that addresses how and when to incorporate input from these groups is a more realistic approach. Involvement of these stakeholders at the leadership table, while valuable and ultimately necessary, often happens gradually as P-3 work unfolds.

Even if these partners don't sit at the leadership table at first, it is vital to ensure that input from families and providers is collected and reflected in the early phases of the P-3 action plan and implementation process. Implementing P-3 strategies without guidance from



THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY VOICE

“ Families need opportunities, families need a voice, and oftentimes we assume that ‘this’ is what they need. But what we really need is to be able to share their voice without trying to solve their problems. They need to be a partner in it.”

these stakeholders can lead to a variety of negative consequences, which include low participation by families, teachers and child care providers as well as implementing strategies that are not valued or that conflict with existing practices or cultural beliefs.

Given that the stated goal of P-3 work in Oregon is to address disparities in educational outcomes for children of color, low-income children and other marginalized students, these voices must be sought out in developing an effective P-3 plan. A number of P-3 initiatives have made the mistake of selecting and implementing programs without taking the time to ask families, “Is this what you want and when you want it?”

The voices of direct service staff — including early learning providers, teachers and others whose work is often the focus of P-3 programming — are also critical to informing the action plan. Early learning providers and K-12 teachers know best whether they can realistically implement planned P-3 strategies in their specific educational setting. Professionals, like parents, can identify barriers to participation (e.g., scheduling difficulties) that may make or break the success of a selected strategy. Without the support of on-the-ground staff in planning and decision-making, new programs may not be implemented as intended.

Getting There: Meaningful Inclusion of Family and Staff Voice

Including staff and family voice is not easy. However, some Oregon communities have accomplished this goal by building relationships and bridges between P-3 leadership and key stakeholder groups. Successful strategies include:

- Partnering with community agencies that are already gathering input from parents

- Strategically hiring or contracting with staff who have expertise in family engagement and who represent or come from the community
- Providing resources to support and incentivize participation
- Facilitating opportunities for input by sharing initial ideas and plans at staff or family-focused meetings and inviting input through conversation, email, or confidential sharing with a neutral convener

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Strategies for Including Family Voice

Engaging family voice is a common challenge for P-3 leadership groups. Seeking help from a community organization that has active parent leadership or that provides culturally specific services (e.g., Head Start) can be an effective way to facilitate this input.

In one community, the school was struggling with low family engagement despite numerous efforts to host family dinners and other welcoming events. The school worked with an outside evaluator to conduct focus groups with parents, which revealed that families had a deep distrust of school staff, who they felt were judging them because of their socioeconomic status.

In response, P-3 leaders developed explicit goals for improving these perceptions and relationships. By partnering on P-3 outreach with a local community agency that had a long history of working with these families, they learned what type of activities families would enjoy and what supports they would need to participate.

As a result, a small group of families began participating in P-3 events; these families soon became the leadership team's most important allies in bringing a steadily increasing number of families to P-3 events and parenting programs, and eventually to the P-3 leadership team itself.



SUMMARY: P-3 FOUNDATIONS

In summary, we believe these six foundations are necessary to build and sustain successful P-3 work:

- 1 Stakeholders with a strong understanding of the P-3 approach.** All partners must have a good working knowledge of the P-3 approach and what makes it different.
- 2 Dedicated, willing leadership.** At least a few committed early leaders from the K-12 and early learning sectors should be willing to take on the initial collaborative work.
- 3 Effective collaborative teams.** Members should take the time to build strong administrative capacity (decision-making structure, clear communication methods, etc.) and relational capacity (e.g., sharing information and building relationships).
- 4 A shared vision for long-term success.** Creating a shared big-picture vision allows partners to recognize their role in achieving it.
- 5 An informed action plan.** Leaders should gather input and make informed decisions about priority

work while also developing a plan that provides achievable opportunities for early success.

- 6 Meaningful inclusion of family and staff voice.** The planning process must seek family and staff input, and decision-making must reflect that input.

Building these foundations requires time and dedicated effort. Depending on their individual history, context and partnerships, communities will develop these foundations at different times and in different ways.

Moreover, this foundational work is seldom finished. Even communities that have been engaged in P-3 work for many years continue to revisit these elements as they incorporate new partners, build new relationships and governance structures, and refine and re-prioritize their action plan.

Some communities have been able to establish these foundations more quickly and to proceed more directly to implementing effective P-3 strategies. We refer to the factors that build this momentum toward real change as **catalysts**.

3

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Keys to Moving Ahead

P-3 catalysts are elements that promote and sustain progress toward improving educational systems, programs and outcomes. In our school bus analogy, catalysts are the elements that move the bus from point A to point B so that all children get to school on time, such as a driver and fuel. Catalysts also include a feedback system along the route, which provides information about progress toward the destination as well as potential roadblocks or course corrections.

Without such catalysts, P-3 work can take longer, entail more false starts and failures, expend more resources on activities that are unlikely to lead to meaningful change, and be less sustainable.

The catalysts we have identified are:

- 1 Capacity to support P-3 work.** Infrastructure, people and other resources are needed to carry out collaborative processes and implement P-3 strategies.
- 2 Intentionality.** Team members must maintain a strategic focus on the most important aspects of P-3 work within their community at any given time.
- 3 Ongoing, data-informed shared learning.** Leaders must create regular opportunities and systems for gathering and using information for planning, implementation and continuous improvement.



CATALYST 1: CAPACITY TO SUPPORT P-3 WORK

Through more than 100 interviews conducted with P-3 leaders across Oregon, we learned that one of the primary obstacles to getting P-3 initiatives off the ground is inadequate support for the time-consuming collaborative work involved in the P-3 approach.

Building the foundations for P-3 work takes considerable time and resources, and the people involved in this work typically have a full plate even without these added demands. It is extremely rare that P-3 leaders such as principals, superintendents and early childhood program directors can take on the additional work needed to make a P-3 initiative successful.

The most successful P-3 initiatives have been supported by additional resources (usually through funded staff time) that move this work forward. These resources typically support scheduling cross-sector meetings,

facilitating communication between meetings, and ensuring that at least one person is responsible for overseeing progress.

Not surprisingly, communities that have identified and used resources to directly support these processes have been better able to move from planning to implementation.³²

WHY A P-3 COORDINATOR IS USEFUL

“ I think [the P-3 Coordinator's role] has been critical to catalyze the building of this birth to 8 system. Providing the support and facilitation that is needed, and building strategic partnerships to make it happen.”

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Creating Capacity for P-3 Work

By far the most effective and direct way to support P-3 capacity is to fund a full- or part-time coordinator who has sufficient dedicated work time to take on P-3 responsibilities. Of the more than 25 Oregon communities known to be engaged in P-3 work at the time of this report, more than half have a P-3 coordinator or someone who plays that role as part of their job.

Across the state, P-3 coordinators are taking on a variety of roles, including outreach and engagement for families, early learning programs, schools and school districts, and community-based organizations and agencies. P-3 coordinators have also served as the primary collaborative team convener; they communicate with and recruit partners, schedule cross-sector meetings, and facilitate resources to support attendance (e.g., food, child care, and substitutes for teaching staff).

In many communities, P-3 coordinators have also been the public face of P-3, promoting the work and advocating for continued or new resources from Early Learning Hubs and other funding agencies. Often, a coordinator will work directly within elementary schools as a community liaison to school principals, staff and families. Coordinators who partner with and support elementary school principals in the P-3 domain have been particularly effective.

Some have noted potential downsides to having a single person be seen as “the” P-3 person (e.g., a lack of shared cross-sector responsibility¹⁹ and potential difficulties in sustaining funding for P-3 coordination). However, we believe that the benefits of hiring staff to take on this important role far outweigh the potential negative consequences.

Getting There: Capacity to Support P-3 Work

P-3 initiatives in Oregon vary widely in terms of the resources available to them. Given this fact, we have noted a variety of creative ways in which resources have been brought to the table to support collaborative capacity:

- Funding or supporting a full- or part-time P-3 coordinator
- Providing in-kind staff support for specific tasks such as administrative support (meeting logistics), communication and outreach, and data collection
- Sharing resources and tasks across partners so that no single organization is responsible for P-3 implementation
- Engaging and supporting families to run P-3 meetings, conduct outreach, and collect data and information

CATALYST 2: INTENTIONALITY

In the P-3 context, intentionality is defined as a focused and strategic approach to partnership development, planning and implementation. Intentional P-3 initiatives are those that maintain a sharp focus on achieving desired short- and long-term objectives and outcomes while also being flexible enough to respond to lessons learned and contextual changes.

In particular, P-3 work requires an intentional focus on addressing racial, ethnic and other disparities in order

to drive progress toward equity. Reducing disparities in outcomes is often more difficult, or at least requires a different approach, than efforts aimed at improving outcomes for all.

Intentionality is crucial to every aspect of P-3 work, from initial collaborative efforts through planning, implementation, evaluation and sustainability. In the planning stage, for example, intentional P-3 initiatives are able to move beyond meetings that focus loosely on brainstorming and building relationships toward creating meaningful shared work.

Success comes from ensuring that meetings lead to productive conversations and information-sharing while strategically moving toward planning and implementation.

Another way P-3 communities can work intentionally is by checking new strategies and programs against their action plan. Given the vast scope of possible work within the P-3 context, keeping efforts intentionally focused on the most important problems and priorities in a given community is essential to avoid the very real risk of mission drift.

Notably, P-3 initiatives that work to include input from families of color and economically disadvantaged families are more successful in reducing readiness disparities. Intentionality can also be demonstrated by a willingness to invest resources to create specific desired changes, taking time to seek out information, learning from mistakes, and trying new strategies to meet goals.

INTENTIONALITY IN BUILDING P-3 INITIATIVES

“ We really looked at the Kindergarten Partnership & Innovation (KPI) evaluation that PSU put together. We had an input session from the Year 1 KPI grantees to see what it looked like and what those folks wanted to see. How do we align with the [family engagement] guiding principles?

We wanted to also build off of what was working by looking at [two P-3 demonstration sites] — but asking, ‘How do we make sure that we don’t create something that’s great that’s happening in [only] one place?’ Part of that was embedding it in [existing school programs] so it would become replicable. We started to see the layers of different services, but if you don’t have that glue to hold it all together things can get lost or siloed. The P-3 coordinators would help to keep things together and connect the different things that are happening.”

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Building Intentionality in P-3 Work

Regularly reviewing the action plan is one strategy for insuring an intentional focus on P-3 goals. While responsiveness and agility can enable P-3 initiatives to quickly meet immediate and developing community needs, the action plan should always be considered as the touchstone for this work.

As part of The Oregon Community Foundation's P-3 grant funding, initiatives were required to create and re-examine a strategic action plan at the end of each year. Although strategies changed from year to year, this process served as a good reminder for each P-3 community of where their work started and what progress had been made over the course of the year. This process also encouraged P-3 partners to re-evaluate the alignment of their action plan with the goals in each of their community-identified priority areas.

Getting There: Intentionality

P-3 initiatives have increased the intentionality of their work in a number of concrete ways, including:

- Providing strong group facilitation and documentation of decisions and next steps
- Making the action plan a living document that is regularly reviewed and revised
- Developing P-3 logic models to guide the work and ensure alignment of strategies and goals
- Committing to and investing resources in achieving desired changes
- Willingness to learn from mistakes (see Catalyst 3)

CATALYST 3: ONGOING, DATA-INFORMED SHARED LEARNING

The final catalyst for P-3 change is engaging in ongoing data-informed shared learning, which includes collecting and using community-specific data.

The importance of using data and embedding it in collaborative decision-making processes has been noted by a number of other researchers.^{5,8,9,17,30,33}

However, we define this catalyst somewhat more broadly to include data collection and research, as well as a broader commitment among partners to shared learning and data-informed decision-making. This may include traditional data collection, synthesis and review;

the use of published and unpublished research on effective P-3 practices; and formal and informal sharing of successful strategies and lessons learned between P-3 initiatives. These activities can help communities move more quickly and effectively toward program improvement and systemic change.

Ongoing, data-informed shared learning serves a number of purposes in P-3 work. Using data during planning can prevent the implementation of strategies that are either unnecessary or unlikely to engage participants. It can also help to focus resources where they are most needed^{10,30} and identify areas for improvement, such as gaps where additional partners or strategies should be established to optimize outcomes.⁵

In addition, sharing data and information can guide decisions on which strategies or programs are most likely to be effective and improve efficiency by helping partners learn from others engaged in P-3 work.^{8,30,33} Finally, data-informed learning can shed light on the root causes of disparities in educational outcomes and the system changes that are most likely to address them.

Getting There: Ongoing, Data-Informed Shared Learning

Gathering and using data and information requires resources to which some P-3 initiatives may have limited access. As with other aspects of this work, however, developing some capacity to engage in this process is a good investment in success.



In addition to using resources for gathering information, successful initiatives have devised strategies for using this information in planning and ongoing work, including:

- Committing staff, time and expertise to identifying key priorities for collecting data and information that will guide decision-making
- Designating a data champion who can help collect, synthesize and summarize data relating to P-3
- Creating a standing leadership team agenda item regarding sharing of data and information
- Creating opportunities to engage community partners in facilitated discussion about data
- Thinking about and highlighting data droplets (i.e., digestible pieces of information that can serve as focal points for discussion and planning)
- Learning from others in the community, region, state and country

OREGON HIGHLIGHT

Strengthening Data-Informed Shared Learning

Gathering data is necessary but not sufficient to create a data-informed shared learning process. Further, although it is important to have at least one person champion the use of data, that person alone cannot interpret the data and make quality decisions. Instead, P-3 partners — including parents, caregivers, providers and teachers — must have the opportunity to discuss what the data means from their perspective. These conversations can help the P-3 leadership team develop recommendations.

In one community, regular Community Cafés were implemented to broaden community, family and partner involvement in P-3 work. These events were structured to share a few initial data highlights, which were used as the basis for a facilitated conversation about P-3 progress and areas in need of new or different efforts. The results of these conversations were then compiled and reviewed by decision-making teams and incorporated into P-3 action plans. Leadership in this community also includes a standing meeting agenda item relating to evaluation and data sharing, which promotes regular conversations about opportunities for data-driven learning.

NEW PARTNERS AND RESOURCES

“ *The [P-3 initiative] influence on data collection was key in building the partnership for rental assistance. [Community partner] has its own county-mandated data collection, but [the P-3 initiative] helped bring some of the data collection together to describe the housing needs of the community. They also helped [program manager] know what other data might be needed to present to support [housing organization]. In the end, [the P-3 initiative's] efforts helped partners to accurately describe the housing crisis in their neighborhood as well as families' desires to stay in the school boundary. I don't think they would have been able to establish this partnership without data.*”



SUMMARY: CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

In summary, the following three catalysts generate momentum and spark change in P-3 initiatives:

- 1 Capacity to support P-3 work.** Infrastructure, people and other resources for implementing collaborative processes and strategies.
- 2 Intentionality.** A strategic focus on the most important aspects of P-3 work at any given time within a community.
- 3 Ongoing, data-informed shared learning.** Creating regular opportunities and systems for gathering and using information for collaborative planning, implementation and continuous improvement.

P-3 initiatives that work to create a collaborative environment characterized by these catalysts can build more quickly on initial successes and move more efficiently toward achieving desired outcomes. They will also tend to avoid false starts, failures and expending resources on activities that are unlikely to lead to meaningful change.

When ongoing attention is paid to these catalysts, P-3 work is also more likely to become a sustainable community-driven endeavor that achieves significant and lasting changes in the systems and programs that support children in Oregon and their families from birth to grade 3.

4

CONCLUSION

Committing to Long-Term Change

In this brief, we have summarized the key lessons learned by researching and evaluating the factors that contribute to successful P-3 initiatives.

We believe that by establishing each of the six foundations and embedding all three catalysts in P-3 work, communities will move more effectively toward system changes that reduce disparities and improve school readiness and success.

As this work moves forward, it will be important to understand whether and how this approach actually leads to improvements in the system of supports for children and families from birth through elementary school. It is clear that significant P-3 work cannot be accomplished quickly and that considerable time,

commitment and resources will be needed to accomplish ambitious P-3 goals.

Funders, policymakers and other key leaders investing in the P-3 approach should understand its scope and complexity and have realistic expectations for achievable change. Instead of focusing on immediate service delivery outcomes, they would do better to invest in helping communities build the foundations and catalysts that facilitate successful P-3 work.

At the same time, communities need to implement P-3 work in focused and strategic ways, moving steadily toward short-term successes that will in turn serve as building blocks for long-lasting and meaningful changes in the lives of children and families.



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- 33 Zellman, G. L., & Kilburn, M. R. (2015). *Final report on the Hawaii P-3 evaluation*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

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