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The Primary Dilemma: Determining and Overcoming Barriers to a Focus on  
Prekindergarten through Grade 3

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of  
Doctor of Education

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2020



The Primary Dilemma:  
Determining and Overcoming Barriers to a Focus on Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 3

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## ABSTRACT

In 2017, reporters of national data in regard to reading ability among American, fourth grade students indicated low proficiency and achievement gaps. These results were also consistent within the state and district under study. There is a need to increase the focus on prekindergarten and primary grade education taking place prior to the grades in which federally mandated, accountability assessments for student learning take place. The purpose of this study is to determine the potential barriers to a paradigm shift at the state and district levels from a focus on state-assessed grade levels to prekindergarten and primary grade levels. The context of this study is a large public school district, the state in which it is located, and the federal education law under which both entities operate. My study demonstrates the gap in priorities between the state and local education leaders in regard to which grade levels should receive the majority of focus on an elementary school campus. I suggest the addition of quality measures for public prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms in order to improve professional development efforts and increase administrative focus.

## PREFACE

I spent the majority of my teaching career serving middle school students who faced many challenges in their young lives. Some students arrived in my classroom having been retained in elementary schools, some experienced a troubled life at home, and others struggled academically which resulted in disillusionment of the importance of education. As the years passed, I realized that my support, while important, was not enough to overcome some barriers. Many of my students required remediation in reading and math skills and suffered from poor self-regulation and other social and emotional skills.

I received the opportunity after seven years of teaching and coaching to join a district leadership team and work with kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers. I quickly realized the potential for preventing many of the issues I saw among my middle school students within these classrooms where reading instruction and social and emotional learning began. I also realized that these grade levels, despite their importance, did not receive the same dedication of resources as the grade levels in which a state assessment took place at the end of the school year. My daily work centered on improving resources for and instruction within primary level classrooms but despite this work, third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms received priority among school and district administrators due to the accountability based on the state assessments.

Around this point of realization, I was at the point during my doctoral program when I needed to choose a dissertation topic. I saw the opportunity to seek further understanding about the barriers that arise around focusing efforts on the grade levels during which the foundation for all other learning is set. I knew the simple answer was

the state assessments in the other grade levels, but I could not help but wonder if it had to be that way. I learned through the course of my study that the answer is no, and that change is possible.

Through this experience, I learned the power of questioning the status quo. There is no culture too ingrained nor law so permanent that a change or amendment cannot take place in the name of making school better for young children. If students experience high quality prekindergarten and primary level education, multiple studies show that those students have a better chance at success both in education and in life. The result of the study is simple though the execution of the results is complex. In essence, if the educational context in which schools operate prevents improvement to the foundational years of a child's education, perhaps it is time to change the context.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To Dr. Carla Sparks who was with me every step of the way. I cannot begin to express my appreciation for her support. She pushed me to be the best writer and researcher I can be, and I have grown as an educator because of her guidance.

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To my work colleagues who were understanding of my schedule, sent me helpful articles, and partnered with me on some of the initiatives in this study. I could not ask for a better work family and I appreciate you.

To my classmates, Sarah, Beth, Carrie, Christine, John, Kyra, Holly, Chris, Tia, Lorilynn, and Crystal. I will never forget the time spent together and the laughs we shared. I am a better learner and leader because of this cohort of educators.



## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to those who walked with me and sacrificed for me in order for this study and my doctorate to be possible.

To my husband, Daniel, who never complained about my time spent working on my degree. He dedicated his time and energy to making sure our house ran smoothly throughout this process. He is my rock and I love and appreciate him so much.

To Dr. Carla Sparks who was a mentor and guide throughout this process but also has truly become a lifelong friend.

To my sister, Holly, who continues to better herself and is an inspiration to me always.

To my grandmother, who finished her book while I finished this dissertation. She is an amazing storyteller and friend to everyone she meets. I hope I am as joyful as she is when I am her age.

To my mom, for always being there. Not only through the process of earning my doctorate, but through every challenge life has sent me. She is the strongest person I know.

Finally, to my dad who modeled a love of learning for me all my life. I love school because he does. Thank you, Dad, for always encouraging me. For the record, a small side table was necessary to get this work done – you were right.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

This study takes place in a midsize, public school district within a large state. The district center is urban with surrounding suburbs. The school district serves this urban center and then spreads into the sparse, rural areas. School district personnel serve the diverse needs of prekindergarten (Pre-K) through twelfth grade students throughout the urban and rural communities. The mission of the district is to ensure student success as evidenced by accountability measures such as student achievement tests and graduation rates. Student achievement tests, primarily national proficiency tests in reading, and the gaps in student achievement revealed by them serve as the basis for the following program evaluation.

Federal law, specifically, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), predicated by the No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), necessitates student achievement tests beginning in third grade and continuing into high school grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These achievement tests, in addition to other indicators, show progress towards “state-designed, long-term goals” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 30) related to academic success throughout state school districts. State lawmakers choose how to frame results from achievement tests and other indicators in the form of a rating for each school. Thirteen states utilize an A-F rating system to summarize public school achievement, which mirrors the traditional grading system for student assignments found in most schools (Education Commission of the States, 2018a). The A-F rating system will serve as the framework for the results of this study. Lawmakers require

support from state education entities for schools that perform poorly on these assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

### **Purpose of the Program Evaluation**

The purpose of this program evaluation is to determine the potential barriers to a paradigm shift at the state and district levels from a focus on state-assessed grade levels to prekindergarten and primary grade levels. Policymakers can implement a better-informed policy regarding academic focus and assessment after barriers have been determined. According to ESSA requirements, assessments for student achievement must begin by third grade, the grade level that author Gene Maeroff (2006a) defines as the culmination of the primary education years.

These assessments are one element of a public school's rating. The A-F rating system serves as the framework for school ratings throughout this study and a score of a D or F may require leaders in the state education department to provide targeted support to that school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Due to the high stakes nature of these state assessments, administrators may see an increase in resources such as money, time, and teacher talent in tested grade levels. Increasing focus on the early learning and primary education grades may reduce the learning gaps that appear in the results of national fourth grade reading assessments as early learning and primary grade levels serve as a foundation for all subsequent grades.

Increasing academic success by providing high-quality early learning opportunities and quality primary grade education is not a novel idea. The city of Chicago began investing in primary year education upon the advent of Title I funding in the 1960s (Jacobson, 2018). A University of Minnesota professor tracked students that

participated in the Chicago early learning programs and found that among the tracked students, there was an increase in the likelihood of graduating high school, participating in higher education, and earning a higher income. Simultaneously, there was a decrease in incarceration, abuse, depression, and the need for special education services among these students compared to their peers (Jacobson, 2018). Cities across the United States have produced successful case studies of education programs focused on Pre-K and primary-level education. Considering the apparent preponderance of evidence that a change to a focus on early learning and primary grade levels can produce positive results, the removal of said barriers may necessitate new policy and practice by school districts state- and nation-wide.

I have observed the result of inadequate investment in primary level education. I spent the majority of my teaching career at the middle school level as a social studies teacher. My academic instruction concluded each school year with a high-stakes exam that counted as a large percentage of my students' final grade, counted towards my school's grade, and factored into my effectiveness rating. My school was under scrutiny by the district, having received an average rating of "D" for several years, and the pressure for my students to perform was palpable.

Each year, I worked with students experiencing multiple retentions, poor reading performance, and little to no background knowledge regarding the subject area of my class. Their lack of social and emotional awareness was apparent, and despite effective classroom management and strong relationships with my students, misbehavior often interrupted instruction. There was very little time to deviate from the curriculum content to remediate reading and social skills because of the pressure on me and my students to

perform academically to support the school grade.

An opportunity arose for me to join a district leadership team working with the elementary schools of the mid-size school district at the focus of this study. I entered the role of curriculum coordinator for kindergarten through second grade. I became endorsed in reading through a state-approved, district certification program, dove into studies on child development, and began to see the strong connection between the primary classroom and the experience of my middle school students. Students who did not see success and start to love learning at an early age struggled to stay in school. However, as I worked with administrators in the various schools across the district and spoke to other district leaders, the focus was always on the grade levels that participated in high-stakes testing at the end of the year starting with third grade.

At the elementary level, administrators placed their focus on the tested grade levels by ensuring highly skilled teachers were placed in third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms, sometimes to the detriment of the primary grade levels. Many of the students in tested grade levels receive interventions in reading and math to remediate deficits. However, frustration mounts among school, district, and state administrators each year as thousands of elementary and secondary level students fail to show proficiency in reading on state assessments despite the academic and monetary focus on these grade levels (NCES, 2018).

A focus on primary grade level instruction may remedy the lack of proficiency in the tested grade levels though current policy narrows academic focus in schools towards the tested grade levels. Diane Ravitch (2013) captured the essence of this issue when she stated, “this misallocation of scarce resources was hardly surprising, because schools



lived or died depending on their test scores” (p. 13). When students do not receive adequate support in their early education experience, the consequences for those students can range from a lower quality of life to incarceration (Jacobson, 2018). A focus on prekindergarten and the primary grades may serve as an ideal focus for school districts nationwide if the goal of the public education system is to ensure each student reaches his or her full potential and each student finds success.

### **Rationale**

Donald Hernandez (2011) in a report for the Foundation for Child Development stated, “Those who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers” (p. 3). Hernandez (2011) drew this conclusion by analyzing both the Child and Young Adult study within the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and national reading assessment results. Hernandez (2011) specifically referenced the results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The results indicated that 33% of students in fourth grade read at a proficient level (Hernandez, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) periodically administers the NAEP assessment nationally (NCES, 2018). According to the 2017 NAEP, less than half of fourth grade students throughout the United States were able to read proficiently with only 35% of fourth grade students performing at or above a proficient rating (NCES, 2018).

Further, focusing on the 2017 NAEP data, an achievement gap was present between White students and other racial/ethnic groups. Compared to the 34% of White students scoring at the proficient level, 17% of African American fourth grade students scored at the same proficient level. For Hispanic students, 19% scored at the proficient

level compared to 34% of their White peers (NCES, 2018). Ten percent of students with disabilities scored at the proficient level compared to 30% of their nondisabled peers, and this gap widens with English Language Learners (ELL) scoring at eight percent proficient in comparison to thirty percent of non-ELL students (NCES, 2018).

Low proficiency and achievement gaps are pervasive in the nation's collective reading ability among fourth grade students. The state in which the focus district of this study is located is above the aforementioned national average by only a few percentage points (NCES, 2018). State and national exams determine the effectiveness of reading instruction in or after third grade, but reading instruction begins during Pre-K through second grade (Education Commission of the States, 2018).

Beyond ratings, high-stakes exams have implications for retention of third grade students in many states (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). It is understandable to place as much focus as possible on the grade levels that culminate in these high-stakes exams. However, as I saw in my personal experience, the need to bolster state, district, and school-wide instructional focus and resources on Pre-K and primary grades is apparent. Many case studies of cities around the United States show that a focus on primary grades improves high school graduation rates and more (Jacobson, 2014). This choice begs the question as to why more states and districts will not forgo the deep focus on tested grade levels and in exchange, invest in the early years of a child's education.

## **Goals**

The goal of this program evaluation is to inform and advocate for policy that drives resources to support and enhance early childhood and primary grade levels as a

possible solution to the pervasive lack of proficiency, specifically in reading, seen in upper elementary grades (NCES, 2018). To inform policymakers best, this utilization-focused evaluation will determine barriers within the state and district in which this evaluation takes place through interviews with state and district leaders (Patton, 2008). These interviews will reveal said barriers within the district and state. This form of evaluation ensures the decision-makers affected by potential policy changes will be at the forefront of its development.

### **Definition of Terms**

- *Accountability Measures* – According to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state education department leaders must create a “statewide accountability system” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 30) based on goals they set. State systems must provide a summative rating for each school. This summative rating includes performance on annual state assessments and the reduction of achievement gaps among student subgroups. Four-year cohort graduation rates are included for high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
- *Achievement Gap* – “The disparity in academic performance between groups of students” (Ansell, 2011, para. 1). The achievement gap may appear as a result of standardized test scores, graduation rate, or other measures of success (Ansell, 2010).
- *Early Childhood Education* – Education that takes place prior to entry into kindergarten. This term may refer to education services beginning at birth through prekindergarten (Pre-K). For the purpose of this study, early childhood education (ECE) pertains to Pre-K. (National Governors Association, 2012).

- *Head Start Preschool Programs* – Head Start services support “the school readiness of young children from low-income families through agencies in their local community” (Office of Head Start, 2018, para. 1). Head Start services can serve children from birth through age five. These programs are funded through federal grants and run by members of local agencies including school districts (Office of Head Start, 2018).
- *P-3* – “P-3” is an abbreviation for prenatal through third grade. The years between birth and third grade are critical for development and the quality of this development affects children throughout their lives. This term is interchangeable with Prekindergarten (Pre-K) – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade as it indicates time a student receives services prior to kindergarten through third grade (University of Colorado, 2019).

### **Research Questions**

Two primary research questions serve as the basis for this study. First, what are the barriers to a state, district, and school-wide focus on early childhood education and the primary grade levels? Sub questions asked within the interview process help further define the current context, culture, conditions, and competencies within the district and state regarding Pre-K and primary level education (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, Rasmussen, 2006). Sub-questions include:

- a. What are the major causes of third grade retention and low-proficiency in third grade reading?
- b. Which grade levels should receive the focus of school, district, and state academic goals?
- c. How important is it that district and school administrators know primary

education needs such as reading instruction?

d. What are the barriers to fulfilling a vision for a high-quality primary grade program?

The literature review will address the second primary research question. What are the variables that enable a successful Pre-K through primary level program within a state and school district? I will analyze case studies of school districts around the United States that focused on Pre-K and primary grades to the benefit of their students and define the variables that enabled that success.

### **Conclusion**

Students around the nation often struggle to be proficient in reading by fourth grade as evidenced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018). This lack of proficiency can affect students throughout their educational careers (Hernandez, 2011). According to case studies around the United States, reading proficiency as well as other academic skills may improve through a focus on Pre-K through primary level education (Jacobson, 2014). Despite this, many districts and states, including those at the center of this study, continue to focus on tested grade levels. After barriers are determined, state and district policymakers will be better informed, and a shift in focus to early learning can occur.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

There are three main topics in my literature review. The first topic of this literature review is the purpose behind a focus on early learning and primary grade level education within a state or school district. Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies serve as the main body of literature for this topic. These studies reinforce the purpose behind a district- or state-wide shift towards a focus on early learning and primary grade levels.

The second topic is the process through which leaders of policy and practice at the state and local levels executed their shift to a focus on early learning and primary grade levels. Case studies serve as the main body of literature in this subsection. The authors of these case studies answer the second research question of this program evaluation: What are the variables that allow for a successful P-3 program within a state and school district? This topic includes the relevant variables and barriers that the state and district leaders, teachers, and families experienced through this shift. The final topic is the changes in policy, or suggestions for policy, made by state and district leaders that allowed for a shift to occur towards a focus on Pre-K through primary grades.

The publication year of the following literature spans from 2006 through 2019. This body of literature includes case studies, policy briefs, white papers, and scholarly articles. Databases from which this body of literature was found include the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) and education databases hosted by the Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO). When I searched for a specific title that was not found in the aforementioned databases, I utilized a Google search to guide me to the location of that title. I also received resources from colleagues who knew the topic of my research

and wished to send a potential article or study of interest. I prioritized my search for case studies as the authors of these studies provided insight for practical means to overcome barriers towards a focus on the early years of a child's education.

### **Purpose**

David Jacobson (2018), director of the Birth through Third Grade Learning Hub in Massachusetts, explained the inconsistency of early child care and education among low income families and the impact of those gaps in learning in his article *A Powerful Convergence: Community Schools and Early Childhood Education*. In a previous article, Jacobson (2014) explained that gaps in education and social-emotional development in early years “lead to gaps in literacy and math proficiency by third grade, which in turn lead to gaps in high school graduation rates and college- and career-readiness” (p. 64). Without proper early education, “every intervention onward becomes remedial” (Maeroff, 2006a, p. 42). In places where a birth through third grade program (P-3) of some form had taken root, reduction in the achievement gap took place along with other community improvements.

Achievement gaps within assessment data were found in local and national examples. Among third grade students in the San Francisco United School District, only 26% of African American and Latinx students scored at grade level in reading as opposed to 74% of their Caucasian classmates (Nyhan, 2015). In 2017, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also indicated an achievement gap between Caucasian students and their African American and Latinx peers. Among Caucasian students, 34% earned a proficient score while 17% of African American students and 19% of Latinx students scored at or above proficiency (NCES, 2018). Researchers argued

that a comprehensive, community-oriented, high quality birth through third grade program can remedy this type of gap appearing annually in school districts across the United States (Jacobson, 2014). Gene I. Maeroff (2006b), author of the article, *The Critical Primary Years*, stated: “The period that begins with preschool and runs through the end of third grade accounts for more than a third of elementary and secondary education. No other phase of a student’s schooling figures more prominently in shaping the future” (p. 42).

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPCs) are an example of an early childhood education program that increased the likelihood of high school graduation and quality of life for students. Providers opened these centers in 1967 and offered quality care and education from preschool age through early elementary grades by way of collaboration with surrounding elementary schools. Students who attended these centers and affiliated schools in the 1980s were found to be less likely to commit crimes as a child or adult, less likely to require Exceptional Student Education (ESE) services, less likely to experience neglect, abuse, or mental health issues, and achieved academic success along with higher income in comparison to a control group, according to a study of students by Arthur Reynolds of the University of Minnesota in 2011 (Jacobson, 2018).

The study by Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, and White (2011) titled, *School-Based Early Childhood Education and Age-28 Well-Being: Effects by Timing, Dosage, and Subgroups* documented the effect of preschool participation in CPCs on overall well-being 25 years after participation took place by utilizing the student cohort born between 1979 and 1980 and documented by the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS). The effect of early education was most impactful for students entering the CPC preschool programs at



age three. Impacted elements included education, socio-economic status, health, and reduced crime (Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 5). For study participants who entered the programs after age three, “findings were limited to education while those for extended intervention were exclusive to education and economic well-being” (Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 5).

Reynolds et al. (2011) accounted for the potential influence of the participants’ environmental context. The authors stated:

The enduring effects of the program were observed within a social context characterized by high levels of risk that substantially counteract the positive influences of early experience. In addition to residing in neighborhoods of persistent poverty where the majority of students fail to complete high school, over half of the participants changed schools frequently, only 25% of participants attended schools of relatively high quality. That the program, especially in preschool, showed such broad and practically significant effects on well-being despite these environmental challenges is encouraging for prevention programming. (p. 5)

As Jacobson (2018) described in his article, Reynolds et al. concluded that early intervention and instruction has a lasting impact for students into adulthood. Reynolds et al. (2011) stated:

In conclusion, early education programs can impact life-course outcomes necessary for economic success and good health. The findings of this study indicate that while there are limits to the effects of the CPC program for particular outcomes and groups, impacts which endured provide a strong foundation for the

investment in a promotion of early childhood learning. ( p. 6)

The authors of this longitudinal study substantiated the purpose behind a transition to a focus on P-3 education in order to increase high school graduation and the well-being of students.

The Reynolds et al. (2011) study was included in a meta-analysis of 22 similar, longitudinal studies on the educational outcomes that result from participation in early childhood education programs. Faculty members from Harvard University, New York University, University of California, University of Washington, and University of Wisconsin chose these studies because they met rigorous qualifications. The authors included studies that:

(a) evaluated a U.S.-based educational program, policy, or intervention for children ages 0 to 5 years; (b) made use of a comparison group that was shown to be equivalent to the treatment group at baseline; (c) had at least 10 participants in each condition; (d) experienced less than 50% attrition in each condition between initiation of treatment and follow-up measurement; and (e) had enough information to calculate effect sizes for analysis. (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 9)

The authors considered three, key educational outcomes which included placement in special education services, grade-level retention, and high school graduation. Of the thousands of documents reviewed, 272 met the criteria listed above. The authors included four additional studies of early learning programs covering the time period of 2007-2016 as the other studies took place prior to the year 2000 (McCoy et al., 2017). The authors chose the 22 studies included because the authors of these studies compared students in early learning, preschool programs that were classroom-based, as opposed to in-home

services, to students that did not participate in preschool programs. Also, the authors excluded studies that were irrelevant to the three desired measures of special education placement, retention, and graduation (McCoy et al., 2017).

The authors chose to conduct the meta-analysis to determine the efficacy of early childhood education programs in consideration of the increase in presence of such programs across the United States since the early 2000s (McCoy et al., 2017). Furthermore, the authors recognized extensive literature which detailed the cost of special education programs, retention, and failure to graduate high school. The authors considered the cost to school districts to provide remedial and special services, the cost to the individual who drops out of high school, and the cost to the U.S. economy as individuals earn and spend less (McCoy et al. 2017).

The authors found “statistically significant average effects of ECE [Early Childhood Education] across all three outcomes” (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 2) within the results of the meta-analysis. Early childhood education programs were associated with an 8.09% “decrease in special education placement” (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 2), an 8.29% “decrease in grade retention” (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 2), and an 11.41% “increase in high school graduation” (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 2). The authors concluded that “further investments in ECE programming may be one avenue for reducing education and economic burdens and inequities” (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 3).

There were studies that confounded the positive findings above on the surface; however, the conclusions for the following studies offered strength to the argument for a P-3 focus (Meloy, Gardner, Darling-Hammond, 2019). The authors of a study on Tennessee prekindergarten programs determined:

Across all these achievement-related outcomes, there were no statistically significant differences past the kindergarten year that favored the VPK participants. Moreover, the direction of the differences in those later grades was overwhelmingly negative, indicating that the VPK participants did not perform as well as the control children, with a number of those differences reaching statistical significance. (Lipse, Farran, & Durkin, 2018, p. 167)

Meloy et al. (2019) pointed out that the Tennessee study did not account for the environmental context for students in the comparison group. Students in the comparison group may have attended other preschools in addition to displaying other contextual differences, including race, poverty, and native language which made the two groups in the study difficult to compare (Meloy et al., 2019).

The authors of the Tennessee study concluded by stating that the experience for students during kindergarten through third grade was pivotal to continuing any benefits that stemmed from preschool experiences (Lipse et al., 2018). The Third Grade Follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study, a report by Puma et al. (2012) for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that benefits for Head Start students did not universally last through subsequent grade levels. The authors stated that they compared students who received services from other preschool providers and did not “differentiate impacts for children who received differing quality in Head Start” (Puma et al., 2012). Meloy et al. (2019) said that this unequal comparison may have contributed to the apparent fadeout of benefits for students after they entered elementary school. Puma et al. (2012) did recognize other studies by authors outside of Head Start showed students benefitted from early learning experiences into adulthood.

Meloy et al. (2019) concluded their report with suggestions that manifested in case studies of districts in which leaders were successful in implementing P-3 programs. These suggestions included high-quality preschool programs, supporting teachers, and sustaining support into the primary and elementary grade levels to extend the benefits of the preschool experience. Drew Bailey, Greg Duncan, Candice Odgers, and Winnie Yu (2017) also discussed the results of the study by Puma et al. (2012) as well as two other notable studies – the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project.

The Head Start, Perry Preschool Project, and Abecedarian Project studies showed an initial benefit from preschool and a steady decline, or fadeout, of those benefits as students move through subsequent grade levels and their peers catch up to their cognitive abilities (Bailey et al., 2017). These authors developed a conclusion similar to the other contrarian authors. They determined that the benefits of early learning programs only last if students enter “environments of sufficient quality to sustain normative growth...by providing high-quality elementary school instruction that complements what has been taught before” (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 25). Authors of contradictory studies may influence policymakers to look to other elements of public education systems to improve student outcomes though further analysis shows that a high-quality, sustainable, and enriching P-3 program may offer substantial benefits to students as they grow into adulthood (Meloy et al., 2019).

Gene Maeroff (2006a) explained that a focus on early education is not a novel idea. Edward Ziglar, a man instrumental in the founding of Head Start, proposed alignment of preschool with primary grade levels in 1978 (Maeroff, 2006a). Two decades later, the National Association of States Boards of Education advocated for school

districts to adopt early childhood programs (Maeroff, 2006a). Deborah Stipek (2017) of the Stanford Graduate School of Education indicated that it is not enough to have an early childhood education program available within a school district, but rather a strong link must exist between the efforts of preschools and the kindergarten through twelfth (K-12) public education system in order to see lasting benefits for students.

### **Process**

Once stakeholders and policy makers are united behind the purpose for transitioning to a focus on P-3 education, the process to achieving that shift in focus can vary depending on the educational context of the state or school district. However, recurring components to this shift are present. The primary component I found throughout several case studies, white papers, and policy briefs was the alignment of efforts between Pre-K, kindergarten, and beyond (The Pre-K Coalition, 2011). Rachel Valentino and Deborah J. Stipek (2016) describe Pre-K-3 alignment as being both “vertical and horizontal” (p. 1). The authors refer to vertical alignment as consistency between state, district, school, and classroom policies and plans including standards and assessments in a given grade level while horizontal alignment refers to cohesion of those policies, standards, and assessments across grade levels in a continuum (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Valentino and Stipek (2016) discussed the potential benefits of alignment and “continuity in policies and practices across grades” (p. 2) including preparedness for upcoming grade levels, reduction of time spent reteaching skills, and minimizing skills gaps. The authors qualified their statement by pointing out the lack of empirical evidence regarding the benefit of said alignment (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The authors stated,

“Although there is limited evidence for the direct or causal benefits of horizontal alignment, there are good reasons to expect it to help maintain the benefits of quality preschool and promote better learning” ( p. 2). Their reasons included the reduction of skill gaps and increase in preparation for the upcoming grade levels for students.

In addition, teachers may benefit from alignment. Communication between grade levels can increase teacher knowledge of instruction and academic content can be maximized within early childhood programs to ensure skills required of academic areas covered in kindergarten are introduced in preschool settings (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The authors of the aforementioned study on Tennessee prekindergarten programs that calls the efficacy of such programs into question suggested Stipek’s idea of alignment as a solution to their conundrum regarding the low impact of a student’s prekindergarten experience (Lipsey et al., 2018).

Valentino and Stipek (2016) further explained that maintaining standards and assessments regarding social-emotional learning are pivotal to a P-3 focus in order to reduce the potential for skill fade out. The authors point out that state preschool standards include standards regarding social-emotional learning, but those standards do not manifest again in the academic-driven kindergarten standards (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). This variation in standards between prekindergarten and kindergarten is accurate for the current context of the state in which this program evaluation takes place (Citation withheld to maintain anonymity).

Valentino and Stipek (2016) recommended that kindergarten and the subsequent grades build off these social-emotional skills to maximize skill development and prevent fade out. In an article titled “The Preschool Fade-Out Effect Is Not Inevitable,” Stipek

(2017) explained that social-emotion skills, such as impulse control, are “highly correlated with academic skills” (para. 7). Stipek (2017) continued, “A failure to build on the progress in self-regulation and other social skills made in preschool is a missed opportunity to maximize student learning” (para. 7). Building on a student’s preschool experience with accurate assessment data and using it to adjust instruction to meet the student’s needs through remediation or enrichment requires teacher skill and may serve as an important piece of a P-3 focus in a state or district (Stipek, 2017).

Valentino and Stipek (2016) interviewed California state, district, and local leaders from the sphere of early childhood education documenting the perspective of educational leaders regarding P-3 alignment. Topics discussed during the interviews included the “policies and practices districts have implemented to achieve alignment” (Valentino and Stipek, 2016, p. 3), as well as key variables for success and barriers experienced while moving towards early childhood and primary grade alignment. Experts in the field nominated these leaders as those making significant contribution to alignment efforts (Valentino and Stipek, 2016, p. 3). According to the interviewees, horizontal alignment across grade levels includes a unified set of goals and expectations “across grades” (p. 5). Most interviewees identified communication among teachers, multi-grade level professional development, leadership dedicated to the goal of P-3 alignment, and an increase of equity of funding and certification between elementary and preschool teachers as critical elements for the process of shifting focus to an aligned P-3 program (p. 5).

The authors detailed the efforts of leaders from two California districts for the subject of brief case studies as a result of the interviews (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The subject of the first case study was Fresno Unified School District (FUSD). Their process



for moving to a focus on P-3 education included several factors. The first factor was training for teachers including the opportunity for teachers to observe in both model and non-model classrooms in order to increase quality of instruction. Instructional coaches facilitated meetings for teachers across different grade levels plus instructors from various providers of prekindergarten services in the district (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). School administrators received similar training and the ability to observe classrooms in other schools. Principals were able to see best practice for alignment between Pre-K and primary grade levels in action. Incentive was fostered among schools to improve practice as a result (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The leaders of (FUSD) valued the importance of training for administrators to ensure valuable growth opportunities and feedback for teachers within the schools (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

The second factor within FUSD alignment efforts was a Transition to Kindergarten (TK) program that increased “communication between Pre-K and elementary school teachers” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 13) as it was a program that provided additional preschool instruction to students prior to kindergarten. Valentino and Stipek (2016) found much of the success of such a program revolved around a positive mindset regarding the efficacy of primary level education and available personnel for this program. TK was helpful in FUSD to bridge the transition between prekindergarten and kindergarten as the teachers adopted play-based learning and social emotional skills into their classrooms while moving children towards kindergarten readiness. FUSD also experienced a high level of support from the superintendent which provided a focus of funding to ensure all children in the district were provided the opportunity to attend Pre-K (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

In addition, the superintendent of FUSD issued a task force of multiple school and community stakeholders with the charge of making recommendations to the superintendent regarding early learning best practices. District personnel were also dedicated solely to alignment efforts (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The final factor contributing to FUSD leaders' successful process of aligning efforts between early learning and primary grades was willingness to change. To make sweeping changes, such as centralizing prekindergarten and kindergarten enrollment to ensure equity of access for all students, a strong desire among several educational stakeholders in a state or district to ensure the effort is put forth and the task is complete may be required (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

The second school district examined by Valentino and Stipek (2016) was Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). Leaders from this district combined their efforts with the Head Start preschool program, adopted common curricula, and encouraged professional development across departments and programs as their process towards implementing a focus on P-3 education. Both Head Start and district-run prekindergarten programs existed in LBUSD. District leaders integrated the two programs through their "Early Learning Initiative" (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 15) with the goal of providing well-aligned, "high-quality preschool for children in the district, regardless of the source of funding" (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 15). The deputy superintendent supervised both the director of state preschool programs and director of Head Start.

Leaders from the Head Start and district prekindergarten programs adopted common goals, common materials, and maintained a forum for discussion regarding disagreements and barriers to alignment in order to continue to work towards the

aforementioned goal. District leaders adopted the same curriculum for both mathematics and English Language Arts from prekindergarten, both in Head Start and district run classrooms, through elementary grades which added to the academic coherence between programs and grade levels (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). District leaders also created professional development sessions that allowed for collaboration between district preschool programs, Head Start preschool programs, local child-care providers, and kindergarten through third grade teachers. Cohesion and communication were fostered through these professional development workshops in addition to quarterly “Kindergarten festivals” that provided an “opportunity for the community to learn about TK and other childhood initiatives in the district” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 15).

David Jacobson (2018) emphasized the importance of a “foundation of collaboration” (p. 21) between public school districts and private providers regarding best practice in early childhood and primary grade education. He recommended that the work of building a quality P-3 program begins with bridging the gap between the various providers of prekindergarten services and kindergarten classrooms including curriculum alignment and joint professional development (Jacobson, 2018). Once that work is accomplished, it can extend into other preschool services and beyond kindergarten into grades one through three.

Geoff Marietta (2010) detailed the efforts of education leaders towards a focus on P-3 education in a case study of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland. Prior to a shift in the school district, an important change occurred in the state legislature. State policymakers committed themselves to the importance of early childhood development in the early 1990s. The policymakers issued a mandate that called

for each state jurisdiction to form a “coordinating body” (Marietta, 2010, p. 9) of agencies which served children and families. The policymakers supported a P-3 focus in school districts like MCPS through this mandate and helped cultivate the “foundation of collaboration” (Jacobson, 2018, p.21) that David Jacobson discussed above.

Superintendent Jerry Weast took the lead of MCPS during the organizational shift that occurred after this mandate, beginning in 1999, and partnered with the statutory local interagency organization, the Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families (Marietta, 2010). Beyond statute requirements, Weast believed that prekindergarten and early elementary grades were important years on which to focus. He believed this focus was a way to better serve the student population that was becoming more diversified, economically, racially, and in terms of native language spoken in the home, and to guide school-based leaders who struggled to close achievement gaps (Marietta, 2010). Weast said, “Once we fixed the system, the kids were suddenly okay. Same kids, just a different system. And we started at the beginning of the education value-chain – early learning” (Marietta, 2010, p. 2).

Weast believed the first step to an improved educational system, one in which early learning was a focal point, was to establish a new district-wide goal that served as the “North Star” (Marietta, 2010, p. 4) for all district employees. The goal was set at 100 percent high school graduation accompanied by 80 percent college readiness, as measured by the number of students scoring within the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT) exam, by the year 2014. The superintendent connected this goal to early learning through an outline of seven steps for students to reach college readiness. The first of the seven steps was “Advanced Reading

in Grades K-2” (Marietta, 2010, p. 4), which required school readiness for students leaving prekindergarten classrooms.

Leaders in Montgomery County Public Schools began to implement changes to early childhood education and elementary schools soon after Weast’s appointment in the 2000-2001 school year under the “Early Success Performance Plan” (Marietta, 2010, p. 6). They expanded the amount of time available for students to acquire skills in prekindergarten and elementary grade levels by moving to full-day kindergarten starting with schools that served at-risk students and expanded to the whole district thereafter (Marietta, 2010). School leaders opened after-school programs for kindergarten through fifth grade students and summer learning opportunities became available for elementary students as well as prekindergarten students (Marietta, 2010).

By 2009, Weast also expanded Head Start preschool to a full day schedule in 24 classrooms among 18 high-needs elementary schools. In addition, he worked with his staff to develop a local MCPS prekindergarten program that served over 2,500 three and four-year-old students for half-day prekindergarten that aligned with the half-day Head Start prekindergarten program. Similar to LBUSD, MCPS leaders were able to provide these services because the school district was “the main delegate agency for Head Start programs in the county” (Marietta, 2010, p. 10). This meant “that all school-based Head Start teachers and staff are MCPS employees, receiving the same comprehensive professional development and evaluation systems as all other district teachers” (Marietta, 2010, p. 10).

The variety of programs available allowed for students, from either lower or higher income families, to have access to prekindergarten programs with the goal of

kindergarten readiness (Marietta, 2010). Early learning leaders also ensured students with special needs had access to prekindergarten programs through both Head Start and MCPS run programs. Head Start and MCPS teachers were able to collaborate with common curriculum and assessments (Marietta, 2010).

Like the school districts in California, Weast recognized curriculum alignment from prekindergarten through grade 12 was important. Philosophical differences regarding an academic versus play-based approach were addressed to avoid any hindrance in the process of moving towards a strong early learning focus. District stakeholders adjusted the curriculum based on the question, “What do our children need for both healthy cognitive and social-emotional development in the early years, so they can succeed throughout school and be ready for college?” (Marietta, 2010, p. 5).

Weast encouraged a developmentally appropriate approach in prekindergarten classrooms that prepared students for rigorous academic standards but allowed for flexibility in regard to delivery of the instruction depending on students’ developmental needs. Members of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) support the developmental approach to educating young children. Authors Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp (2009) outlined this support in the position statement of the NAEYC organization. In regard to standards-based learning in connection to developmental learning activities, the authors stated:

Ideally, well-conceived standards or learning goals are in place to guide local schools and programs in choosing or developing comprehensive, appropriate curriculum. The curriculum framework is a starting place, then teachers can use their expertise to make adaptations needed to optimize the fit with the children.

(Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p 5-6)

In regard to expertise, professional development for teachers was a critical element of Weast's plan for improving student learning outcomes across all grade levels to ensure teachers had the ability to monitor student progress, execute high-level academic instruction, and exercise the aforementioned flexibility in instructional delivery (Marietta, 2010). Teachers met together regularly to discuss student progress towards standard and skill mastery as well as instructional strategies and curriculum. Not only did they meet in grade level teams, but teachers from prekindergarten and elementary grade levels met together to discuss student needs. NAEYC members offered insight in regard to joining early learning and primary grade levels together. The authors stated, "Through increased communication and collaboration, both worlds can learn much that can contribute to improving the educational experiences of *all* young children and to making those experiences more coherent" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 5).

A key element to teachers' ability to meet and collaborate together was the effort made to align curriculum with state, national, and international standards of learning across all grade levels (Marietta, 2010). District leaders provided instructional guides and periodic benchmark assessments to cultivate a common language and coherence between teachers of all grade levels. This effort by district leaders also eased transitions between grade levels and linked teaching efforts to important points on the grade level continuum such as kindergarten readiness, reading proficiency by the end of third grade, and high school graduation (Marietta, 2010).

Janine Bacquie was the director of Early Childhood Programs and Services for MCPS during the decade in which this case study took place. She felt that a connection

between families and the district efforts was pivotal to success, so her office recruited and enrolled students into the Head Start and MCPS prekindergarten programs year-round (Marietta, 2010). To achieve this, Bacquie and the members of her department worked with other agencies in the district including pediatric offices, churches, and Judy Centers. The Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program or “Judy Centers” were created by state policy makers under Senate Bill 793. Two of these centers were built in Montgomery County. The employees of these centers provided wraparound, or comprehensive, services for children from the time they are born until they are five-years old through connections to the county health and human services department, the public library, and other local nonprofit organizations (Marietta, 2010, p. 10). Once parents registered, a service worker was available to assess the family’s needs and connect the family to a variety of services prior to the child starting school. Once school began, phone calls and home visits by service workers and teachers were a regular occurrence and toolkits, guides, and materials were published in six languages to help build a bridge between home and school (Marietta, 2010).

To meet the college-readiness goal set by Weast and his team, teachers and school leaders underwent several changes in order to increase grade-level readiness of young learners and close the achievement gap. District leaders provided both support and accountability, so school teams could implement the changes in curriculum, preschool structure, and connection between state and district efforts with fidelity (Marietta, 2010). Weast viewed the effectiveness of a teacher as the responsibility of “all teachers, support staff, and administrators” (Marietta, 2010, p. 14).

Teachers, including Head Start teachers, participated in the district-union jointly



run Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS). This system included mentoring, professional development, teacher observations, and evaluations. Evaluations were performed by both the principal and a peer for all new teachers in their first two years of employment or for veteran teachers who struggled to meet expectations (Marietta, 2010, p. 14). This “peer assistance and review” (PAR) teacher was assigned to new or struggling teachers by a panel that included “union and district representatives” (Marietta, 2010, p. 14-15). Staff development teachers were available to provide resources or training and funding for substitutes was available to allow for peer observations in classrooms (Marietta, 2010). Early learning teachers received additional training on working with students who spoke English as a second language. In order to lay a foundation of pedagogical understanding, all MCPS teachers were “required to go through the 36-hour Skillful Teacher Training” (Marietta, 2010, p. 15).

District leaders held high expectations for all teachers in connection with the high level of support. Prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers were held to the same high standards and accountability and were included in the regular, school-based data analysis meetings that compared student data to desired benchmarks (Marietta, 2010). All teachers were also expected to maintain lesson plans and class-wide data monitoring sheets that were to be available to administrators at all times. School administrators played a role in monitoring teaching and student data but were also held accountable through student performance reports and site visits from the community superintendent (Marietta, 2010, p. 15).

By the fall of 2010 when Marietta (2010) published this case study, nearly 90% of high school seniors graduated high school with 77% of graduates enrolling in college.

Weast's ultimate goal was that 100% of students will graduate high school with 80% of those students college ready by 2014. In the years since Weast's time as superintendent, MCPS leaders continued to prioritize early learning and the graduation rate continued to remain between 88-90% (Maryland State Department of Education, 2019). In the 2018-2021 Montgomery County Public Schools district strategic plan, district leaders included a focus on early learning. Authors of the plan stated,

Preparing for the success in college, career, and community begins at the earliest ages. MCPS continues to make progress toward providing greater access to prekindergarten; supporting student well-being; and expanding enrichment opportunities for our youngest learners. (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2018, para. 1)

In March of 2019, a multi-stakeholder effort began in Montgomery County including MCPS, Montgomery College, and the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services. The goal of this new initiative titled the Early Child Care and Education Initiative, was to expand enrollment opportunities in early learning by 600 seats, open a new, full-day early childhood center run by MCPS, and partner with the local college to sustain the education and credentialing of early childcare teachers as access for students expanded (Montgomery County, 2019). The legislators for the state of Maryland and for Montgomery County initially focused on young children who lived in poverty when determining access to early childhood programs and continued to do so decades later. The MCPS superintendent in 2019, Jack Smith, stated, "We must focus on providing this opportunity for children who may not have resources to access early learning independently" (Montgomery County, 2019, para. 9). For the 2020 budget,

MCPS dedicated \$1 million to opening the aforementioned early childhood center (Montgomery County, 2019).

**Barriers.** Throughout each journey taken by state and district leaders to implement early childhood programs, barriers were present. These barriers are valuable to states and districts that wish to shift focus to a quality P-3 program. State and district leaders may consider the barriers that exist within their current contexts, cultures, conditions, and competencies, the barriers experienced by other state and district leaders, and apply the appropriate variable to success in order to overcome those barriers.

Valentino and Stipek (2016) interviewed participants in California school districts and a common barrier to a P-3 focus cited by participants at the local level was the disparity of wages between prekindergarten teachers and teachers at the primary grade levels. The inequity of wages, in addition to poor working conditions, prompted high levels of teacher turnover, and therefore, the inability of school districts to maintain a highly-trained group of prekindergarten teachers. The majority of local California education leaders interviewed for this study discussed consistent funding as a current barrier to lasting success of early childhood and elementary grade level improvement and curriculum alignment efforts (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 7). While FUSD was able to secure additional funding from a long-term grant, most districts cited a lack of funding for early learning across California (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Education leaders at the local level in California also explained that teacher contracts and union agreements served as barriers towards a focus on P-3 education (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). Additional time was required to participate in the multi-grade level professional development and other initiatives. Without funding to provide

additional pay for the additional time needed to achieve this focus, it was difficult for districts to overcome this barrier (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). A third barrier identified by interviewees was the licensing system for preschool facilities across the state. The requirements for a license to run a preschool program in California focused on safety regulations and had little to no relevance to instructional quality. Participants explained the need for a more well-rounded licensing system that included classroom practice (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

A final barrier identified by local California education leaders was the training and certification requirements for teachers with emphasis on requirements for preschool teachers (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). Participants stated that “credentialing requirements for PreK teachers are too low and undermine the quality of programs” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 11). Furthermore, “the quality of college programs that prepare preschool teachers is lacking” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 11) both in quality and required quantity of coursework.

State policy and foundation leaders in California initially described similar barriers to those of local education leaders (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). These individuals expanded on the disconnection between funding streams and the strain that this separation placed on early childhood programs. Recruiting quality teachers was difficult due to low funding for compensation. The division of funding streams built a barrier to alignment between programs as the leaders from whom the funding came required different learning standards for students and variation existed between accountability measures (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). District leaders had to put forth a concerted effort to overcome the funding barrier as displayed in the Fresno and Long Beach school

districts.

The disparity between funding sources for early childhood programs manifested in another barrier across California school districts. Writers of union contracts, according to interviewees, did not allow for additional time in the work-day for teachers to participate in professional development workshops. Without the ability to compensate teachers for additional work time, quality professional development was difficult to implement and therefore effective teaching practices were not present in early learning programs (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The leaders interviewed indicated that increased funding may allow for compensation for professional development, and therefore, overcome the barrier built by union contract writers in an effort to prevent extraneous, unpaid work placed on teachers (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

California state education leaders identified additional barriers to those identified by local leaders. First, early childhood care prior to kindergarten varied among different providers. Some providers were licensed, some were not. Some preschool providers were privately funded, others were public, and some ran through the Head Start program. Valentino and Stipek (2016) summarized the issue by stating, “It is difficult to ensure equal quality of care and student preparation across programs before children enter the public school system” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 18). Second, alignment of skill mastery and instruction was difficult for Transition to Kindergarten (TK) and kindergarten teachers as students entered school on a spectrum of acquired skills. Furthermore, communication and professional development across providers was difficult due to programmatic and geographic separation (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Finally, school districts throughout California experienced inconsistent support

from district leaders and teachers regarding a P-3 focus. Outside of the Fresno and Long Beach school districts, superintendents did not prioritize early learning or principals did not regard education taking place below kindergarten as within their scope of work.

Teachers, too, did not see the need to work together with preschool teachers and providers which further prevented collaboration (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Jerry Weast, superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), was able to overcome the barriers to a focus on P-3 education and successfully implemented this focus as part of a larger effort to increase high school graduation and college readiness. I will define the variables for Weast's success in the following subsection, but the circumstances that initiated the implementation of those variables may be considered barriers. The first barrier was the need for early education providers to come to consensus in regard to pedagogical approach. Some prekindergarten teachers believed in a play-based approach while others emphasized academic rigor (Marietta, 2010).

In addition to the need to agree on instructional delivery in order to streamline professional development, another barrier existed in the form of access to prekindergarten resources for the MCPS community. After expanding Head Start opportunities and wraparound services for low-income families, another barrier arose as the need for prekindergarten services existed for families that lived above the poverty line (Marietta, 2010). Funding was the root of the barriers surrounding early learning access which required Weast to work creatively with federal funding to ensure program sustainability.

After district leaders aligned early learning curricula and lawmakers assisted in the expansion of access to prekindergarten, Weast required a method to train and support teachers as they entered the district as a new employee or shifted their approach in the

classroom as an existing employee (Marietta, 2010). Furthermore, he held high expectations and held teachers accountable but needed a path that joined with the vision of the teachers' union to avoid negativity and grievances among teachers. After an agreeable approach to training and evaluation was established, Weast and his leadership team needed to create a data system that allowed for tracking student progress towards academic success as defined by learning standards and benchmarks (Marietta, 2010). Weast and his early learning team experienced a final barrier in the form of communicating learning efforts to students' families and reaching families prior to children reaching school-age (Marietta, 2010).

While Weast and his team, in conjunction with critical state policy, overcame the barriers described above, it was not a brief process. Starting in 1993 with the creation of a state-mandated management board of individuals focused on collaboration between early learning agencies, a decade and a half passed including a decade of Weast's tenure before processes and programs were fully in place (Marietta, 2010). Time may become a barrier for school districts who seek to make a large paradigm shift if the expectation of the school board or other governing bodies involves a quick solution to a problem such as increasing student achievement or graduation rate (Collins, 2005).

**Variables.** The second of two primary research questions for this study was: What are the variables that allow for a successful Pre-K through primary level program within a state and school district? The author or authors of each case study considered for this literature review offered insight in regard to variables for success that education and policy leaders in other states and districts may replicate. These case studies are based in the United States, and therefore, the districts described adhered to the same context of

operation within the confines of the federal policy at the time of publication and the accountability measures therein.

Fresno United School District (FUSD) was able to focus on providing equitable, high quality, and aligned early childhood and primary education due to two variables. The first variable was the dedication of district leadership towards the goal of a P-3 focus (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). The superintendent and school board members shared a vision for increased attention and funding to preschool and therefore allocated millions of dollars to that effort. In addition, the district received a ten-year grant of \$500,000 a year “to improve quality in early childhood education, test practices that are effective for supporting children and families under the age of four, and to create systems that support children and families as well as scale those practices” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 14). Funding was listed as a barrier by other interviewees across California in the authors’ study, however, FUSD overcame this with a concerted effort of top district leadership in addition to winning a significant grant.

Valentino and Stipek (2016) interviewed leaders from the Long Beach United School District (LBUSD) and learned that those leaders considered the members of the district to be “unusually committed to and successful in creating stronger Pre-K-3 alignment” (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 14). This attitude towards a P-3 focus may have played a strong role in the ability of district leaders to work through barriers that impeded the progress of other districts such as unifying preschool organizations, bridging funding sources together in order to provide high quality early learning experiences and aligning curriculum between preschool and third grade. Like the leaders from Fresno, the



leadership of LBSUD decided to focus on early learning and pulled together resources and people in order to achieve that focus (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Like in Long Beach and Fresno United School Districts, the educators in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) had strong support for P-3 education from their top leadership. Superintendent Jerry Weast rooted the district goal of increased high school graduation and college readiness in reading ability by the end of second grade with a connection to students' school readiness as they left prekindergarten (Marietta, 2010). Weast began his position as superintendent in 1999 and after studying the demographics and needs of the district, he launched the "Early Success Performance Plan" (Marietta, 2010, p. 6) in 2000 which sparked the alignment of early learning and primary education goals and curriculum in order to ensure third grade students read on grade level and stayed on track to graduate high school and seek postsecondary education.

The ability of Weast and his leadership team to prioritize preschool and primary students in MCPS centered on a variable for success in the form of state statute. Maryland state legislators enacted a law in 1993 that required collaboration among early learning agencies in school districts (Marietta, 2010). As a result, representatives of children, youth, and family services joined to create a Local Management Board (LMB) for Montgomery County called the Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families. Eventually joining Weast and MCPS, the collaboration between the council and the school district allowed for coordinated early learning efforts as opposed to duplicated efforts (Marietta, 2010, p. 9). Furthermore, "the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools

Act of 2002 mandated that all four-year-olds living at or below 185% of the federal poverty threshold be provided early learning services” (Marietta, 2010, p. 9).

The Bridge to Excellence Act, in addition to a state senate bill, led to the creation of the Judy Centers in the early 2000s (Marietta, 2010, p. 10). These centers provided comprehensive services to families with infants to five-year-old children through community partners which helped overcome the barrier of access for families to early childhood services. Weast also expanded access to early learning services by strengthening the Head Start program. Full- and half-day Head Start programs were available to low-income families and early childhood leaders in MCPS created a preschool program for three- and four-year-olds to serve families that did not qualify for Head Start services (Marietta, 2010).

Two variables allowed Weast to move forward with the aforementioned expansion of early learning services. First, MCPS was the delegate agency for Head Start so funding for the program, as well as the MCPS preschool and special education preschool programs, was partially derived from federal Title I dollars overcoming the barrier of funding (Marietta, 2010). Funding also enabled district leaders to provide full-day kindergarten in schools within low-income areas as well reduced class sizes in primary grades, summer extended-learning programs for prekindergarten through grade 5 students, and after school programs for kindergarten through grade 5 students (Marietta, 2010) in those schools.

Second, a variable for success towards a P-3 focus was the existence of Head Start and district preschool under the same umbrella of oversight. Alignment of curricula between programs and equity for professional development among teachers was possible

due to common leadership between Head Start and district programs (Marietta, 2010). District education leaders settled philosophical differences between preschool programs (i.e. play versus academic preparation) and created a standards-based program that emphasized the importance of both cognitive and social-emotional development (Marietta, 2010). Alignment was also increased when district leaders created common assessments within preschool and elementary curriculum which allowed for constant analysis of student progress and a continuum of skill building (Marietta, 2010). According to Stipek (2017), this type of alignment may help future kindergarten teachers close skill gaps as teachers would know where their students left off in their skill development according to prekindergarten assessments.

Head Start, MCPS preschool, and kindergarten through grade 12 teachers were equal in regard to employment benefits, pay, and professional development opportunities which overcame barriers in regard to quality of teacher certification and equity in pay. This factor also placed all teachers at the same level of scrutiny and accountability for effective teaching practices by their school leaders (Marietta, 2010, p. 14). A variable for success while teachers underwent the early learning paradigm shift in their district was the involvement of teachers' union members in the development of the evaluation and professional development plans. Through the Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS), district and school leaders offered new teachers mentoring and professional development along with resources in addition to the opportunity to be evaluated by peers in addition to their administrator (Marietta, 2010). The decision of district leaders to include the union in the development of a more rigorous professional development and evaluation protocol may have prevented an increase in the number of union grievances

filed by teachers.

Another variable for success towards a focus on P-3 education was the MCPS Early Childhood Programs and Services team and their dedication to family engagement (Marietta, 2010). Recruitment for Head Start and MCPS prekindergarten programs was year-round and the team worked with Judy Centers, pediatricians, and other community groups to gather referrals for the early learning programs. The team worked with teachers to create a plan of action to connect families to community services in order to address needs and ensure a higher likelihood of student success in the classroom (Marietta, 2010). Take-home academic toolkits in a variety of languages and parent trainings contributed to the development of a common language between school and home (Marietta, 2010). Services for families combined with quality instruction may address student needs and improve student learning outcomes (Jacobson, 2018).

### **Policy**

Authors of case studies and members of state and national organizations developed policy recommendations based on the experiences of state and district leadership teams that were successful in their implementation of a P-3 program. This policy section will include critical federal, state, and local policy from which state and district leaders benefitted while shifting to a P-3 focus within their jurisdiction. In a California case study, Valentino and Stipek (2016) interviewed California education leaders regarding the importance of alignment between early childhood and primary grade levels. The authors found that alignment was favored by the interviewees as common goals and expectations for teachers and students may improve instruction (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). However, the authors emphasized that ideal alignment

involved elementary educators building from preschool standards, such as social and emotional skill development, as opposed to academic standards increasing in the preschool environment. Policymakers can help ensure that these skills are built into state grade-level standards (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Valentino and Stipek (2016) compiled additional policy suggestions from their interviewees including education leaders at the state and local levels. First, interviewees suggested that multiple sources of reliable student data be available and transferred between each grade level as the student progressed through school. Such a longitudinal data system may allow for better preparation by teachers as they analyze the student data from the student cohort that will matriculate to their grade level (Valentino & Stipek, 2016, p. 19). Second, participants suggested that unions can be valuable allies in the process of moving to a P-3 focus. Union members negotiate salary and contractual obligations for teachers. If district leaders and union leaders work together, it may be possible to overcome barriers such as professional development being stymied by a contractual limitation of hours spent at work (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Interviewed participants proposed several policy and practice changes in regard to professional development. First, allow time for collaboration between teachers across grade levels and provide a consistent message within workshops across organizations such as district prekindergarten programs and Head Start (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). Second, have clear and consistent goals and messaging for each workshop. Third, train administrators on the efficacy of high-quality early childhood programs as well as the fundamentals of such programs so that they can lead their teachers as they administer their own program. Finally, participants discussed the need for improvement among

teacher and principal preparation programs both in general and in regard to P-3 education (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

The authors and the individuals they interviewed consistently cited funding, and the sources from which the funds stem, as an area in need of a policy change in order to better focus on P-3 education. (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). Funding streams in California differed for the various prekindergarten options for early childhood education, such as Head Start and other forms of child care, and kindergarten through third grade education. Providers of each funding stream varied in their accountability requirements and alignment within these requirements was minimal. The policy change, according to the authors, should incorporate increased funding for compensation of prekindergarten teachers and compensation for time to attend professional development opportunities (Valentino & Stipek, 2016).

Lawmakers in the state of Maryland played a role in the success of Superintendent Jerry Weast and his team in Montgomery County School District (MCPS) and their effort to focus on P-3 education in part towards their goal of increased high school graduation and college readiness (Marietta, 2010). In the early 1990s, state lawmakers mandated that leaders in each Maryland school district create a Local Management Board (LMB) to coordinate the efforts of early learning services for children from birth to age five. Nearly a decade later in 2002, lawmakers passed the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act and required preschool services for four-year-olds living 185% below the federal poverty line (Marietta, 2010).

These mandates and the partnership between Weast and the members of the Montgomery County LMB, the Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families

resulted in a district-wide vision for early learning which connected preschool opportunities to kindergarten and beyond (Marietta, 2010). Authors of a related policy placed Head Start preschool under the auspices of MCPS leaders. This policy allowed for alignment of curriculum between the preschool programs and for increased funding to expand the programs to serve a greater number of three- and four-year-old students (Marietta, 2010).

Marietta (2010) recommended that the leaders in the federal department of education consider supporting P-3 efforts in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). After the publication of the Montgomery County Public Schools case study, federal lawmakers passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as the reauthorization of ESEA and follow-up to the previous iteration of the law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The authors of ESSA allowed for states to choose some measures of student success outside of students' achievement on required state exams. This flexibility allowed Maryland lawmakers to include early childhood education and kindergarten readiness in their accountability measures for school districts (Maryland State Department of Education, 2017). Thus, leaders of school districts must focus on their youngest students when creating policies and programs. Authors of the Maryland ESSA plan stated:

In addition, Early Childhood Education is a priority for the State Board and the State Superintendent of Schools. The MSDE [Maryland State Department of Education] will identify gauges for kindergarten readiness and academic growth through grade 3, to be deployed no later than school year 2018-2019 and incorporated into the ESSA accountability system in this measure as rapidly as

feasible with the weights of the measures revised accordingly. (Maryland State Department of Education, 2017, p. 24)

The 2018-2021 Strategic Plan for Montgomery County Public Schools was in line with Maryland lawmakers' decision to include early learning and academic growth in primary grades within their accountability plan. District leaders hold teachers and school leaders accountable for academic growth among the district's youngest students through a kindergarten readiness screener and a local assessment for second grade students called an Evidence of Learning assessment (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2018).

Regarding literacy skills, 78.6% of second grade students met literacy measures on the Evidence of Learning local assessment during the 2017-2018 school year. In the 2018-2019 school year, the number of second grade students meeting literacy measures rose to 82.3% (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2019).

The members of the National Governors Association (NGA) (2012) supported the idea from California and Maryland district leaders described above in a white paper titled "Governor's Role in Aligning Early Education and K-12 Reforms: Challenges, Opportunities and Benefits for Children". The organization members recognized that alignment between early childhood and kindergarten through grade 12 efforts "can reduce the likelihood that low-income children fall behind early in life or experience a growing achievement gap over time" (National Governors Association, 2012, p. 2).

Organization members suggested several policy options that may assist in this alignment.

State lawmakers may create structures that "facilitate alignment of ECE [Early Childhood Education] and early elementary policies and practices" (National Governors Association, 2012, p. 5). The authors cited the state education offices of New Jersey and



North Carolina. Members of the New Jersey office that serves early learning programs created professional development for superintendents and principals on best practices in teaching prekindergarten through third grade in order to facilitate aligned P-3 instruction in their districts and schools (National Governors Association, 2012). Like the assessments created by leaders in Montgomery County, North Carolina education leaders developed formative assessments for kindergarten through third grade that measured progress on state standards and skill development (National Governors Association, 2012). Another policy suggestion by the members of the NGA (2012) was to increase opportunities for early learning and early elementary school teachers to align their approaches. Education leaders in Delaware, Massachusetts, and Washington created teams or centers that facilitated joint sessions for professional development.

State leaders may create policies surrounding credential and certification requirements which can support capacity-building in teachers and administrators. Through these policies, lawmakers may increase the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and increase the knowledge of school administrators in regard to early childhood and early elementary teaching practices (National Governors Association, 2012). State lawmakers in Illinois “embedded more ECE content in its [the state] principal certification requirements (National Governors Association, 2012). The authors also described the funding efforts for early childhood education in Connecticut and Indiana. The governors of both states were instrumental in securing funding allocations for early childhood education programs indicating that state leaders can prioritize early learning in their state and be a part of P-3 efforts (National Governors Association, 2012).

Since the publication of the 2012 white paper, the National Governors

Association (2018) issued an updated brief. The organization members continued to support alignment between early childhood education and kindergarten through grade 12 with the goal of increasing reading and mathematics assessment outcomes of third grade students. The members of the organization also reinforced the importance of improving prekindergarten through third grade teacher and administrator preparation and development in order to maintain best practices in the classroom which support cognitive and behavior development (National Governors Association, 2018).

The white paper was published in 2012 during which time state education departments operated under the federal context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant (National Governors Association, 2012). In 2018, state education leaders operated in a new context under Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Despite the shift in federal law, the National Governors Association continued to view the focus on and alignment of early childhood and primary level education as critical to student success (National Governors Association, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review answered the second research question of this program evaluation: What are the variables that allow for a successful Pre-K through primary level program within a state and school district? Prior to determining those variables, I established a purpose for a P-3 program. Longitudinal studies indicated that participation in early childhood education programs can benefit students through school and into adulthood. These results and other similar studies provided purpose behind a focus on early learning and primary level education for state, district, and school leaders (McCoy

et al., 2017). Though there are studies that indicated a fade-out of preschool benefits, this does not negate the need for school district and state leaders to focus on P-3 education. Rather, it is not enough to simply provide preschool opportunities. Instead, a strong alignment between prekindergarten and kindergarten through third grade will extend the benefits of early learning (Stipek, 2017).

For state and district leaders around the country that chose to make a P-3 focus part of their educational plan, the process varied depending on the context within their districts. For California leaders, funding through grants and a relentless passion for early learning made a P-3 focus possible (Valentino & Stipek, 2016). In Maryland, state lawmakers created statute oriented towards preschool opportunities and local policy streamlined early learning funding by placing the major providers of preschool, the school district and Head Start, under the same supervisory umbrella. This connection allowed for alignment of standards and professional development plans to form in order to create quality and cohesion between grade levels for young students (Marietta, 2010). In each state and district where a P-3 focus was possible, barriers to implementation existed and the presence of variables, such as funding sources and quality of leadership, helped leaders overcome said barriers. The exploration of these variables answered my second research question and can be applied to the context, culture, conditions, and competencies of the district and state to which this program evaluation applies.

The aforementioned variables for success, including funding and structure policies, were critical to the ability of state and district leaders to overcome barriers to a P-3 program like those in Maryland and California. The National Governors Association cited several other states in which lawmakers and state leaders made early learning and

primary education a priority through policy allowing school districts to do the same (National Governors Association, 2012). As indicated by the literature, lawmakers may create a joint effort between state and local governing bodies, as well as early learning and public education agencies, through policy. These policies may be a variable for success required to overcome barriers to a P-3 focus in a state or school district.

The following section contains the methodology through which I collected data in regard to determining the barriers to a P-3 program in the state and school district under study. I held interviews with state, district, and school leaders and then identified trends in their responses. The combination of the barriers to a P-3 program identified by participants and the variables for successful state and district implementation of a P-3 program identified in this literature review may initiate a solution for the state and district at the center of this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### Research Design Overview

This program evaluation focused on the barriers and variables present in a state and district shift from a strict focus on third through fifth grade, the tested grade levels in elementary school, to a focus on early learning and the primary grade levels. This shift in focus by district stakeholders may allow a school district to solidify foundational academic and social skills and provide equitable access to high quality, early education. I utilized a utilization-focused approach coinciding with a decision-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008, p. 301). The goal of this evaluation was to clear a path towards an early learning and primary grade prioritization within a school district by removing identified barriers.

In order to be utilization-focused in my evaluation, I analyzed the needs of stakeholders in the form of quantitative extant data including results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) based on guidelines provided by Michael Q. Patton (2008). To inform the decision-making process of a school district considering a shift to an early learning and primary grade focus, I conducted interviews with school-based administrators and district leaders to determine barriers to said shift. I also interviewed state education leaders. From those interviews, I extracted anecdotal, qualitative data (Patton, 2008). In order to analyze the trends found in the interviews, I distributed a preliminary survey among school leaders. The survey provided insight on the background of participating administrators including experience as an elementary school teacher of primary grades or of intermediate grades, time spent at a district or state

turnaround school, and participants' experience as an administrator (See Appendix A).

### **Participants**

There were three groups of stakeholders involved in this program evaluation. The members of the first group were elementary school principals. This group was critical, as principals will be the couriers of change if a shift in focus takes place from intermediate to primary grades. Principals were the current overseers of school-based policy. It was important to understand if their focus on intermediate grades was a result of their own background knowledge or if it was due to district policy, either actual or perceived, in order to discuss a possible policy change with the district or state leaders.

The second group of stakeholders involved in this program evaluation were district leaders. While principals carry out change, district leaders are the change agents, and by understanding the barriers that stand in the way of change, district leaders can make informed policy decisions. I interviewed the superintendent, deputy superintendent, director of elementary education, and director of turnaround schools and early learning, as they may be the catalysts for this change.

The final group of stakeholders were state leaders. District decisions, and therefore school-based decisions, stemmed from state education statutes. State leaders can provide insight behind policy and allow for deeper policy analysis. I was able to understand if the aforementioned barriers to a focus on primary education within state school districts are perceived or actual.

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

I gathered extant data in the form of the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in order to illustrate proficiency among fourth grade

students in reading across the United States. In addition, I collected extant data in the form of local kindergarten readiness assessment results and state standardized assessment results in the state and district under study. I conducted interviews of state, district, and school leaders in order to determine barriers to focusing on preschool and primary grade levels. I read case studies and examined longitudinal studies to determine the variables for success in regard to a state- and district-wide focus on a preschool through third grade program and the efficacy of implementing said program.

**Surveys.** Prior to interviews taking place, I gave elementary school-based administrators a brief survey in order to determine professional background and knowledge of early learning and primary grade level teaching as well as their consent for an interview (See Appendix A). This survey was electronic and distributed at a district administrative meeting. As a result of the surveys, I interviewed the six principals who indicated interest and availability. I provided school, district, and state level administrators with a message involving the purpose of the research and the Informed Consent document regarding interview participation.

**Interviews.** The interview process took approximately twenty minutes and consisted of questions pertaining to the principal's observations of student academics and behaviors within his or her school, and student success. Questions also included the principal's focus regarding amount of time and money spent on primary versus intermediate grade levels, thoughts regarding district academic and social/emotional learning needs, and the potential barriers of a shift to an early learning and primary grade focus (See Appendix B). If a principal was responsible for a turnaround school (i.e. a school receiving intervention from the state in order to improve), the questions differed

slightly to include the potential influence of serving a school facing that status (See Appendix C). For state leaders and district leaders, interview questions included their thoughts on the decision-making process and their priorities (See Appendix D and E). I provided Informed Consent forms to all those interviewed (See Appendix F). I transcribed and analyzed the responses for trends.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

I analyzed the historical extant data using descriptive statistics based upon guidelines provided by James, Milenkiewicz, and Bucknam (2008). The providers of the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for fourth grade reading offered insight into the potential need to focus on preschool and primary grade levels. I analyzed the responses on the preliminary survey for school administrators for background knowledge, grade level focus within their schools, and consent to interview. I transcribed and analyzed the interviews with an open coding system based upon the ideas of James et al. (2008). I read each transcription and marked trends as they appeared. After reading all transcriptions for the first time, I established a code and categorized trends through descriptive statistics (James et al., 2008). I acquired anecdotal information through the interview process that gave insight to the school, district, and state context, culture, conditions, and competencies.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The primary ethical consideration was anonymity of the participants. I ensured that extant district data were aggregated and not specific to a school, teacher, or student. I analyzed and reported the initial survey for administrators in aggregate as well. Interviewees remained anonymous with only general descriptors attached. I chose to



interview subjects based on their consent given on the initial survey, their interest, and their availability. The consent statement included the purpose of the program evaluation and the usage of the data collected. I conducted the interviews and transcribed the responses with names redacted. I provided a copy to the participants of the trends found within the interviews.

### **Limitations**

The district in which this program evaluation took place had 32 schools serving elementary level students. I interviewed a sample of six principals among those schools; therefore, one limitation of this study was the small sample size. Another limitation was potential bias. A participant may have held a skewed viewpoint regarding grade level focus depending on their background experience. A final limitation was my position within the school district. My focus was primary level education, so a school administrator may have hesitated to express an opposing view regarding an early learning and primary level focus. Despite my role in the school district, I remained neutral throughout each interview.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the pressure surrounding the high stakes testing in intermediate elementary grades, I was very interested to analyze the interview data regarding a potential shift in focus away from tested grade levels. I wanted to investigate the potential barriers to a focus on primary education in order to determine next steps. The following section details the results of my interviews, my interpretation of the results, and recommendations based on those results.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

According to the results of the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, 35% of fourth grade students across the United States exhibit proficient reading skills. This indicates that 65% of fourth grade students are below grade level in their reading skills. Furthermore, achievement gaps are present between Caucasian students and their African American and Hispanic peers, between nondisabled and disabled students, and between native English speakers and students who speak English as a second language (NCES, 2018).

Leila Feister and Ralph Smith (2010) of the Annie E. Casey Foundation described the importance of being able to read proficiently by the end of third grade. This point in time marks an instructional shift from learning how to read to an emphasis on reading for content. Students lacking reading skills as third and fourth grade students may not have a chance to receive remediation for those skills, struggle in academic content areas, and therefore, are at risk of dropping out of school prior to high school graduation (Feister & Smith, 2010).

Some state governments and school districts in the United States are moving towards a focus on early learning and primary grade levels in order to mitigate the potential issues for at-risk students who may drop out of high school which may result in lower-paying jobs, mental illness, and incarceration (Jacobson, 2018). A birth to grade 3 (P-3) focus is substantiated by a study of over 1,400 students by Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, and White (2011). Born in Chicago between 1979 and 1980, these students made up a cohort documented by the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Reynolds et al., 2011).

With documented, statistical information, a comparison was drawn between those who attended preschool as a three-year-old or older, through the Child-Parent Centers (CPC) of Chicago, and those who only attended kindergarten (Reynolds et al., 2011). The students who attended preschool were less likely to commit a crime, more likely to graduate, and more likely to have postsecondary education or training (Reynolds et al., 2011). As of 2019, 15 states and Washington, D.C. reported district or state-wide efforts to the National P-3 Center regarding an increase in focus by educational and government leaders on early childhood education through third grade (University of Colorado, 2019).

At the time my research took place, the state and district at the center of study did not maintain an active focus on alignment of prekindergarten through third grade. According to the state reading test required by Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) regulations, 44% of third grade students within this district read proficiently in 2019 (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). Among fourth grade students, 49% read at a proficient level according to this assessment (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The state average for both grade levels was 58% proficiency. A P-3 focus may be a solution to the preventable academic struggles that face students unable to read at a proficient level by the time they enter the fourth grade. Districts around the country, including districts in which many economically disadvantaged families reside, moved to a focus on young children and the education they receive prior to their first state exam (Program Evaluation Division, 2019).

### **Findings**

After considering the literature available which indicates an educational focus on young children may reverse the negative trend in reading proficiency among fourth grade

students revealed by NAEP data, plus the potential impact low reading skills can have on a student's quality of life after their educational career, the primary research question of my study was, what are the barriers to a state, district, and school-wide focus on the primary grade levels? Sub-questions included:

- a. What are the major causes of third grade retention and low-proficiency in third grade reading?
- b. Which grade levels should receive the focus of school, district, and state academic goals?
- c. How important is it that district and school administrators know primary education needs such as reading instruction?
- d. What are the barriers to fulfilling a vision for a high-quality primary grade program?

To answer this question and sub questions, I conducted 12 interviews. The interviews were semi structured as I developed the questions based on topical literature and adjusted them depending on the position of those interviewed (See Appendices B-E) (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008).

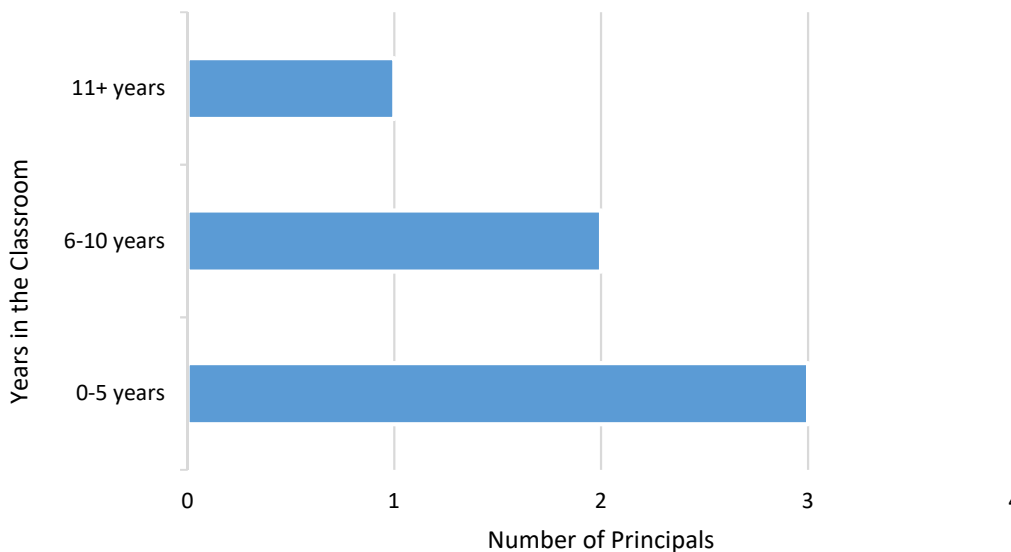
I interviewed three leaders of the state department of education. The positions held by these individuals at the time of the interviews were executive director for the Bureau of School Improvement, executive director of the statewide reading initiative, and the chancellor of k-12 public schools. I interviewed three district leaders including the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and the director of elementary education. I chose these individuals due to their relevance to the purpose of this evaluation. I also interviewed six elementary school principals from a diverse set of six schools. The

interviews lasted approximately 10-20 minutes and took place between December 2018 and August 2019.

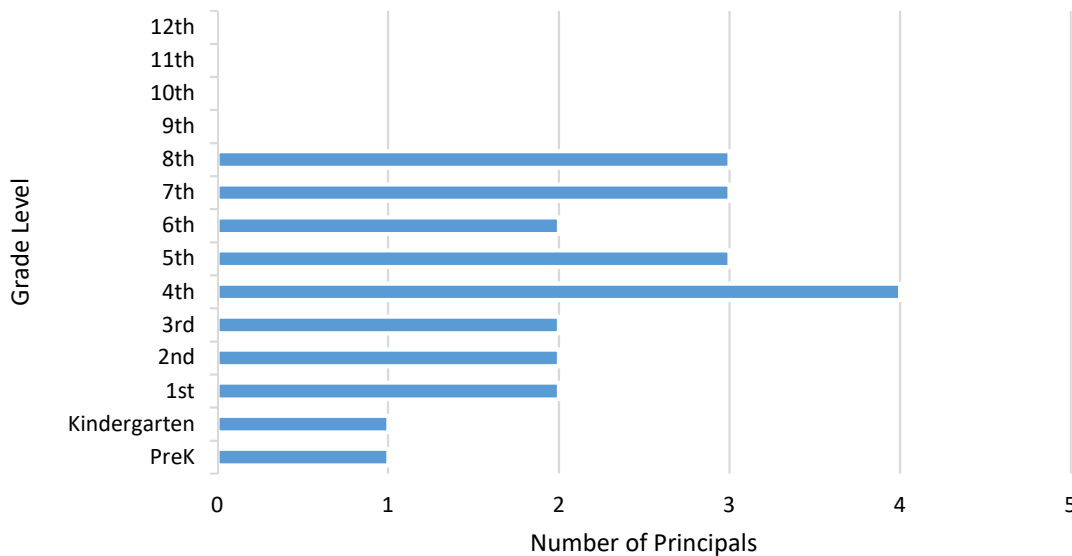
Out of the six schools from which the principal was interviewed, state education leaders assigned two schools an F rating for one or more years between 2015 and 2019. For elementary schools, this rating system connected to scores earned by students on state mandated tests in reading, math, and science (Woods, 2018). School leaders and teachers at these schools received targeted support from members of the state department of education. For two other schools, ratings from state education leaders fluctuated between B, C, and D over the course of those four years. State leaders assigned one school a C rating all four years while the last school received A ratings (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). Five out of six of the participating principals have voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) classrooms on their campus serving four-year-old students. Three of the six schools are located in rural areas while the three remaining schools are located in suburban areas.

I interviewed the principals based on their agreement to be interviewed and their availability. I provided a survey to all principals in the district prior to setting appointments with interested individuals to allow me to glean some background knowledge about their careers and experience in the elementary school setting. According to survey results, as shown in the figures to follow, the interviewed administrators vary in the amount of time they spent teaching in the classroom prior to their administrative appointment, the grade levels in which they taught, and the number of years spent as a school administrator. All principals interviewed served as an administrator at an elementary school, including the year in which they were interviewed, with two having

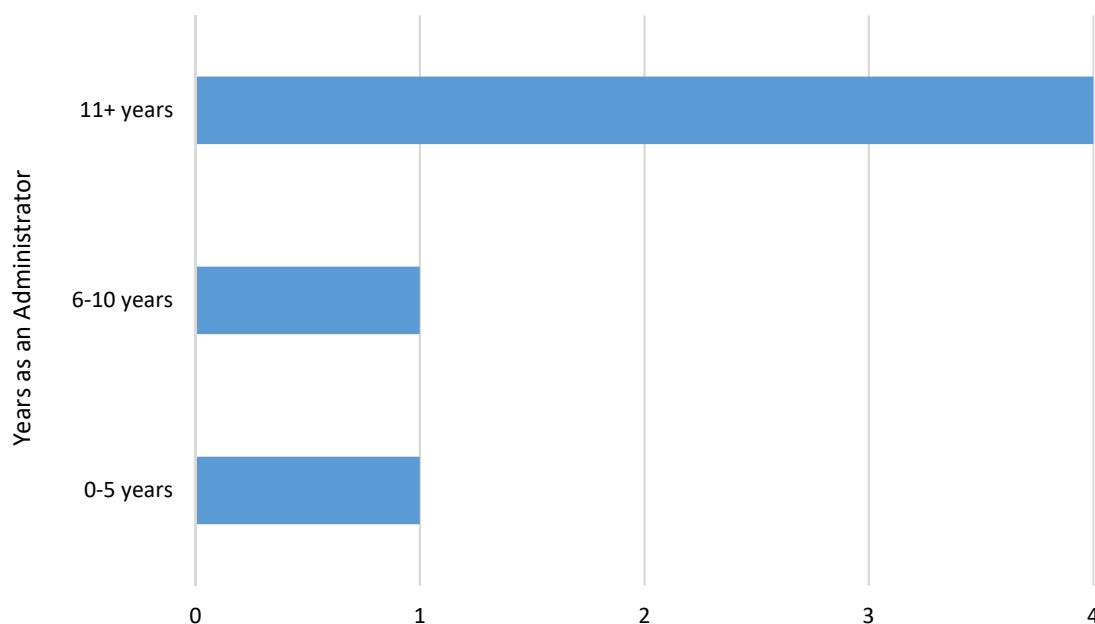
served in a secondary school as well. Five out of six principals taught in or led a school at one point in their career that received targeted support from state education leaders due to low ratings based on student test scores.



*Figure 1.* The number of years spent in the classroom by each interviewed principal



*Figure 2.* The grade level taught by each interviewed principal; principals may have taught multiple grade levels over the course of their teaching career



*Figure 3.* The number of years each principal spent serving as a school administrator; This includes time spent as either an assistant principal or principal

The participants' answers within these interviews fulfilled the first research question by providing insight regarding the context, culture, conditions, and competencies within the state and district which formulate the barriers to a P-3 focus (See Appendix G) (Wagner et al., 2006). In order to move forward and overcome these barriers, I posed my second research question: What are the variables that allow for a successful Pre-K through primary level program within a state and school district? I answered this question through a review of literature. Throughout the discussion of the findings below, after the description of barriers identified by the interviewed participants, I will present relevant variables for success determined by other districts. By mitigating the current barriers to a focus on P-3 education with the possible variables for success experienced by other districts who succeeded in such an implementation around the United States, a solution may be found.

**Contexts.** When considering the barriers to a focus on the learning of young children in a school district or state, some barriers presented by those interviewed fall outside of an educational leader's sphere of influence and serve as the context for other barriers. At the time of this study, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) was the current iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (Paul, 2016). In 1965, lawmakers catalyzed federal funding for public school systems through ESEA and initiated a new wave of accountability for students, teachers, and administrators (Paul, 2016). This accountability took root in the 1994 iteration of the act, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), in which lawmakers established standards of learning for math and reading and assessments to match those standards (Paul, 2016).

Less than a decade later, lawmakers morphed ESEA again to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Through this act, lawmakers increased standardized testing as a means for accountability of learning. Educators and the public criticized the legislators behind these policies for the punitive action taken as a result of low test scores and simultaneously gave praise for the increased focus on all students that resulted from the legislative change (Paul, 2016).

Beginning on December 10, 2015, school districts across the United States operated under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Through ESSA, lawmakers continued to expect state education leaders to execute accountability measures in connection to standards of learning geared towards college- and career-readiness (United States Department of Education, 2016). Lawmakers required assessments in reading and math in grades three through eight, and at least once in grades nine through 12, to



measure academic achievement in those subject areas. According to federal policy, state education policymakers also ensured school leaders provided a science assessment at least once during grades three through five, again between grades six through nine, and a final assessment in grades 10 through 12 (United States Department of Education, 2018). Thirty-nine out of fifty states have a rating system to summarize the results of these assessments, and related factors, including the state in which this study took place. In this state, state education leaders assigned a rating of A, B, C, D, or F to each school (Education Commission of the States, 2018a).

District ratings reflected the combined school ratings. State education leaders were required to intervene in circumstances of low school and district performance as indicated by the assigned A-F rating. In the state serving as the focus of this study, a rating of D or F indicated that students were performing below desired achievement levels. Members of state education support teams aided through “targeted support” when students showed a consistent trend of underperformance indicated by state leaders assigning a grade of D or F for multiple, consecutive years (United States Department of Education, 2018, p. 35). Under targeted support, school leaders were required to create and execute an improvement plan that had to be approved by the state education agency.

The required assessments do not apply to students prior to grade 3 (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015, 2018). State and district education leaders do require assessments in primary grade levels statewide for the purposes of both teacher evaluations and analysis regarding data pertaining to skill development among young students; however, these assessments do not factor into school and district ratings (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The requirements set forth by federal lawmakers place implicit importance

on the grade levels in which an assessment takes place. Stakeholders in the realm of education including parents, churches, businesses, and the community at large were annually informed of school and district ratings via various media outlets. Regardless of the work happening in preschool and primary grade levels, state leaders assigned school grades according to student performance in tested grade levels. As one of the participants interviewed for this study noted:

School grade is everything. It is whether you get penalized. It is whether you are rewarded both financially, rewarded because you become more attractive to parents, to teachers to want to come work at your school. Whatever the reason is, no one can say that there is not an accountability piece sitting out there in third, fourth, and fifth grade. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

Contributing to the importance placed on tested grade levels discussed above, the aforementioned national, state, and district reading assessment data indicated that many students were not meeting proficient levels in reading (NCES, 2018). In addition to the desire to avoid a school rating of D or F, as of 2018 there was a mandatory retention policy in 15 states for third grade students showing a lack of reading proficiency, including the state in which this study takes place (Education Commission of the States, 2018b). Educational leaders desired high reading proficiency among their students for two reasons. First, that meant students likely avoided retention and were on a path to academic success. Second, according to one of the principals interviewed, there was a heavy workload associated with turning around a poorly rated school and those ratings were a direct result of reading proficiency among students (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

One of the participants interviewed was the principal of a school that state leaders assigned an F based on the results of the 2017-2018 assessment. The following year, she replaced the principal under which the F was assigned and was tasked with improving student achievement results. Under the participant's leadership, the school rose two ratings to a C. She remarked in her interview that her views on what makes a school successful did not change whether she ran an F-rated school or an A-rated school. However, the workload and pressure were much higher when serving in an F-rated school (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Participants in this study indicated that there are several contextual factors, in addition to educational laws, that serve as barriers to a focus on a quality P-3 program. When asked why low proficiency and retention was pervasive among third grade students, participants identified three factors outside of their control as state, district, and school leaders. The most frequent factor cited was the child's home life. Six out of 12 participants indicated that parenting and the home environment contributed to a lack of reading ability. Two of the six participants who cited this factor were principals from the rural areas of the county and they added that illiteracy and lack of education among parents contributed to a lack of knowledge regarding how to help their children be successful in school. The three remaining participants indicated a general lack of parent involvement contributes to a young student's potential skill deficits prior to the conclusion of third grade. Another participant stated that parents are ill-informed and prefer their students to bring home worksheets and experience didactic, or teacher-centered, instruction (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Among the six participants that cited a child's home life as a contributing factor to

the likelihood of reading proficiently by the end of third grade, three discussed a family's socio-economic status. Specifically, a family that experienced poverty may need more support for their children than a family that did not. One participant among the six explained that students need more support in skill acquisition if they are English language learners (ELLs) or if they required additional educational support due to a learning disability (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

A state leader cited a lack of kindergarten readiness as another contributing factor to low reading proficiency in third grade. Kindergarten, or school, readiness for a child is defined by their enthusiasm for learning, motor development, social and emotional awareness including self-regulation, communication and language skills, and early literacy and numeracy skills (Williams & Lerner, 2019). Five out of six principals interviewed cited a similar factor for low reading proficiency, as well as a general barrier to a P-3 program. They pointed out that there are families that do not enroll their child in school until kindergarten. According to participants, preschool is an opportunity to identify possible learning deficits. Students who enter school without preschool experience may go without learning needs identified and therefore teachers are unable to provide appropriate supports (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Zero participants stated that federal or state policies regarding educational accountability needed to change. One participant stated that he or she felt the state was moving in the right direction as proficient reading by the end of third grade is a necessary goal. Five participants, including a state education leader, did note that government entities may need to increase funding for early learning opportunities in order to remove barriers to a focus on early learning and primary grade levels. Participants discussed the

need to increase participation in preschool and in order to provide those opportunities, public schools need to add to existing prekindergarten programs including new classrooms, more teachers, and necessary materials which require funding that at the time was above the funding available for preschool in the district and state (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The state leader who mentioned the need for increased funding focused specifically on teacher training. He or she stated that teachers need incentive to stay in the profession and compensation is required to pay teachers to devote more hours to training.

**Culture.** The focus on accountability through testing grades three through twelve by lawmakers and educational leaders may have contributed to the culture of the state, district, and schools for those interviewed in this study. One outcome of this culture within the school district under study was the area of focus a school leadership team chose to place their time, coaching efforts, and monetary resources. When asked which grade levels a school leadership team should prioritize, all three state leaders said primary grades. Specifically, kindergarten, first, and second grade with one of the state leaders including third grade as well (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). These participants discussed the critical nature of the first years of school and how these grades lay the foundation for future learning. The Executive Director of the state reading initiative explained that students need to improve their skills in the earliest grade levels as it becomes more difficult to progress in reading skills once a student reaches third or fourth grade. The Executive Director of the Bureau of School Improvement added that district leaders decide to focus on tested grade levels, despite the importance of primary grade levels, due to the implications for school grade and the view of the public (Citation

withheld to protect anonymity).

The interviews of the three participating district leaders produced mixed results. One participant listed the tested elementary grade levels as the most important – grades three through five. The participant stated that fifth is the most important grade due to the fact that the students are tested in math and reading with the addition of science. Therefore, those students bring more points towards the school grade and require the most effective teacher. Fourth grade was listed next followed by third grade (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Another participant from the district leadership team stated that grades three through five were the most important due to accountability. The participant explained that the highest performing teachers must be in those grade levels so a strong teacher in a primary grade level may need to be moved to a tested grade level. This individual believed that the strongest teachers should be placed in fourth and fifth grades to ensure that students show learning gains on their test which equates to points towards the school grade. The same participant also stated that kindergarten is a critical year as a skills gap at that time may cause a student to be retained in third grade after their first experience with state exams (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The third participant from district leadership said that all grade levels should serve as the academic focus for a school leadership team.

All six participating principals said that grades three through five were important grade levels on which a school leadership team should focus due to the implications of school ratings. Two of the principals noted that their answer was impacted by the fact that they lead a school that was assigned an F by state leaders the previous year. Due to the

low rating of their school resulting from testing in those grade levels, these leaders stated they were charged by the state and district to increase the school rating which must be done through the tested grade levels (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Each principal interviewed also addressed prekindergarten and primary grade levels. The first principal interviewed said that despite the focus on grades three through five, coaching efforts are focused on kindergarten through second grade to ensure teachers help students build a solid academic foundation and connection between home and school. The second principal interviewed said that the majority of coaching efforts goes towards the tested grade levels but stated, “Without that foundation in K, one, and two, how successful are grades three, four, and five going to be?” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The third principal said that the leadership team at his or her school creates academic goals separately for tested grade levels and primary grade levels. This principal specifically detailed the focus of the school academic coaches working with new teachers and primary grade level teachers while the administrative team worked with teachers in grades three through five. The participant stated that focus moves mostly to the tested grade levels in the spring when testing draws closer (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The fourth principal said that all grade levels are a focus due to the foundational nature of the primary grade levels and the testing that occurs during grades three through five. When asked which grade levels receive the majority of coaching time and efforts, the participant discussed the importance of third grade as this grade level is a transition for students in regard to expectations in reading and considering the conclusion of this grade level includes the students’ first state exam experience. The participant continued

to justify the decision to place coaching efforts in intermediate grade levels due to the nature of testing in those grade levels – including the introduction of the writing test in fourth grade and the science test in fifth. The participant then said that all focus cannot be solely placed in tested grade levels as this is a reactive approach and it better serves the organization to be proactive and make sure that primary grade levels are strong as well (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The fifth principal interviewed was one of the principals impacted by an F rating the previous year. The participant explained that a grade level focus is less important than a focus on specific curricula. This principal chose to focus on English language arts (ELA) and reading in kindergarten through fifth grade, math in kindergarten through fifth grade, and science in fifth grade. Because science in grades kindergarten through grade four and social studies throughout all elementary grade levels were not tested subjects, the principal deemed them less important in regard to a prioritized focus. The participant discussed the purpose behind this approach was to build sustained learning, so students grow to be proficient.

Also impacted by an F rating, the final principal interviewed echoed the idea that the tested grade levels must be a central focus in order to avoid continued support from state educational leadership. This participant did say that tested grade levels were the main focus within the school but qualified that statement by saying that the primary grades were also important as those students will eventually matriculate to the tested grade levels. She discussed problems such as low academic achievement can be avoided if students have a high quality education when they are young (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).



Three participants, two principals and a state leader, discussed a cultural piece among districts related to grade level retention. If a certain level of reading proficiency was not displayed by a student at the end of third grade, retention was mandatory for that student. This practice occurred in the state connected to this study and in several other states (Education Commission of the States, 2018b). Retention in grades kindergarten through second grade was not mandatory and these three participants said that moving students to the next grade level when the student does not display grade-level proficiency is not appropriate. The state leader stated:

In our state, what we have seen is that we have very low retention rates in K, one, and two and unfortunately, due to testing, they get captured in third grade. So, what that tells me is that they went to third grade not prepared and they have spent a year with grade level standards that they are not very comfortable with, so it does not sit well that their self-esteem and will to learn might be diminished.

(Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The district superintendent taught early childhood education teacher preparation courses at a community college in the district prior to being elected to the position of superintendent. The superintendent noted a cultural barrier that manifested as a perception among the students at the college that the early learning teacher preparation program, which focused on prekindergarten through the primary grades, was easier than a university elementary education program focusing on grades kindergarten through six. The participant indicated that these courses were not simple and that this perception was a result of a cultural idea that early childhood education is “easy” because “all you do is have cookies and play with blocks” but then noted “until we can change that perception,

we are going to be stuck” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

**Conditions.** The decision-making process employed by principals when determining teacher placements resulted in a tangible, conditional barrier to a P-3 focus within schools that may have stemmed from the contextual and cultural barriers discussed by interviewed participants above. I asked each principal his or her strategy for placing teachers if a teacher shortage occurs. Out of the six principals interviewed, four explained that they take school assessment data, preference of the teachers, and the strengths and weaknesses displayed by the teachers into account before moving a teacher to a certain grade level. One of the four principals that responded with this information added that large moves from one grade level to another were avoided. For example, this principal preferred teachers to move to a grade level above or below their current position as opposed to moving a teacher from kindergarten to fifth grade (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

One of the two remaining principals struggled with eight teacher vacancies at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year including the entire fourth grade level team. The participant served in one of the schools rated an F after the 2017-2018 school year. The participant considered the demands by state leaders to increase student achievement which is determined only through test results in grades three, four, and five. As a result, for the 2018-2019 school year, she chose to move some primary level teachers to tested grade levels as she prioritized having certified teachers in those grade levels as opposed to substitute teachers.

The second remaining principal did not serve a school with an F rating in the prior school year, but did reiterate the need, when placing teachers, to prioritize grades three

through five because they are the tested grade levels. The participant also prioritized second grade as it prefaced those grade levels. The participant stated that the strongest teachers must be “with my weakest or most vulnerable students which would be grades three through five” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The Director of Elementary Education for the district studied discussed teacher placement decisions impacting primary grades when asked about the potential causes for low reading proficiency and retention in third grade. From the point of view of a school administrator, a capacity in which this participant served previously, the participant said:

Sometimes you are pulling those really strong primary teachers and you are constantly trying to move them up in to upper elementary so then what you are left with [in primary grades] are, twofold, either your weaker teachers or teachers that are still developing and have great potential but they’re not quite there yet.

(Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The Executive Director of the Bureau of School Improvement for the state indicated that school leaders may remove weak teachers from tested grade levels into primary grade levels. The participant said:

So, we, again, need to make sure that there are quality educators in pre-k through two because what historically seems to be trends is if teachers cannot cut it in tested grades, sometimes what you will see is that they are put in a lower grade level thinking that that is going to help them or grow them and build their capacity and I just question that theory. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The district superintendent observed a similar trend while in the classroom as a primary teacher. The participant noted hearing school principals discuss moving teachers out of

tested grade levels and into primary grade levels to avoid doing any “damage” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The participant then said that the primary grade levels are where the damage is done as it is important to provide a firm foundation to students.

Another conditional barrier identified by interviewed members of state education leadership is the separation between the state agencies that serve students in public and private early learning programs and the agency that serves students in the public school system beginning in kindergarten. The chancellor of K-12 public schools acknowledged this separation between state education entities when he said:

We need to start looking at state agency lenses and maybe across different divisions supporting early learning or even before students enter traditional school settings in three- to four-year-old range and zero to three range...interventions that happen in those developmental years pays off in large dividends throughout the child’s growth and development. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The chancellor continued to talk about the connection between state education and private education agencies when asked about the barriers to an ideal P-3 program. He said:

That’s a good question and I do not know if it is necessarily policy driven or if it is an awareness campaign or if it is resource allocation. I think as we are really looking at how we invest in early learning it’s going to cross a lot of state agencies, but it's more than just policy support. It goes back to community support, the faith based support, the nonprofit support, everybody determining or realizing a common vision and aligning resources to invest appropriately so that we are not duplicating services. It is going to look different in every zip code and

maybe as a state agency leading those conversations is a big part of our [state public education agency] role in engaging those efforts and I think we are seeing more and more traditional schools start voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) programs in their schools so they can start getting children into their classrooms and get them acclimated to being school ready. But, a lot of those VPK programs only support a half-day of early learning and there is a real lack of reliance on parents to support wraparound services and a lot of communities supporting those wraparound services is a great need and that's where the philanthropic support, maybe revisiting some of the federal dollars that are assigned to districts, or it can be targeted and allocated in both private and public sector looking at innovative ways to make sure we can get students in to schools and learning in that full day experience. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The executive director of bureau of school improvement commented on the separation between educational agencies stating:

I believe that the state is considerate of allowing districts to have local control and make district decisions but to have a state message of advocacy for students in early education is important. Messaging, making sure that parents know about VPK programs and screening programs to allow their three-year-old if they are noticing developmental delay to go ahead and start receiving services. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The participant also discussed early interventions stating that it is “essential” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity) for children from birth through age three. This state leader noted that in rural communities there is not a guarantee that an agency exists in the school

district to oversee early learning and preschool programs. The participant said public and private providers of early education can be better partners because it was important that the state was “ensuring districts have those people in place to focus on early education because sometimes that is the first to go when you look at the tested areas and put all the emphasis on grades three through 10” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

**Competencies.** A barrier to a P-3 program throughout this state may exist in part due to a lack of competency among teachers in regard to child development and educational needs for students in preschool through the primary grades. Regarding teacher competency, when asked about their vision for a high quality P-3 program, one state leader said that students need “a caring, compassionate adult that knows those standards, knows the rigor of those standards, how to teach them, how to plan for them first, how to teach them, and how to assess them” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). One of the principals interviewed also said that the adult in the classroom may contribute to a successful P-3 program. The participant said:

You hire teachers and provide teachers in classrooms that have both a conceptual understanding of what they are about to do as well as the practical application of it so that you do not have to spend time remediating the teacher. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The superintendent said that teachers need to understand the type of teaching that is best for young children, including scaffolding learning experiences, which, according to the participant, goes beyond the use of worksheets. Two other principals added that teachers need to be skilled in reading instruction and strategies such as guided reading.

While a parent’s decision to enroll a child into preschool may be a contextual

barrier, a teacher's ability to remediate a skill deficit once the child is in kindergarten is a competency issue. A district leader echoed this factor by discussing the critical nature of kindergarten and the potential for a skill gap in kindergarten to grow to an insurmountable size by the end of elementary school. In total, eight out of 12 participants cited skills gaps or achievement gaps in their interviews for this study as factors contributing to low achievement in intermediate grades or discussed the importance of closing these gaps early on in a child's school experience in order to avoid those gaps growing beyond the ability of a teacher to remediate in a year (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

In addition to hiring teachers with a certain level of subject area knowledge and pedagogical understanding of teaching young children, the district director of elementary education explained that a barrier existed beyond the knowledge a teacher holds in that it can be difficult to hire teachers in the first place due to availability of quality candidates. The participant said:

When we have a teacher shortage, in some of these classrooms we are putting substitutes which are, for lack of a better word, sometimes it feels like you are putting a warm body in a classroom and no administrator likes that feeling.

(Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

This participant also explained that a lack of teacher competency can lead to pacing issues and wasted time in the classroom. Furthermore, the participant explained that a barrier can be built when a teacher over-customizes curriculum due to lack of understanding or absence of districtwide vision for said curriculum. This personalization, according to the participant, can change expectations for students and impact academic

outcomes.

The principal quoted above, describing the importance of a teacher having conceptual understandings of instruction, also explained that a challenge facing school administrators “is finding the high-quality teachers that you need in the classroom so that you are not spending a lot of time building professional development” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). This principal served at a school recovering from an F rating. The second principal serving in the same situation at another school attributed the failing rating partly to poorly skilled teachers allowing student needs to go unmet (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In total, seven out of 12 participants identified the competency of teachers as a potential barrier to a quality educational program for young children.

Another barrier to a P-3 program throughout this state may exist in part due to a lack of competency among administrators in regard to child development and educational needs for students in preschool through the primary grades. State and district leaders were asked specifically to discuss the importance of an administrator’s competency in regard to understanding early childhood and primary education concepts and pedagogy. The chancellor of K-12 public schools said that it is important for an administrator to have this knowledge to ensure a strong foundation for learning is built for young students within schools. The executive director of the Bureau of School Improvement explained that an administrator must be able to walk into a classroom and understand what is being taught and whether it is aligned to state learning standards. The executive director of the state reading initiative said that you cannot teach that which you do not know. This participant further explained that individuals heed their supervisor’s vision and priorities.



For example, if the principal understands how to diagnose reading deficits and values quality intervention for those deficits, it will occur on campus (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The district director of elementary education similarly stated that you cannot coach what you do not understand. This participant further explained:

If you cannot coach someone on their curriculum practices, it is really hard to change instruction. So, if you as the leader do not know what you are looking for [in the classroom], how do you provide that constructive feedback to another individual? (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The director then discussed the financial implications for a lack of competency among administrators. School principals had freedom to purchase supplemental curriculum and classroom materials. If these individuals were not knowledgeable in regard to primary level education, they might purchase a program that does not have the desired effect on student learning. The administrator may seek advice from another administrator or academic coach; however, without adequate knowledge, this person may be misled inadvertently.

The district superintendent recalled that principals within the district once received training on early learning concepts, but that training no longer occurred at the time of the interview. The participant explained that school administrators must have a deep understanding of early learning concepts as a prekindergarten or kindergarten classroom may look different than a classroom of older students. Students may be playing on the floor, but the greater purpose for that play as intended by the teacher may be misunderstood without that deep understanding. Five out of six district and state leaders

stated that administrative competency regarding early learning and primary education was important. The district deputy superintendent did not feel that this knowledge was important. The participant stated that it is more important for an administrator to understand quality instructional technique and have experts around them to fill the potential gaps in content knowledge that the principal may have.

### **Interpretation**

By interviewing state education leaders, school district leaders, and school leaders, it is possible to see trends of agreement and trends of contradiction with their answers regarding barriers to a focus on a P-3 program. Generally, participants agreed that a lack of family engagement hinders a child's academic success. Participants also agreed that low enrollment in preschool opportunities may hinder success as well. These are not barriers specifically to a P-3 program but do reveal the importance and purpose of such a program (Jacobson, 2018). The importance of quality reading instruction, the damage caused by a lack of qualified teachers, and the necessity to identify student learning needs as early as possible were also generally agreed upon which again revealed the need for a focus on early learning and primary grade levels.

The contradictions between interview responses reveal the barriers to a paradigm shift from focusing on tested grade levels to supporting a quality early childhood and primary education. The most apparent contradiction within the participants' answers occurred when they answered the question about which grade levels should serve as the focus for state and local academic goals. All three state education leaders said that the primary grades, kindergarten through third grade, should be the main focus within schools. Preschool opportunities like voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) were mentioned

separately in their responses as an important focus in school districts and this disconnect between prekindergarten and primary grades may be the result of division at the state level between kindergarten through twelfth grade public education and the early learning department. The state leaders discussed the importance of setting up a student for success with a strong foundation and identifying learning needs or skills requiring intervention as early as possible.

Conversely, of the remaining nine participants interviewed, including school and district leaders, eight said that grades three through five are a typical choice for academic focus due to the accountability to which schools and districts are held according to ESSA requirements. The eight individuals who gave this response currently serve or served as a school principal and experienced the need to achieve high student proficiency and growth ratings. The remaining participant, the district superintendent, stated that all grade levels should serve as a focus point. This individual had not served as a principal as the individual was elected to the position by the community. However, the superintendent had experienced the pressure to increase district ratings that were a cumulative score of school ratings from the state. One state leader, the leader of the Bureau of School Improvement, acknowledged the fact that schools may choose to focus on tested grade levels over primary grades due to the accountability measures. This individual's department is responsible for providing the support required of the state when schools and districts score low ratings.

The conflict over which grade levels on which to focus within a context of accountability was apparent from the principals interviewed as they contradicted themselves within their own answers at times. One principal stated that the school-wide

focus prioritizes grades three through five but when asked about coaching efforts, this individual said that kindergarten, first, and second grades served as the focus for said efforts. Another principal stated that a balance is struck between grade levels when determining a focus point. At the end of the year, however, all focus returns to grades three through five as it is “testing season.” Due to the expanse of the testing window, this season lasts for several months which may reduce the amount of time spent by administrators and academic coaches ensuring grade-level readiness in prekindergarten and primary grade levels.

The contradiction between state leaders and the leaders that serve at the district and school levels is a substantial datum when determining the barriers to a primary focus on young children in schools. School and district leaders must execute the state vision for education. If the state leaders, as indicated by the interviews described in this study, believe that a focus on prekindergarten and primary education is critical to student success, then modification to policy and the support provided must take place. The interview responses by district and school leaders were indicative of this breakdown as the majority indicated that tested grade levels must be the focus of school leadership teams.

The contradiction regarding grade-level focus results in the question of how to utilize finite resources of money, time, and expertise in order to support young children in early grade levels. School leaders may be able to focus on both tested grade levels and the foundational grade levels coexisting on their campus, but it will take some scheduling dexterity and knowledge on the school leader’s part to ensure effective teaching practices are taking place. Seven out of 12 leaders indicated that effective teaching through teacher

knowledge of content and pedagogy was critical to a quality primary education program. The need to fill vacancies in tested grade level positions sometimes pulls highly effective teachers from a primary grade level. Substitute teachers or poorly skilled teachers may be placed in primary grade levels as replacements and their potential lack of knowledge may hinder a student's academic progress. In order to coach these individuals, hire well for the positions in the first place, or observe their practice effectively, a principal must have knowledge of what constitutes quality primary and early childhood instruction.

Five out of six state and district leaders described knowledge of primary education and early childhood education as important for educational leaders to possess. Participants indicated that it is difficult to coach, support, and envision that which you do not understand. It is also important, according to those interviewed, that school and district leaders can walk into a classroom and understand what is taking place and be able to determine if it is quality instruction. Regarding this factor, an important contradiction arose between the district superintendent and deputy superintendent.

The superintendent was one of the five participants that stated this knowledge is important for administrators, but the deputy superintendent said it was unimportant to have knowledge of content such as reading instruction. The deputy superintendent said that understanding strong instructional technique is important and to have experts on campus that understand the content. Not only does this contradict the superintendent, but the statement itself is contradictory. The ability to recognize expertise, avoid bias, and affirm appropriate curriculum decisions hinges on the knowledge of the administrator. Pedagogical knowledge without content knowledge may lead to ineffective instruction disguised by a compliant and engaged class of students. The contradiction between these

two individuals is significant because they are ultimately responsible for hiring and observing members of district and school leadership. The skill set they value is what will likely manifest in school and district leaders.

### **Judgments**

The data collected through the interviews of twelve educational leaders at the state, district, and school level provided valuable insight as to the existing barriers to a focus on P-3 education. The first research question and sub questions were purposely left open-ended to allow for interpretation by the participant in order to draw out the most probable barriers. The purpose of this program evaluation is to better inform policymakers when addressing education by better understanding the reason behind a P-3 focus and learning the barriers to that focus. The result of the interviews was positive in that barriers to a P-3 program, both explicit and underlying, were defined through direct responses or contradictions between responses. Policymakers can interpret if the contradiction between state and local leaders regarding grade level focus is indicative of a breakdown in communication and unity on a central vision and therefore determine an adjustment is needed. If the state leaders want a central focus on primary grade levels but schools are focusing on tested grade levels due to accountability policy, the accountability policy may need to change.

My second research question required an analysis of literature on states and school districts in the United States that currently house a successful P-3 program. By determining barriers and pairing them with the variables to success, it is possible to analyze state and district needs and apply the variables that best reduce or eliminate the experienced barriers based on those needs. The results are positive in that the analysis of

literature provided many avenues and approaches that may be utilized to create a successful P-3 program in the state and district within this study. It is imperative, however, that a needs analysis is complete prior to applying a potential approach to a P-3 program and not assume that an approach will work simply because it did elsewhere (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linky, 2009).

### **Recommendations**

When asked which grade levels school district leaders should place their focus, interviewed participants revealed a clear contradiction which indicated a powerful barrier to a focus on a P-3 program. As indicated in their interviews, state leaders recognized the importance of students entering kindergarten ready to learn after a quality preschool experience and the need to learn how to read prior to the conclusion of third grade (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). School and district leaders felt that it was imperative to focus on the grade levels that concluded with high-stakes, federally- and state-mandated proficiency testing which began at grade three (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The primary recommendation to resolve the divide between the vision of state leaders and the instructional execution by school leaders is to adjust the context within the state to allow the P-3 focus to take root in school districts and move away from the solitary focus on tested grade levels.

For the 2018-2019 school year, state education leaders were able to participate in an amendment process in regard to their state plan to execute the provisions of Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) (Brogan, 2018). State leaders may be able to amend their state education accountability plan again in the future, and a shift in state accountability requirements to a measure of quality for instruction in preschool and

primary grade levels which may redistribute the unequally high focus on tested grade levels. I recommend this amendment process in order to change the context within the state under study and allow districts to shift their educational context to allow for a focus on primary education to take place in schools. Federal lawmakers provided the flexibility to include a strong connection between early learning and primary grade levels within the language of ESSA. This included the need for professional development and meetings among preschool and kindergarten teachers and their school leaders, the need for a plan for smooth transition between preschool and kindergarten, communication between early learning providers and school district leaders, and the availability of grant funding for early learning and primary level programs (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018).

Federal lawmakers used language within ESSA that allowed state education leaders to utilize federal funds on and set accountability measures for early learning and primary education (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). State leaders held the decision-making power in regard to the degree to which they capitalized on the possibility to make a P-3 program a priority. Lawmakers of the state at the center of this study included some language regarding early learning and primary education in the state ESSA plan. Lawmakers included a description of provider organizations for early childhood education opportunities and included the need for a transition plan from preschool to elementary school as part of the overall goal to increase college and career readiness which makes early learning a requirement but not necessarily a priority (Education Commission of the States, 2018a). As a more intense approach, Maryland lawmakers incorporated kindergarten readiness and academic growth measures through third grade as part of their accountability system which may necessitate a greater focus by



school and district leaders on those grade levels and early learning opportunities (Maryland Department of Education, 2017).

The second recommendation is to reduce the bureaucratic space between service providers of early learning opportunities and kindergarten through grade 12 services in order to create a more aligned approach to instruction and ensure necessary funding to early learning programs. California and Maryland school district leaders were able to expand access to early learning opportunities by leveraging federal, state, and local funding sources (Valentino & Stipek, 2016; Marietta, 2010). Districts in both states provided professional development for prekindergarten and primary grade teachers, as well as their school leaders, in regard to high-quality curriculum and instruction. Montgomery County Public School leaders created an aligned assessment system to allow for consistent monitoring of students' academic growth through each grade level which eased transitions between grade level changes and increased readiness for the upcoming grade level (Marietta, 2010). The commitment to aligned instruction and communication between teachers may prevent skill loss particularly among students as they transition between prekindergarten and kindergarten grade levels (Stipek, 2017).

If district leaders increase their focus on preschool and primary grade levels and provide aligned curriculum delivered by well-trained teachers, then graduation rate, the likelihood of seeking postsecondary education, and potential for a higher quality of life may be possible for students (McCoy et al., 2017). Modification of the state accountability plan may innately spark the need to focus on P-3 structure and support and raise the importance of laying a firm foundation in the earliest years of a child's education. Equally important is a commitment from district leaders to move a district

vision for a P-3 program forward and overcome barriers to success.

### **Conclusion**

Through a series of interviews, state, district, and school leaders articulated the context, culture, conditions, and competencies for the educational environment of the state and district in which this study took place. By examining the current framework for education in this state and district, I was able to analyze the variables in comparison with case studies of school districts around the United States in which leaders were successful in implementing a P-3 program. In the following chapter, these variables shape the ideal future of this state and school district in which state and district leaders are able to support schools and programs in order to maintain a quality P-3 program for young students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### To-Be Framework

In this section, I will present the ideal implementation of the recommendations I developed regarding a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education among state, district, and school leaders based on the results of my study. The issues that arose from my findings involve the context, culture, conditions, and competencies of the state and school district under study. In order to enact system-wide, organizational change, all four areas must be considered when envisioning success and developing an action plan (Wagner, 2006).

Elements within the educational context served as barriers to a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels for the state and district under study. Federal lawmakers passed Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) and required assessment of reading, math, and science skills beginning in grade 3 (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). States then chose their accountability reporting methods. The state under study tied funding, teacher and leader evaluations, and school ratings to these accountability measures that centered on the outcome of these required assessments (Education Commission of the States, 2018a).

If school or district teachers and leaders did not meet expectations for student achievement, intervention from state education leaders was executed, which included increased scrutiny through classroom observations from state education leaders. School leaders and faculty faced judgement from school communities as results from state assessments were published throughout local news outlets. The high stakes nature of the assessments placed the attached grade levels at the center of action plans by principals

and district leaders as indicated by the interview results. This focus on grades 3-5 in elementary schools shifted focus away from the foundational years of education which spanned from prekindergarten services through third grade.

Additional contextual barriers identified by interviewed participants included students' home life, parent involvement, and readiness for kindergarten. These are barriers outside of an educators' sphere of influence but participants at the state, district, and school levels identified the disadvantage students have upon entering school when parents did not help practice skills due to a lack of education themselves, lack of time due to work, or lack of value for education. Finally, funding was identified as a barrier due to the scarcity of dollars to allocate for teacher trainings and for additional prekindergarten classrooms in the public schools.

The cultural issues resulted from the context described above. Within an elementary school, the focus on which school leadership teams should spend time, money, and other resources was identified by principals and district leaders as grades 3-5 in their respective interviews. Of the nine individuals interviewed who served as district or school leaders at the time of this study, eight stated that grades 3-5 were central to a school focus due to the high stakes nature of the state assessments at the conclusion of the school year for these grade levels. Grade-level retention was also discussed as a cultural issue among participants. Specifically, participants discussed the mandatory retention policy for third grade students who receive the lowest rating on the state reading assessment. Because of this state mandate, participants at the school level felt that students in grades kindergarten through grade 2 were moved forward without consideration for retention and without adequate preparation for the next grade level.

There were two barriers within the state and district educational conditions. First, a shortage of teachers in combination with high-stakes testing for grades 3-5 meant that principals prioritized placement of high quality teachers in the assessed grade levels as opposed to placing them in classrooms serving primary level students. Conversely, teachers who did not perform well in an assessed grade level were often moved to primary level classrooms. The second barrier was the separation between the agency that served grades kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) and the agency that served early learning programs. In the state under study, all services rendered prior to kindergarten were housed in state and local departments outside of the K-12 spectrum. The state department of early childhood education oversaw local early learning coalitions among school districts.

The final piece for systematic, organizational change towards a focus on prekindergarten through third grade students in the state and district under study was the competency of teachers and administrators in regard to providing high quality service to students within those classrooms. Interviewed participants at the state, district, and school levels identified the importance of a knowledgeable teacher in a primary level classroom. Further, all state leaders and two out of the three district leaders interviewed discussed the importance of administrators possessing a high level of competency regarding P-3 education. Hiring decisions, program purchases, and instructional guidance by school leaders were not likely to be effective, according to those participants, without a knowledge base on the needs of the prekindergarten and primary classroom.

In order to overcome the barriers found within the context, culture, conditions, and competencies of the state and school district under study, collaboration among

educators and community members will be critical. According to John Kotter's (2018) book *8 Steps to Accelerate Change in Your Organization*, creating a sense of urgency surrounding the issue at hand is the first step towards organizational change. The 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that 35% of fourth grade students in the United States were reading at a proficient level (NCES, 2018). Students who are not successful readers have a reduced chance of graduating high school and being college- or career-ready (Jacobson, 2014). While a proficient score on the NAEP indicates a reading proficiency above grade level according to the state under study, fewer than half of students in the district under study were meeting satisfactory requirements on the state reading exam which is considered on-grade level (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The urgency to ensure students are reading by third and fourth grade is present across the schools, district, and state at the center of this study.

By turning these data into an opportunity to share a possible solution through a focus on P-3 education, the hearts and minds of administrators, teachers, families, and community members may be open to joining together to reduce barriers and increase success in prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms (Kotter, 2018). The sense of urgency and open mind may allow for quality communication to take place as the resulting interest turns to priority. Communication may take place through parent and community events, board meetings, and administrative meetings as a "guiding coalition" (Kotter, 2018, p. 13) of stakeholders from prekindergarten providers, the district elementary schools, and community partners join together to create a vision for success and begins to move towards organizational change.

**Envisioning the Success To-Be.** The central measure of success among the four areas of change is strong leadership, alignment of curriculum and resources, and strong instruction in prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. This may lead to a reduction in the achievement gap between students of varying backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. As a result, there may be an increase in academic proficiency, primarily in literacy, among students prior to the conclusion of third grade.

At the conclusion of the interviews, I asked participants about their vision for success in regard to a high quality P-3 program. The state leaders I interviewed discussed equitable access for all students, the ability to identify student needs early in order to intervene as soon as possible, aligned resources, and the prevention of academic gaps among students through high quality teaching (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). District leaders indicated that a successful approach in prekindergarten through grade three would result in students' preparation for the state reading and math assessments at the end of third grade. These participants also emphasized high quality instruction and classroom environments in which students enjoy learning. School leaders focused primarily on highly-trained teachers and quality instruction. In addition, these participants believed a successful P-3 program included a developmentally appropriate approach to instruction as well as effective curriculum resources.

The following breakdown of a successful P-3 program was based on the effective implementations of P-3 programs around the United States and how the efforts of those state and district education leaders may be applied to overcome the barriers summarized above for the state and district under study. Pieces of the visions of the state, district, and school leaders I interviewed regarding a P-3 program will appear throughout this

breakdown of success which may indicate that a future shift towards actual implementation of this type of program is possible with additional action steps.

*Contexts.* The school and district leaders I interviewed discussed the importance of maintaining a high level of support in the elementary grade levels, grades 3-5, which culminate in a state assessment in accordance with federal education law (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). Contrary to this belief was the response of all three state education leaders who indicated that a focus on primary grade levels, which do not conclude with a state test, was a priority. State leaders may advocate for a focus on early learning and primary education, but until the advocacy is connected to policy, the work will not be executed in schools, as evidenced by my findings.

When the federal education law shifted from No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), state education leaders had opportunities to adjust their measurements of accountability and school success to include more than the results of mandatory testing in grades 3-12 (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). State education leaders around the country began to incorporate elements of early childhood education and primary grade education in accountability and school success measures within their ESSA plans. Maryland policymakers added learning growth assessments in the primary grade levels as part of their ESSA accountability system and included kindergarten readiness as well (Maryland Department of Education, 2017, p. 24). Education policymakers in Washington D.C. incorporated the scores of an observational tool utilized by administrators for prekindergarten classrooms as part of their measures of school quality (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2017, p. 21).



A successful shift in context for state, district, and school leaders includes a future adjustment to education accountability and quality measures to include a focus on early learning and primary grade levels. This may include incorporating measures of instructional quality and quality of student support included in the state accountability indicators within the state ESSA plan. It is important to note that success within this suggested accountability measure does not include increased testing, but rather increased ability for district and school leaders to increase their focus on the quality within prekindergarten and primary grade programs. Including a P-3 program in the language of federal accountability measurements may shift the mindset of district and school leaders and allow them to confidently include early learning and primary grades as a priority.

A child's home life was mentioned by several participants I interviewed as a factor for low kindergarten readiness, student retention in third grade, and a lack of reading proficiency among students. Principals noted that some parents may not be educated and therefore cannot support their child's education, or they may not value education. The deputy superintendent of the district under study explained that families expect schools to "fix" (Citation withheld to protect anonymity) their children, but he explained that it is imperative that families and communities are involved in education.

John Hattie synthesized over 1,500 meta-analyses based on the research that "collective teacher efficacy is "positively associated with student achievement across subject areas and in multiple locations" (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018, para. 3). Collective teacher efficacy is the belief amongst a teacher team that they can work together as a team to increase student achievement (Donohoo et al., 2018). This belief yielded a greater effect size as a factor on student achievement than socioeconomic

status, home environment, and parental involvement. The effect size was based on Cohen's  $d$  statistical analysis with an average effect size of  $d=0.40$ . In Hattie's study, the higher the effect size of an educational element, the higher the impact on student achievement (Donohoo et al., 2018). Socioeconomic status, home environment and parent involvement for a student saw an effect size of 0.52, 0.52, and 0.49 respectively, but collective teacher efficacy showed an effect size of 1.57 indicating a very strong impact on student achievement when held by teacher teams (Donohoo et al., 2018).

The support, both financial and parental, available at home does impact student achievement and families are an important group of stakeholders in education. However, this meta-analysis of 1,500 studies indicated that a teacher team's belief that they can make a difference has an even greater impact (Donohoo et al., 2018). Therefore, a vision of success regarding supporting students prior to kindergarten involves increasing the ability of families to get their students to early education programs where a team of teachers understands early education and believes in their ability to increase a students' readiness for kindergarten and overall achievement through the primary grades and beyond.

In the state under study, car seats are required on buses in order to transport prekindergarten students. The district under study does not have car seats universally available on all buses, so parents are responsible for getting their students to the prekindergarten service center of their choice whether it is a private provider or a public school voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) program. An increase in availability of transportation can help parents get their children to a VPK program on a public school campus. This may require grant funds in order to purchase the appropriate car seats or a

temporary reallocation of existing funds. Furthermore, the state under study could extend services to serve more students at age three to help overcome issues of socioeconomic status and parental support.

Increased funding is a contextual barrier that can be overcome by state and district educational leaders through creativity and alignment of priority. Funding impacts many other variables for success regarding a strong P-3 program from the transportation issue mentioned above to expanding preschool into all public schools in the district under study. One principal interviewed mentioned that he or she sees a great benefit to having prekindergarten classrooms on campus as those students can then move into kindergarten on the same campus. Within the vision of a successful P-3 program, this approach allows for a high level of kindergarten readiness, families connect to the school community earlier, and teachers are able to collaborate across the prekindergarten and kindergarten divide on a regular basis to discuss student needs as the children transition from prekindergarten to the primary grades. However, funding for this situation is a necessity.

Across the United States, state education departments saw success by overcoming this contextual barrier with solutions such as grants. New Jersey, which ranks second in state spending on preschool programs according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, received the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five in 2018 (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). Working with the state executives and the legislature is also advantageous. In 2018, the governor of New Jersey awarded an additional \$50 million to preschool spending on top of the \$25 million for preschool expansion approved by the state legislature the year prior (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). New Mexico took advantage of federal funding under Title I of Every Student Succeeds

Act of 2015 in order to extend the day of prekindergarten programs in public schools (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019).

If the barrier of funding is overcome successfully, the leaders of the district and state under study can take similar approaches to utilize categorical funds and grants in order to expand and improve prekindergarten services. These leaders can use funds to provide professional development sessions for prekindergarten and primary level teachers to attend together to allow for collaboration and alignment of curriculum as well as instructional approach. An increase in funding can provide paraprofessionals in classrooms to increase the number of adults in the classroom, and therefore, increase the amount of assistance and attention each child can receive. District and state leaders can provide professional development for administrators as well in order to increase their knowledge of developmentally appropriate, high-quality, and well-aligned instruction within prekindergarten and primary classrooms. If overcome, an increase in funding increases the likelihood of success in all the areas of change – context, culture, conditions, and competencies.

***Culture.*** The result of an educational context in which accountability was based on testing beginning in third grade was a culture of focus on tested grade levels within districts and schools. This was evident from the responses of the participants interviewed for this study. All three state education leaders interviewed for this study responded to the question regarding the grade levels on which focus should be placed within a school with the primary grades. All district and school administrators responded with comments that suggested the tested grade levels should be prioritized due to the high-stakes accountability measures attached. While the district and school administrators did not

state that grade level support for prekindergarten and primary grades was absent, the results of this culture within schools resulted in practices such as principals placing high quality teachers in tested grade levels. Within a vision of P-3 success for the state and district under study, the context is shifted to include an accountability or quality measure for kindergarten and primary grades so that the culture may shift among administrators to include prekindergarten and primary grades as equal priorities with the tested grade levels.

In addition to the statutes tying accountability to grades 3-5 in elementary schools, there was a mandatory retention policy for third grade students scoring the lowest rating of a one out of five on the state reading exam in the state under study. This practice increased the urgency placed on administrators to focus their resources on third grade. Among the findings from my interviews, several interviewed participants indicated that students are often promoted in kindergarten through second grade without being ready for the next grade level. A state leader indicated that retention should increase within grade levels K-2 in order to remediate skill deficits prior to third grade. In my professional experience, increasing student retention in kindergarten, first, and second grade may not prevent a second retention as a result of the mandate in third grade. Therefore, a vision of success includes better alignment of instructional practices from prekindergarten through grade 3 and easing transitions between grade levels in order to prevent retention.

This vision includes opportunities for professional development for teachers. This professional development would include opportunities for prekindergarten teachers, from both public and private providers, to collaborate with kindergarten teachers and develop a

consistent, developmentally appropriate approach to early childhood instruction. By bridging the gap between prekindergarten providers and public school kindergarten classrooms, kindergarten teachers can better understand the skill level of incoming students and seamlessly continue their skill development where prekindergarten teachers left off. This practice is recommended by Deborah Stipek (2017), a professor of education at Stanford University, as a way to prevent the fade-out of benefits over time from a student's prekindergarten experience. For example, if kindergarten teachers can access data resources from prekindergarten teachers, they can build on skills already acquired as opposed to starting at the same place for all students regarding literacy and math skill acquisition.

A culture of retention may also be avoided through a transitional kindergarten (TK) program for students who may benefit from additional time after prekindergarten instruction and prior to starting kindergarten. In a case study of California school districts by Stipek and co-author Rachel Valentino (2016), Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) implemented a TK program. FUSD was one of the first to do so and expanded from two pilot sites to 37 school sites. In 2017, California education leaders included TK programs in their ESSA education plan for students turning five years of age between September 2 and December 2 (California Department of Education, 2017). In Fresno, the teachers were credentialed to teach elementary grade levels, including kindergarten and prekindergarten, and helped bridge communication between prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers (Valentino and Stipek, 2016; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018). A TK program may be part of a vision of success in the state under study in an effort to successfully overcome the barrier of low kindergarten readiness cited

in the findings of this study.

Professional development opportunities across the primary grades can ensure teachers are well versed on critical elements such as explicit, systematic phonics instruction which spans across the primary grade levels as students learn to decode text. Educational leaders in Montgomery County Public Schools in Montgomery County, Maryland require teachers to go through the same professional development to ensure a common understanding of instructional practices and include a specific section of this professional development for prekindergarten and primary teachers (Marietta, 2010). In the district under study, professional development is offered throughout the school year and during the summer months. A successful cultural shift in the district under study may include district leaders from curriculum and professional development departments joining together to create a professional development program designed for prekindergarten and primary grade teachers to achieve the ideal vision of well-aligned curriculum and instruction across the grade level continuum.

As the vision of success moves forward towards a focus on a high quality P-3 program, it is imperative to ensure the implementers of the plan take cultural competency into account as they progress through action steps. In 2018, only 5% of ELLs entering kindergarten in the district under study were ready for kindergarten skills according to scores from the state kindergarten readiness assessment (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). Adding to the sense of urgency, 65% of ELLs not only scored below readiness level, but scored in the lowest range of scores (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

For a successful cultural shift to occur within the state and district under study,

district and school administrators must feel free within the larger educational context of accountability to spend more time and resources within the prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms. This increased focus on instructional accountability and professional development accompanied by aligned, consistent, and culturally responsive instructional strategies utilized across the grade level continuum may yield a productive P-3 program. Furthermore, the contextual and cultural shift can assist district and state leaders in adjusting the conditions that prevent that shift from being sustained.

*Conditions.* The first condition within the district under study that required a change was the practice by principals of moving effective teachers out of primary grade levels in order to serve students in the tested grade levels. Principals also did the opposite and moved ineffective teachers from tested grade levels into primary grade levels where school and district accountability were not measured currently. Teachers of primary grade levels in the district under study were evaluated based on their students' growth on a diagnostic assessment; however, that growth did not factor into school or district ratings (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

In a success approach to a P-3 program, district and school leaders will invest in their primary grade level and prekindergarten teachers and will provide the aforementioned professional development that allows for collaboration, alignment of instructional practices, and analysis of student assessment data. The momentum required to spark such a shift within principal practice may require a push from top education leaders. Paul Nyhan (2015) discussed the importance of support from superintendents, deputy superintendents, and district staff in order to maintain change towards a quality P-3 program in his analysis of the successful shift to that end that took place in San



Francisco Unified School District in California.

A major part of that shift, which also requires the support of leaders to be successful, is the combining of resources between early learning agencies and the K-12 public school system. In the state at the center of this study, early learning support and K-12 support are housed in separate departments within the state department of education. Within the district under study, the early learning team and elementary education team are separate and operate under separate budgets and expectations regarding accountability. This can be confusing to principals. For example, items purchased by the early learning department belong to that department and not the school; however, the principal does supervise the prekindergarten classrooms. For a district to be successful in the execution of a strong P-3 program, a partnership between prekindergarten and K-12 education can and should be forged.

Another example of this interdepartmental connection was the partnership between the principal at King Elementary School in Itasca County, Minnesota and the early learning organizations serving her school community (MinnCAN, 2014). The principal, Amy Starzecki, “established close relationships with the regional Invest Early initiative, Head Start, Minnesota Reading Corps, Indian Education, and Community Education” (MinnCAN, 2014, p. 11). There are multiple state agencies and private providers involved with early education and public education, and purposeful partnership may help better align these resources and connect teaching efforts by teachers. In efforts to increase school readiness, overcome the contextual barrier of a lack of pre-school opportunities for families, and bridge the gap between private and public pre-school providers, Starzecki “hosts monthly events to get all area three- and four-year-olds up to

speed and ready for school” (MinnCAN, 2014, p. 14). The example of Starzecki’s work shows a partnership is possible between early learning organizations and elementary schools regardless of varying educational contexts and cultures.

**Competencies.** A trend throughout the contextual, cultural, and conditional shifts required for the state and district under study to move to a focus on prekindergarten and primary education was teacher competency. John Hattie found that collective teacher efficacy, the commitment of teachers to work together and believing they can make a difference for students, was a more statistically significant factor than a child’s home environment, economic status, or parental support (Donohoo et al., 2018). For a successful manifestation of a P-3 program to take root in a school district or state, this commitment requires follow up with professional development specific to the needs of young children.

The professional development should be offered to prekindergarten through third grade teachers in an effort to align instruction and collaborate regarding student skill acquisition. Otherwise, teachers may not be equipped to remediate the skill gaps that may appear among prekindergarten and primary level students described by eight out of 12 participants noted in the findings of this study. Furthermore, to be culturally competent in the efforts to build a strong P-3 program, teachers must be equipped to teach ELL and DLL students through all P-3 grade levels (Figueras-Daniel, 2019). For the district and state at the center of this study, a successful implementation would begin with prekindergarten teachers participating in the ELL and DLL trainings, trainings on developmentally appropriate practices, and literacy instruction. Implementation will be

solid if teachers apply the learning from those trainings and align curriculum and instruction through all grade levels.

At the center of all the aforementioned elements of a successful P-3 program, was the need for leadership that understood and championed prekindergarten and primary grade education. I asked six leaders at the state and district levels about administrator competency during their interview for this study. Five said that school administrators must understand effective P-3 practices and the sixth stated that the principal may not require the knowledge but should have experts on campus who do (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Expanding to include district administrators, administrators must have knowledge of P-3 practices in order to effectively lead teachers in those positions. District and school administrators purchase curriculum programs and other resources. To understand whether the programs are evidenced-based and effective for young children, administrators require competency in regard to the education of young children. Further, to observe and coach a teacher in his or her practice as a prekindergarten or primary grade teacher requires understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and understanding the difference between play-based learning and simply play. In my professional experience, leaders support what they understand. This may pertain to curricula or grade level instruction. If school and district leaders understand and expect high quality P-3 education, professional development, coaching, and support will follow.

For elementary school principals specifically, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2014) released a guide titled “Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice.” The authors of

this document stated, “Elementary school principals must be actively involved in the implementation of prekindergarten programs, not only those that are community-based but school connected, to ensure effective, high-quality programs and a seamless learning continuum from age three to grade three” (NAESP, 2014). According to the members of NAESP, the first competency that a school principal should possess is the ability to articulate the value of early learning and align funding and resources (NAESP, 2017, p. 11). The second competency was ensuring developmentally appropriate teaching on campus and encouraging professional communities where teachers learn from one another (NAESP, 2017). The third competency involved working with teachers so that they can meet students at the students’ individual skill level and to incorporate technology effectively and appropriately to do so. Finally, principals must utilize multiple assessments on their campus to measure student learning growth and support teachers in their use of the assessment tools to guide instruction (NAESP, 2017).

The hierarchy of support must be in place for teachers in order for a successful implementation of a P-3 program to occur. This hierarchy includes administrators at the school and district level that understand and encourage a strong P-3 program and are able to give quality training, feedback, and use funding effectively. Otherwise, competent P-3 teachers may grow frustrated or suffer from skill atrophy without quality professional development and feedback.

## **Conclusion**

An effective P-3 program begins within a context that both requires and supports quality in prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. Within that context, a culture can develop in which district and state leaders focus on the education of young children

and work to develop effective instruction in all schools across the P-3 continuum. Further support will be garnered in a conditional shift to a joint effort between agency leaders that serve prekindergarten and public school as collaborative partners. As focus increases on P-3 education, the expectations on teacher and administrator competency will increase because quality professional development will be available. This change can take place as a result of a well-crafted action plan that includes multiple stakeholders and strategic action.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Strategies and Actions

In the nation, state, and district under study, it is apparent that a significant portion of students are lacking proficient reading skills by the time they conclude third grade. Data analysts from the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 35% of fourth grade students were able to read at a proficient level in 2017 according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2018). Achievement gaps also existed between Caucasian students and African American students or Hispanic students as well as students with disabilities and those without (NCES, 2018). In the state under study, achievement gaps are also present among students in upper elementary grade levels and considering the consistency of low proficiency and pervasive presence of achievement gaps, a change is required within schools to ensure students build the skills they need prior to entering third grade through high quality prekindergarten and primary grade-level programs.

A change to a central focus on prekindergarten and primary grades is in direct opposition to the current culture in the district under study as it is common for school and district leaders to place the majority of their time and resources into the tested grade levels (i.e. third, fourth, and fifth grade in an elementary school) according to the district and school leaders interviewed for this study (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). To paraphrase one of the district leaders interviewed, the grade, or rating, state education officials give to schools as a result of student assessment scores is very important to leaders as the grade can impact the status of the school within the community and the

decisions made by school administrators regarding personnel and programs (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The key barrier that prevented the state and district under study from a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education was the context set by the state education plan under Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). Like all states within the United States, the education policymakers in the state under study created a plan for accountability in regard to student achievement and education quality. There were federal requirements for state accountability plans in regard to the use of the aforementioned state assessment scores in grades 3 through 12 on reading, math, and other subjects to determine effectiveness of teachers, principals, and programs (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). State education leaders submitted the state plan to the national Department of Education and it served as the basis from which school and district strategies and actions were driven.

As evidenced by the results of this study, when I asked state education leaders which grade levels, they felt required the greatest amount of focus within elementary schools, they responded with primary grade levels in order to prepare for testing. However, school and district educational leaders interviewed indicated the opposite - that tested grade levels, third through fifth grade, required their focus in elementary schools (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The annual urgency created by the results of this assessment renewed this focus on the tested grade levels each year. Therefore, this focus left less time and fewer resources, such as qualified teachers and coaching efforts, for support in prekindergarten and primary grade levels.

There is an element of state ESSA plans that may provide the avenue for organizational change. In addition to required testing and other required elements such a graduation rate and service of students identified as English Language Learners, the writers of ESSA did offer state education leaders some flexibility in regard to the elements on which state education leaders felt were most appropriate to measure school quality (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). It is my recommendation that state education policymakers in the state under study amend the current ESSA plan to add a new accountability measure on the effectiveness of instruction in early childhood education programs and primary level education as a measure of school quality. I do not recommend an increase in testing for young students, however, a measure of instructional quality in the classroom may encourage an increased focus on these classrooms and increased knowledge of child development for educational leaders at all levels.

An example of this change lies in the ESSA plan created by education policy makers within the local school system in Washington D.C. The plan included results from an observational tool for prekindergarten classrooms as a school quality indicator (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2017). This tool utilized by school leaders, measured instructional and emotional support provided by teachers to students as well as classroom organization (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2017). A tool like this, that is included in the educational context set by the state education plan, may be beneficial in prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. By installing a measure of quality into the educational context of the state, school and district leaders are galvanized to shift their culture and move away from a primary focus on the grades in which a state assessment is



given in order to ensure skill acquisition prior to the years that conclude with said state assessments.

The change in context may allow for a cultural shift of increased focus in prekindergarten and primary classrooms which then may improve assessment scores and academic achievement. Improvement in academic achievement in subsequent elementary grades may occur according to the meta-analysis performed by McCoy et al. (2017) on the effectiveness of classroom-based early childhood education programs. The authors state that identification for special education services, grade-level retention, and drop-out rates are reduced when students, especially from low-income households, attend early childhood programs (McCoy et al., 2017). Furthermore, the benefits of prekindergarten programs matriculate into primary grade levels most effectively when a connection is fostered between prekindergarten services and elementary schools allowing for learned skills in prekindergarten to be built upon rather than repeated (Stipek, 2017).

Principals and district leaders may be willing to overcome the current conditions of separation between early learning and elementary programs and bridge the gap between prekindergarten and elementary school if there is accountability for quality across the continuum of those grade levels. The requirement of including observations in accountability measures may also lead to a request for professional development by instructional leaders and teachers in order to increase their competency about the needs of young students. Increased competency may lead to better instruction and instructional coaching in those classrooms.

The above shifts in the context, culture, conditions, and competencies surrounding the state and district under study may increase student achievement. A more conducive

context for a culture of focus on prekindergarten and primary level education may eliminate disconnect between prekindergarten programs and elementary schools. A culture of focus on early childhood and primary education may then support initiatives by state and district leaders to increase the competency of teachers and administrators in the field of early childhood and primary level education. An increase in the quality of access and instruction for prekindergarten and primary level students may result in all students entering tested grade levels with proficient skills, and therefore, achievement gaps may begin to close (Kelly, Evans, and Atchison, 2019). To achieve such context, culture, conditions, and competencies, several strategies and accompanying action steps will need to take place in the state and district at the center of this study (Wagner et al., 2006). The following eight-step process will cultivate sustainable change towards the long-range goal of improving student achievement and well-being through high-quality, interconnected prekindergarten and primary education programs.

**Strategy and Action Steps.** Creating a sense of urgency is the first strategy to begin the organizational change required to shift educational leaders' focus from the grade levels that culminate the school year with a federally-mandated, state assessment to the years that precede testing – in this case, a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels (Kotter, 2018). The urgency to change focus is apparent in the national data mentioned above and in recent data from the state-mandated kindergarten readiness screener and the five-year trend from the state reading assessment in the state under study. In this state, lawmakers require a school readiness screener within the first 30 days of kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2018c). In 2018, 53% of students across the state scored at the base score indicating school readiness while 47% of

kindergarten students scored at this level in the district under study. Twenty-nine states in the United States require some form of school readiness screener for incoming kindergarten students per state statute (Education Commission of the States, 2018c).

In my professional experience as a curriculum coordinator for kindergarten through second grade, the urgency surrounding this assessment is two-fold. First, access to and quality of prekindergarten resources is not universal and consistent in the district under study as indicated by the percent of students arriving to kindergarten at the ideal readiness level regarding literacy and numeracy skills. Second, in my experience, school leaders do not take the information that can be gleaned about a child from this assessment and triangulate with the prekindergarten assessment taken by those students that received prekindergarten services, nor is either assessment utilized to best differentiate primary grade level instruction and therefore maintain the benefits of prekindergarten (Stipek, 2017). For example, the results of the kindergarten readiness screener in the district under study indicated that 63% of students have a strong knowledge of letter identification while the ability to recognize and produce rhyming words fell to 6% (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). School leaders and primary level teachers can take this information and focus instruction on areas of weakness, and/or lack of exposure, and review or remediate skills on which the majority of students are already moving towards mastery according to the screener.

The first action step to create a sense of urgency is to ensure the key district stakeholders connected to early childhood education and primary grade levels in elementary schools are fully aware and knowledgeable about the state of reading proficiency scores on a local, state, and national scale and about prekindergarten and

kindergarten assessment tools, recent results, and the potential use of these results. The teams will discuss the best format to share this information with other district leaders and school administrators in order to encourage the use of these data to bridge the divide between prekindergarten services and elementary school to best differentiate and improve instruction. Once decided, time may be allotted to the leaders of these teams at district-wide administrative meetings to share the importance of these data and problem-solve how these data can be utilized by teaching teams at the primary level.

The results of the state reading assessment each year between school years 2014-2015 and 2018-2019 deepens the sense of urgency to improve student achievement through a focus on prekindergarten and primary grades. In the state at the center of this study, the percentage of students reading at a satisfactory level and above in fourth grade has increased little over five years. In the 2014-2015 school year, 54% of fourth grade students read at or above a satisfactory rate on the state reading assessment and in the 2018-2019 school year that percentage was 58%. The percent of fourth grade students scoring at a proficient level and above was lower. In the 2014-2015 school year, 27% of fourth grade students scored at a proficient level and that percentage increased to 30% in the 2018-2019 school year (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). According to the assessment plan state education leaders submitted to the federal Department of Education, a satisfactory score, which in the state under study is a level of three out of a possible five levels, indicates the ability to read grade-level text. A proficient score on the state reading assessment in the state under study is equivalent to the proficiency score on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and considered to be above grade level in the state under study (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In 2017, the

publishers of NAEP data reported that 35% of fourth grade students were proficient in reading nation-wide while in the state under study, 29% of fourth grade students scored at the equivalent of NAEP proficiency on the state mandated reading assessment. (NCES, 2018; Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The increase in student achievement is positive as one percentage point indicates thousands of students across the state improved in their reading ability according to the state exam. However, over the five year period of 2014-2019, the percent of students reading at or above grade level did not surpass 60% within any of the grade levels that requires a state reading exam – this includes third through tenth grade. State, district, and school leaders must reflect on whether they are satisfied with over 40% of our students being unable to read proficiently.

Furthermore, achievement gaps on the state reading exam are prevalent in the state under study and the reduction of those gaps are stagnant (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). For example, between Caucasian students and their African American peers, an average achievement gap of 29 percentage points on the state reading assessment, across all tested grade levels, persisted between the school years of 2014-2015 and 2018-2019. Between Caucasian students and their Hispanic peers, an average gap of 15 percentage points held across the same five-year span. Between students classified as economically disadvantaged and those who are not, that gap remained consistent across the five year span at an average of 26 percentage points (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). The district under study performed below the state averages listed above on fourth grade reading performance at the satisfactory and proficient levels.

The results of the state reading assessment, and the accompanying achievement gaps, produce a sense of urgency that may not only move the district under study to action but the state as well. Indicative of this movement, I attended a state education leadership conference in 2019 during which state leaders emphasized the need to focus on kindergarten, first, second, and third grade instruction, primarily in reading. State education leaders have also mandated that school districts spend the majority of funds allocated towards reading initiatives on primary grade levels. This may be a positive step towards the goals of this study, however, there are two missing elements that require attention.

Principals own the student data for their schools, and in my professional experience, they are not ignorant of reading skill gaps on their campuses. Principals indicated in their interviews for this study that a focus on grades 3, 4, and 5 is imperative as federal and state mandates require testing at the conclusion of these grade levels. Furthermore, the trend over the past five years shows that the triage of reading skills taking place during these grade levels is not sufficient to reduce achievement gaps and increase total student achievement in reading. Based on the responses to my interview questions and the actions of the state leadership team, the first element that must be addressed is the apparent gap between state initiatives and the execution of school strategic plans. The second element is the separation between early childhood education providers and kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) public schools. Prekindergarten services are treated separately at the state level within the state under study as does the district.

The state under study does not include a measure of quality regarding prekindergarten and primary grade levels in the state ESSA plan. I recommend adding this measure of quality through an amendment in order to reorient school and district leaders' focus to high-quality instruction and resources for, and bridge the gap between, prekindergarten services and primary grade levels. At the district level, the action step regarding this aspect of the urgency at hand to improve student achievement is transparent communication. Not only does the early learning and elementary education team need to communicate the benefit of a permeable membrane of data between prekindergarten and kindergarten educators, but also of the gap between current school focus and state initiatives.

The monthly administrative meetings in the district under study provide an appropriate medium in which the district teams can work together to communicate to principals the state of primary education and the need to join together with prekindergarten service providers to improve data-sharing and instruction. Both district and state leaders need to understand the urgency to update our state plan in order to support a paradigm shift in school focus from tested grade levels to a P-3 focus. This shift may reduce or prevent the current state of remediation, intervention, and retention in the tested grade levels which has proven ineffective at reducing achievement gaps and improving the reading skills of over 40% of the students served within the state and district at the center of this study who are unable to read at a satisfactory level or above. To communicate this sense of urgency with state leaders, the focus of the communication may be the breakdown between the well-intentioned initiatives of the state and the interpretation of policy by districts and schools.

A guiding coalition may act by requesting a conference call with the state leader of public schools and the state director of early learning (Kotter, 2018). During that call, concrete examples including qualitative interview trends may help support the argument for an amendment to the ESSA plan as well as proposals of how the amendment may be worded and a plan for implementation. It will be important for the coalition to work through the impact of such a policy change and communicate the potential impact with state leaders. The strategy of creating urgency paired with the action step of communicating with transparency may set the foundation to subsequent strategies towards organizational change.

The next strategy is the creation of said guiding coalition. This strategic action plan will require two guiding coalitions – one at the state level and one at the local level that will eventually move to local coalitions in all state school districts as the change spreads. The initial, local guiding coalition in the district under study will catalyze the organizational change. This group will be imperative to the organizational change in terms of proposing the change as well as planning it. The coalition will be formed as the sense of urgency is created throughout the district under study in regard to student performance on the state reading assessment. Administrators will learn of the issues at their monthly meetings mentioned above and school personnel will receive literature through weekly newsletter communication put forth by the district curriculum team. A call to action will take place in the form of several meetings to share ideas and garner interest held at different times on various days throughout a period of several weeks to allow for maximum participation.

This guiding coalition will include teachers, instructional coaches, school



administrators, and district leaders who are dedicated to increasing the focus on and quality of prekindergarten and primary grade levels through a state-level policy change and subsequent local shifts. Because the local early learning coalition leads all prekindergarten services in the district under study, including public prekindergarten classrooms, this organization and the preschool directors and teachers they serve, will be a crucial part of the local guiding coalition. Students are served by private prekindergarten providers across the district as well as in public school prekindergarten classrooms and measuring the quality of all prekindergarten programs will be included in the ESSA measure of quality.

Upon the state political and educational leaders agreeing to amend the state ESSA plan, members of the state department of education will create the second guiding coalition as the efforts to move from policy to change will require support from state government officials and involvement, as well as communication, with the local guiding coalition. The state guiding coalition is imperative as this change implies that the approach to classroom evaluations across two state departments, the early learning department and K-12 public schools, will require an overhaul and district teams will require technical assistance from state stakeholders as the shift takes place and spreads across the state. A tertiary guiding coalition across the state will take the form of district leaders across the state. In the state under study, there are educational leadership conferences twice each year to communicate state goals, initiatives, and garner feedback from local school district leaders. These conferences are an ideal time to gather interest and feedback across the state as the measure of quality on the ESSA plan will impact all school districts state-wide once enacted. The initial local guiding coalition in the district

under study may serve as the nexus of this change plan, but the needs of each district must be considered to enact lasting change.

The third strategy is the formation of a strategic vision and initiatives connected to that vision (Kotter, 2018). According to the organizational change structure by John Kotter (2018), the vision must motivate and unite people and be clear as to how the idea will pertain to reality. The initial, local guiding coalition will participate in the creation of a strategic vision and from that vision form initiatives over the course of several meetings to allow time for research, discussion, and reflection. This group will communicate this vision to state education leaders who can then join the efforts behind the vision and begin communicating the actions to the coalition of district leaders across the state. The sense of urgency may come from various data sources, but the vision must consider the fact that those numbers equate to children, their future, and those that educate them. Four out of every ten children are unable to read at a satisfactory level according to the assessment created by state education leaders. To create concrete action steps to improving this situation, the strategic vision will include: well-informed leadership, high-quality student support, supportive accountability, and increased student achievement.

The local and state guiding coalitions will act through the creation and implementation of two initiatives to support the initiatives to transition to a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education. The first initiative is the creation of a supplemental resource in the form of an evaluation tool. This tool will be a part of the proposal to the state to amend the current ESSA plan to include a measure of quality for prekindergarten and primary level education. This tool will measure quality of instruction and student support in the prekindergarten and primary classrooms and that quality

measure will be weighted and added to evaluation of schools and districts in the state under study. This tool will bring the vision of well-informed leadership and supportive accountability to reality. This vision is supported by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2014). Authors from this organization described six competencies required to lead prekindergarten and primary grade learning communities and the fourth is to use multiple measures to guide student growth. Specifically, the authors said to, “support teachers in using multiple forms of assessments along with observations, portfolios, and anecdotal records” and to “share information about program effectiveness among schools and other providers” (NAESP, 2014, p. 13).

The guiding coalitions will collaborate to create a “formal classroom quality evaluation tool” (Valentino and Stipek, 2016) for use by district and state administrators as they evaluate prekindergarten and primary grade teachers’ instruction. This tool will serve as a companion to the current evaluation system used by school leaders and will focus on early childhood development, developmentally appropriate instructional practice, and classroom environment. District leaders will be able to use the companion formal evaluation tool as an overlay to the current domains of their instructional assessment tool. For example, if school district leaders base their instructional evaluation system on the work of Charlotte Danielson, when observing for elements of Domain 3, which revolves around elements of instruction, the guiding coalition’s companion tool will guide administrators to look for scaffolded, developmentally appropriate activities which may be play-based (The Danielson Group, 2019). This guidance may better inform administrators’ evaluations of prekindergarten through third grade classrooms and therefore increase the effectiveness of resulting professional development and increase

the validity of evaluation scores recommended for inclusion on the amended ESSA plan.

An example of such an evaluation tool on which to base this evaluation companion is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) utilized in prekindergarten classrooms in Washington D.C. as well as throughout federal Head Start programs (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2019; Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2019). The tool focuses on emotional support provided by the teacher as well as the classroom climate, the organization and management within the classroom, and instructional support (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2019a). The CLASS observation tool provides a foundation on which the guiding coalitions can build the new evaluation instrument intended to measure quality in prekindergarten and primary classrooms but will need additional source material as the CLASS tool does not measure curriculum use, individualized teaching or ongoing assessment (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2019). The CLASS tool is also available in a version for primary grade levels which will aid the guiding coalition as they utilize it to build the companion formal evaluation tool (Valentino and Stipek, 2016)

For the purposes of this new observational tool that will span prekindergarten through the primary grade levels, the state and district guiding coalitions' companion to the current evaluation instrument will be based on the CLASS system as well as the work of Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp (2009) titled *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth to Age 8*. As a part of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Copple and Bredekamp (2009) lay the foundation for developmentally appropriate teaching practices and differentiate what those practices look like in a prekindergarten room verses a second

grade classroom. Their work also juxtaposes traditional classroom practice to developmentally appropriate practice throughout the book, and those segments can help the guiding coalitions develop a straight-forward, informative evaluation tool that will help measure quality in those classrooms. For example, regarding classroom environment, a developmentally appropriate classroom in kindergarten is described as, “a variety of opportunities for peer interaction are offered throughout the day and throughout the week. Children work with partners as well as in small- and whole-group situations. Teachers encourage peer-to-peer scaffolding and assistance when possible” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p. 219). In contrast, a classroom that may rate lower on the evaluation tool may have teachers who, according to Copple and Bredekamp (2009) “rely heavily on whole-group settings with children remaining at their places” (p. 219) with little to no opportunity for student collaboration.

The results are combined into a rating system that community members can access when determining which school to choose for their children as well as help the district leaders assist schools strategically with areas of weakness (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2019b). The guiding coalitions will collaborate to create a tool that may be used as a companion to the current evaluation method utilized by a district as the state under study allows for local decision-making in regard to source material for educator evaluation tools. Including union members and leaders in the guiding coalition may help ease the transition to use of this evaluation tool as support from the union will be garnered prior to piloting and implementing.

In the district under study, the current evaluation tool for public school prekindergarten teachers as well as kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers is

identical to that of upper elementary, middle, and high school students. The observation element of the evaluation tool covers teacher practices regarding planning, assessment, classroom management, and instructional methods. In my professional experience, the lack of differentiation matters when a principal enters a kindergarten teacher's classroom and, for example, observes students playing. Instead of investigating whether the students are being challenged through appropriate scaffolds and the teacher is utilizing suitable strategies, such as play, as a means to achieve that challenge, the principal may interpret this time as unstructured, non-academic, and not effective when it may be exactly what the students need to flourish. Furthermore, this uniform evaluation tool is paired with student performance on a diagnostic screening assessment in primary grade levels and a one-on-one prekindergarten assessment for prekindergarten students. Student growth and performance on these assessments are applied as a measure of teacher effectiveness and there is an accompanying, online instructional tool that students may utilize to practice the skills on which they performed poorly on the diagnostic.

In my professional experience, teachers in primary grade levels are often more concerned about assessment performance than early childhood practices and tend to prioritize time on the computer program connected to the diagnostic tool than quality instruction. The current evaluation tool may not incentivize them to break this mindset. A differentiated tool of evaluation for prekindergarten and primary grade levels may improve the ability of administrators to diagnose professional development needs of their faculty and improve ability to self-reflect and discover areas in need of development among the members of the school. Most importantly, a tool tailored for evaluating prekindergarten and primary classrooms may empower teachers in these grade levels to

teach young children with their needs in mind as opposed to a uniform tool for all. I have attended conference sessions presented by representatives of the company that created the diagnostic assessment administrators currently utilize in connection to teacher evaluations and the accompanying online instruction program. Company representatives stated that more time with their online program will not necessarily improve scores on the diagnostic assessment. The proposed evaluation tool may therefore improve observation and diagnosis of needs by administrators and better equip and empower teachers of primary level students to break away from a computer program.

The second initiative is a professional development plan to increase the capacity of teachers and administrators in order to continue the fulfillment of well-informed educational leaders and high-quality student support. Teachers will be trained how to utilize data from previous grade levels and/or prekindergarten to differentiate and improve instruction. The guiding coalition will create a plan to support reading instruction, such as explicit and systematic phonics instruction which, at the district and state levels, will include reading specialists as the executors of said support.

Another area of professional development for teachers includes developmentally appropriate practices which provide an avenue for teachers to meet students at their developmental level and scaffold their learning through appropriate challenges (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). It is imperative that the professional development provided is aligned across grade levels and allows for prekindergarten and primary level teachers to attend together and collaborate. Alignment allows for teachers to build upon of the knowledge gleaned by students in the previous grade levels as well as ensure consistency within the grade level (Valentino and Stipek, 2016). The plan may begin with these foci,

but the nature of the plan will be flexible as data are gathered using the updated classroom observation tool and needs across prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms are targeted.

The guiding coalition at the state level may begin interdepartmental professional development for school and district leaders that includes the needs of prekindergarten and primary level education. In my professional experience, this requires effort to bring prekindergarten services into the K-12 public school discussions. For example, at a recent conference for district education leaders in the state under study, representatives of the state early childhood education department were invited to speak in regard to current efforts and upcoming changes within the department. It behooved the audience to learn about the condition of prekindergarten as those children become students in the K-12 system and the more interconnected the departments become, the more aligned instruction can become and the greater the benefit to students (Stipek, 2017).

The state guiding coalition may also bring representatives from state colleges and universities into the state guiding coalition to explore ways to improve teacher preparation programs as a way to increase the effectiveness of professional development by the state and local districts after the new graduate obtains employment. This also connects to the vision of high-quality student support. A principal interviewed for this study discussed the difficulty of hiring inexperienced teachers or teachers with low skill levels. The participant explained that it takes a lot of time and energy that could be devoted to other priorities just to get these teachers to a basic level of providing instruction (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). This concern paired with another common practice in regard to teacher placement decisions, identified by participants



interviewed for this study, increases the need to build better teacher preparation programs. When faced with placement decisions in which a skilled teacher may be placed in a primary grade classroom or a tested grade level classroom, participants indicated that the tested grade level classroom won out more often than not (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Professional development for administrators is critical in order to realize the vision of supportive accountability and well-informed leadership. District and school administrators will receive differentiated training. If their background does not include primary level education and/or prekindergarten services, specialists can provide curriculum and instruction training as well as the universal training on a new evaluation tool to monitor quality in prekindergarten and primary level classrooms which all administrators will receive. For some administrators, increasing knowledge of early childhood development, early literacy instruction, and developmentally appropriate practice is out of their comfort zone.

In my professional experience, elementary school principals may have little to no experience in elementary schools and enter the position as a former secondary level administrator. In these circumstances, the need to increase knowledge in order to best support teachers and students across the prekindergarten and primary grade levels will be an adaptive change. According to Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009), an adaptive change is a change that takes time and builds on current knowledge. As the administrator learns about early childhood education and applies the new knowledge through classroom observations, a level of disequilibrium may be experienced but that is where the guiding coalitions at the state and local level get involved (Heifetz et al., 2009). The coalitions

can help by setting up a “holding environment” or “context in and out of which a person grows” (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, Asghar, 2013, p. 66).

The holding environment may include mentorships with principals that have a strong understanding of early childhood education. The local coalition may set up collaborative observation opportunities to calibrate their evaluation methods using the new state measurement tool tailored to measuring quality in prekindergarten and primary classrooms. The first step for this segment of the professional development initiative is to anchor administrators as to why the change is taking place and building on current understanding. For the principal who has experience in early childhood education, their purpose may be anchored to improving this element in their schools and empowering teachers in prekindergarten and primary grade levels.

The principal who has only taught and led in middle and high schools, and now finds himself or herself in an elementary school, may need to reflect on the students they with whom he or she previously interacted, and the academic deficits and behavior issues present among them. According to the meta-analysis presented by McCoy et al. (2017), quality experiences in early childhood education programs can have positive long-term educational outcomes and Stipek (2017) argues that the benefits of early childhood education increase when well aligned with primary grade level instruction. Paired together, this research provides a strong foundation on which principals can build new information and help improve the education experience for the youngest students on their campus. The result of increased teacher and administrator competency and supportive accountability may be the final piece of the strategic vision – an increase in student achievement.

Once the vision is formed and the initiatives are outlined, Kotter's (2018) fourth strategy in the change process can take place - building a group of volunteers ready to tackle those initiatives and begin the process towards change. Regarding this change strategy, Kotter (2018) stated, "to build a volunteer army, you need to give people a choice to participate and true permission to step up and act" (p. 20). Prior to bringing in volunteers to spark change efforts, the local guiding coalition must complete the first step of presenting the case for a measure of quality regarding prekindergarten and primary level education to leaders at the state departments of early learning and K-12 education. Upon agreement among leaders at the state level, the state officials will gather a guiding coalition to move forward with the proposed amendment to the ESSA plan as well as the final development and pilot of an evaluation tool companion that differentiates for the education of young children, and both coalitions can begin to create professional learning plans.

Once those initiatives are complete, at the local level, the guiding coalition will enlist volunteers. An important group of volunteers will be principals and private prekindergarten program directors interested in piloting the evaluation tool on their campuses and serving as a focus group for state leaders as they finalize this tool. Paul Nyhan (2015) suggests that a prekindergarten through third grade approach begin with "a small number of high-need schools with principals who readily support the strategy" (p. 5). In order to volunteer, the principals and directors will meet with their teacher teams and gather interest and questions about the process. The guiding coalition will answer questions and provide informational meetings or videos regarding the process of using the enhanced observation tool, how the data will be communicated with the community,

and how it will increase the ability of district and state leaders to provide better professional development and coaching. The members of the local guiding coalition will partner closely with the members of the state guiding coalition so that the state leaders may work with other districts to begin their own pilot process in order to glean information on the needs of varying districts before finalizing the observation tool connected to the ESSA amendment.

In my professional experience, prekindergarten and primary level teachers are not frustrated by evaluations as much as they are frustrated by evaluations that are one-size-fits-all and do not take the needs of young children into consideration. They are frustrated when their administrator does not understand early literacy instruction and the benefits of play-based learning. The use of an observation tool companion that aligns the district evaluation protocol with early childhood education methods will likely be exciting for teachers and helpful to administrators, and interest will likely be high to volunteer to pilot this initiative.

Professional development opportunities will begin on a volunteer basis for principals, prekindergarten program directors, and teachers. The guiding coalitions will need to approach both leaders and teachers simultaneously with their professional development efforts. As principals and directors volunteer for training on the observation tool, they will also be offered the chance to participate in differentiated professional development on early childhood teaching practices depending on their level of comfort and experience. Teachers in pilot schools will also have the opportunity to participate in differentiated professional development.

In my professional experience, there are many teachers that sought alternative

certification methods and entered teaching with little to no educational background. These teachers may be placed in primary grade levels to avoid a lack of experience damaging chances for high assessment scores in third, fourth, and fifth grades. The professional development and support needs in primary classrooms can be high depending on placement decisions made by principals. There are also those teachers who majored in early childhood education or elementary education in college, and in the state under study, and that educational experience qualifies them for a teaching certificate in prekindergarten through third grade or kindergarten through sixth grade respectively. Professional development can be paired with mentoring on campus as those with less experience begin to implement practices learned during professional development sessions.

This organizational change plan is based on removing barriers. Specifically, removing contextual barriers, cultural barriers, conditional barriers, and barriers due to a lack of competency regarding a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels. While each step works to eradicate these barriers, there are overarching barriers to the plan itself. Their removal is part of the fifth strategy to organizational change recommended by Kotter (2018) – remove barriers in order to enable action.

Overarching barriers to the change plan are time, funding, and adhering to the union-approved teacher contract. Time and funding are required for the local guiding coalition to create and finalize the draft observational tool companion and proposal to state education leaders. Coalition leaders can act to remove this barrier by strategically scheduling sessions of time to gather. This group includes primary level teachers, public and private kindergarten teachers, school administrators, and district leaders, so these

sessions may need to take place outside of school hours, on a school day when students are released early, or on a weekend. Because Title II, Part A within ESSA requires a meaningful evaluation tool that involves multiple stakeholders in its development, Title II funding may be available to fund this time with these stakeholders and the resources required to develop the tool and communication plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Prioritizing professional development needs can also overcome the time barrier. Consider the online instructional tool that accompanies the state-mandated diagnostic assessment. The diagnostic assessment may be required, but the online instruction tool is not. Professional development on the ancillary pieces associated with the diagnostic tool currently takes place throughout the school year and it may behoove district leaders to use said training time and funds with continuous, differentiated, and job-embedded training on early childhood education practice.

The authors of Title II, Part A also support the development of educators of young children, and the associated funds can be used to remove the barrier of cost regarding professional development opportunities. The authors of the Title II, Part A guidance document suggest funds be used by the state and local district to “support joint professional learning and planned activities designed to increase the ability of principals or other school leaders to support teachers, teacher leaders, early childhood educators, and other professionals to meet the needs of students through age eight” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 25). Funding barriers can also be overcome by “blending and braiding” funding sources (NAESP, 2014). Grants are also an option, and district leaders in Fresno Unified School District secured grant funding as a part of their

effort to shift focus to early childhood education (Valentino and Stipek, 2016).

In my professional experience, I work closely with the early learning department in my district which provides support to the public school prekindergarten programs. This department received recently a large grant that totals millions of dollars over the course of several years. While some of the funding does go towards professional development for prekindergarten teachers, the department leaders also decided to spend money on non-consumable goods for classrooms such as books, furniture, and manipulatives for hands-on learning. Materials are a large expense in prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. While funding sources such as Title II may provide annual support for professional development, outfitting classrooms with grant funding when available may prevent the periodic depletion of funds that are annually allocated for those materials.

Transparency with the teachers' union from the early stages of the change process may prevent unnecessary roadblocks for the local guiding coalition. For some teachers, increasing knowledge of early learning may necessitate adjustments to teaching habits and that can be met with frustration occasionally. The evaluation tool can also lead to friction between teachers and administrators as teachers who may have been highly rated on the previous iteration of the evaluation tool may receive a lower score when looking specifically for an environment that is developmentally appropriate for young students. In my professional experience, working with the teachers' union, communicating with transparency, being prepared with answers to potential questions, and soliciting support from their members is an effective way to remove barriers. Valentino and Stipek (2016) support that union involvement in the process may lead to reduced resistance and recommend that districts prioritize adding aligned instruction among prekindergarten and

primary grade classrooms to union contracts.

Through the first five strategies of this organizational change plan, action will begin to take place. At this point, theoretically, the state guiding coalition in the state under study will be on board and working on an amendment for the ESSA plan to give weight to their primary level initiatives and will now include prekindergarten in those initiatives. The local guiding coalition will begin to pilot the evaluation tool and conduct relevant professional development sessions for school leaders and teachers on a voluntary basis. At this point it is important, according to Kotter (2018), to engage in the sixth strategy towards organizational change and produce some short-term wins early in the change process. There are many forms a “win” (Kotter, 2018, p. 26) may take, but when a positive response to the efforts taking place occurs, the guiding coalition can act to communicate those moments clearly and widely to stakeholders both in the schools and the school communities.

In my role as the district administrator over primary grade education, I have already experienced short-term wins in regard to bridging the gap between prekindergarten providers and primary grades and the momentum those wins can help maintain. I worked to develop a partnership between the elementary education department, the district early learning department, and the county coalition for prekindergarten providers to create events and find materials to distribute to families in order to ease the transition to kindergarten for young students. I worked with the early learning department to align instruction and provide professional development for prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers in both the public schools and in programs such as Head Start. Because of this partnership, teachers across the prekindergarten and



kindergarten divide were excited to learn together and build developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms.

I experienced another win in my current role within the district under study through the pilot of developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten classrooms. The prekindergarten classrooms in the public schools, as well as some private prekindergarten providers, operated under this approach, and two kindergarten teachers began to utilize the same approach in their classrooms with the permission of the superintendent. I supported the efforts of these teachers in partnership with a colleague in the early learning department.

The teachers saw growth in their students' reading abilities and math skills as well as a decrease in behavior issues in comparison to the previous school year. The data from the required reading and math diagnostic assessment showed this growth was communicated to the school board and district leaders. Within these two classrooms, 6% of students in the first classroom and 0% of students in the second classroom met grade level expectations in reading according to the diagnostic assessment. By the end of the year, those percentages rose to 100% and 88%, respectively, of students meeting grade level expectations in reading. Furthermore, only one discipline referral was written between the two teachers throughout the entire school year in comparison to their colleagues where the lowest incidence of discipline referrals was three and the highest was 12 (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

I coordinated efforts to expand this pilot to three more schools as a stepping stone to moving district-wide with this approach. The expansion included teachers working with students with disabilities and, in addition to also seeing growth among students like

the teachers saw in the initial pilot, the teachers feel they have better flexibility to meet students' needs. Updates are provided to administrators and the school board regarding the efforts of this implementation, professional development for these teachers occurs monthly, and the local coalition board for prekindergarten invited me to present the information on the kindergarten classrooms to their board of directors. These short-term wins, and the clear communication regarding those wins, are beginning to move the district under study towards a focus on P-3 classrooms. The execution of the change plan for the district and state under study can yield similar short-term wins as volunteers in the pilot begin to see benefits of a specific observation tool geared towards prekindergarten and primary level teachers. Administrators may feel more empowered to give specific feedback to prekindergarten and primary level teachers and teachers may feel greater support and willingness to act on that feedback because it is tailored to their needs as teachers of young students. Data regarding student growth on diagnostic assessments utilized in primary grade levels in the state and district under study may also offer short term wins. Like the experience of the kindergarten teachers utilizing developmentally appropriate practice described above, if teachers and administrators see growth in academic ability and a reduction in behavior issues on campus, acceleration towards change may begin.

The seventh strategy towards organizational change according to Kotter (2018) is sustaining acceleration. Three action steps are required to sustain acceleration towards a P-3 focus. First, at the state level, the state guiding coalition must communicate with the local guiding coalition to pilot, improve, and finalize the evaluation tool that district, and school leaders will utilize to monitor quality in prekindergarten and primary classrooms.

This tool will eventually be tied to school evaluations according to the ESSA plan amendment. Within that process, the state must communicate the expected timeline from piloting the evaluation tool to full implementation. Beyond this partnership, the state must communicate with the coalition of district leaders, both those volunteering to participate in the pilot alongside the initial local guiding coalition and in total as the ESSA amendment will impact all districts in the state.

Second, both the local and state guiding coalitions must sustain professional development efforts for leaders and teachers through flexibility of available training times and differentiation of needs. This way, the implementation of the evaluation tool will not be met with friction but instead with empowerment and optimism as teachers and their leaders are prepared and excited that the tool used to monitor instruction is tailored to the needs of teaching young students. Plus, teachers' abilities to meet students' needs across the continuum of early learning and primary grades may increase.

In support of these professional development efforts, the first, second, third, and fifth competencies required to lead prekindergarten and primary grade learning communities according to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2014), are relevant. The first competency is embracing the learning continuum between prekindergarten and third grade. Principals need to reach out to community preschool providers to learn as much as possible about incoming kindergarten students and may need support in how to do so (NAESP, 2014). The next two competencies revolve around the classroom including developmentally appropriate teaching practices for young students and learning environments that are supportive of individual students' needs (NAESP, 2014). In my professional experience, developmentally appropriate

classrooms are very different than classrooms in which every student is assigned the same task which is a practice prevalent in many schools. Professional development opportunities will support the realization of the first three competencies and fulfill the fifth which is to build capacity in educators of prekindergarten and primary grade students (NAESP, 2014).

In conjunction with continuous professional development opportunities, Kotter (2018) recommends the continuous recruitment of volunteers in order to sustain momentum. In my professional experience, primary grade teachers are excited to take part in professional development that focuses on developmentally appropriate practices as a means to move children socially, emotionally, and academically. I have several kindergarten teams ready to be a part of the next wave of developmentally appropriate practice implementation. As the developmental approach expands in kindergarten, first and second grade teachers may wish to learn more about how to change their classrooms, and I can support the facilitation of that professional development when the time comes.

The third action step is relentless communication of the end goal. Kotter (2018) explains that it is difficult to stay on target in the process of achieving the “ultimate goal” (p. 29) of changing state and district culture. The goal is a high quality prekindergarten and primary grade program that results in academic success and lifelong wellbeing for students. Studies by McCoy et al. (2017) and Reynolds et al. (2011) indicate that this goal is possible. Their communication of the end goal is crucial though to get past a second time-related barrier and can take place during periodic administrative meetings, school board meetings, and principals may wish to communicate regularly with their staff about local efforts.

Time is mentioned as a barrier above. Time to provide professional development and create the observation tool is a primary barrier; however, time also becomes a factor when considering that the benefits of strong prekindergarten and primary level classrooms may not have an immediate effect on third, fourth, and fifth grade scores on state assessments. Communicating increased scores in student diagnostic data in grades kindergarten through second can help sustain acceleration towards the goal of a strong prekindergarten and primary program. Principals can collaborate about successful community outreach efforts to ensure timely student enrollment and that students enter kindergarten with confidence. Professional development opportunities that cross grade levels and bring in prekindergarten teachers may allow for a lasting sense of community to grow among those educators which can spark longevity and dedication to quality teacher practice in classrooms.

In Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), Valentino and Stipek (2016) identified strong leadership as a factor in the success of FUSD leaders to move to a prekindergarten and primary grade focus. Because the district leaders wanted to see the change through, they problem-solved through barriers, acquired necessary funding, and found success in achieving their goal (Valentino and Stipek 2016). State-wide in California, efforts to increase focus on prekindergarten and primary education have sustained. A program quality measure for prekindergarten classrooms called the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), similar to the measure in Washington D.C. and the prekindergarten through second grade measure recommended in this study, is in use at the time of this study as a part of the state ESSA plan (California Department of Education, 2019).

After the guiding coalitions execute the vision through initiatives and gather volunteers to pilot said initiatives while removing barriers, celebrating short-term success, and sustaining acceleration, the final step to organizational change can take place. Kotter (2018) describes the first seven strategies as actions that build new ways of work, but the eighth and final strategy is about cementing the change. Factors within the first seven strategies may help ensure the change is permanent.

Organizational capacity will shift over the course of the change process, and that increased capacity to focus on and serve prekindergarten and primary level teachers and students will make that focus last. First, the observational tool connected to the ESSA amendment is a companion to the current teacher evaluation instrument, so the entire system is not thrown out, but rather enhanced so the evaluator can differentiate between a classroom at the prekindergarten or primary level and classrooms that serve older students. For example, in the district under study, one element on the evaluation instrument is engaging students in learning which includes scaffolding teacher support and rigorous content. To adequately assess whether a prekindergarten or primary grade teacher is engaging students appropriately for the developmental level of their students, the new evaluation tool will include additional information regarding what to look for in an ideal early childhood setting in contrast to an ineffective setting or a setting that would better serve older students according to guidelines set by NAEYC (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009).

After school and district leaders utilize the new companion tool with existing observation and evaluation methods, the data from those observations can be used to target professional development to increase organizational capacity to teach students in

prekindergarten and primary grade levels (NAESP, 2014). There will be a strong incentive to do so as the ESSA amendment will connect quality of instruction and student support in these classrooms to the overall school and district rating. Because leaders within the district under study are basing their knowledge of prekindergarten and primary level instruction on an evaluation tool with which they are already familiar, and because the requirement to use the tool to evaluate and improve these classrooms will be a part of the ESSA plan, an increased focus on good practice in prekindergarten and primary grade levels will become inherent. A summary of the above organizational change process can be found in Appendix C.

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

As the change process progresses, assessing the effectiveness of the changes will help ensure that the guiding coalitions stay on track towards permanent change and that the work being done is in the best interest of educators and students. The goal is an increased focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels, supported by state statute, as a means to increase student achievement and therefore students' academic and overall wellbeing. Joseph Murphey (2016) discussed the importance of data when assessing the effectiveness of a program or program change in his book *Creating Instructional Capacity*. Murphey (2016) explained that goals drive data collection and data collection, in turn, shapes goals (p. 125). National reading assessment data, five-year trends in local reading data, and kindergarten readiness data all point to a need for change and the goal of a strong focus on young students. To determine whether a focal shift towards prekindergarten and primary level classrooms to preempt academic achievement issues is effective, I recommend collecting data from multiple sources throughout the piloting

process of the observational tool for evaluation of quality in these classrooms.

According to Murphey (2016), when driving change, assessment data must come from several sources and be well-organized and easily accessible. Considering the recommendations of this study, data from the observation tool calibration sessions with administrators and multiple sources of data regarding students' academic growth from classrooms in which the teacher is participating in the recommended professional development courses and in which the administrator is utilizing the evaluation tool. Additional data sources may also include participant surveys regarding the effectiveness of the professional development on teaching practices, parent surveys regarding their satisfaction with their child's experience at school, and community partner surveys with directors of private prekindergarten providers as they may also participate in the evaluation process and teachers will be included in the professional development.

Electronic platforms such as Microsoft Forms and Google Forms make survey collection simple with the ability to analyze survey results in multiple ways – both in aggregate and by individual response. In my professional experience, I have watched Microsoft Forms utilized as a means to gather quickly calibration data as administrators rated a teacher's instruction via video. Their ratings were gathered quickly through electronic devices and the facilitators of the session were able to provide actionable feedback in the moment and discuss misconceptions immediately. The data was also saved on the platform for further analysis and comparison to future sessions. The same can be done for the use of the new companion to the evaluation instrument connected to prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms.

Student data in prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms can take several



forms but the guiding coalitions must agree regarding which data sources best serve the goal (Murphey, 2016). In the state under study, kindergarten, first, and second grade students take a reading and math diagnostic assessment three times a year as required by state statute. In the district under study, these grade levels also utilize an authentic reading assessment twice a year. Prekindergarten students take an assessment based on state prekindergarten standards at the conclusion of their prekindergarten experience. The data collected from each of these assessments may allow the guiding coalition to analyze the effectiveness of the professional development offerings and adjust if there is a general trend across all pilot classrooms or if certain teachers require additional assistance and further coaching.

### **Communication Plan**

The guiding coalitions will communicate regularly in regard to the progress made towards the goals of this study and the accompanying action plan. There are several fronts on which communication must take place. At the state level, the state guiding coalition responsible for amending the current ESSA plan to include a measure of quality for prekindergarten and primary level classrooms will communicate with the local guiding coalition to ensure the needs of local school districts are present in the creation of the final observation tool. The local guiding coalition, in turn, will communicate with the state guiding coalition as pilot data becomes available because the adjustments and successes found in the piloting process of the evaluation tool and professional development can be considered for the eventual state-wide roll-out of this plan.

The local guiding coalition has several arenas in which they must regularly communicate throughout the process. Members of the local board for prekindergarten

providers will be a part of the local guiding coalition. This board is a critical community partner as the primary communicator with all prekindergarten providers. They can assist in gathering volunteer participants in the pilot, surveying needs as the evaluation tool is finalized, and contracting a data-sharing agreement in order to analyze the results of assessments provided by private providers. Multiple departments in the school district under study must be apprised of these efforts including the superintendent and other top district leaders, the elementary education team, the early learning team, the team responsible for teacher evaluations, and the team responsible for compiling assessment data. All of these teams are impacted by this change plan and can provide valuable insight and assistance in the execution of the plan.

School administrators and teachers are vital pieces of this plan and will receive open and transparent communication about the change plan from the guiding coalitions. Key communication elements include the intention of the evaluation tool as a way to better equip evaluators to assess the practices within a prekindergarten or primary level classroom and therefore better inform coaching and professional development. The evaluation protocol according to union contract will remain intact; however, education leaders will increase the validity of the evaluation tool through this change as it is no longer the same across all grade levels but considers the needs of teachers as they work with young children. If teachers are not utilizing best practices according to the observation tool, they may participate in professional development to improve their practice. Communication will come from teachers and administrators as well as they respond to surveys to relay any concerns or suggestions to the guiding coalition.

Finally, the state and local school boards must be included as partners and it may

be advantageous to communicate early and often with the members of those boards. The state school board members in the state under study value a strong accountability system according to their mission and may be advocates and partners in the process of amending the ESSA plan (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In my professional experience, in the district under study, the local school board members appreciate transparency and partnership and do not appreciate learning about initiatives that began without their knowledge or their consent if necessary. The school board was receptive to the piloting of developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten classrooms and may therefore be open to this important shift in the educator accountability system.

### **Community Partners**

Participation from community prekindergarten providers in the pilot process of the evaluation tool and professional development courses is another source of data. The goal includes community prekindergarten providers in order to ensure the best early learning experiences possible for young students. Because educators in the context of a private provider may be different than those in a public school setting, the feedback garnered from these participants is invaluable as the guiding coalition works to make the evaluation tool universal, useful, and effective.

Adjustments to the implementation plan must be made if community partners report on their surveys that the new way of work requires additional or individualized professional development. In order to ensure equity in the strategic plan towards change, the local prekindergarten coalition board and the state early learning department will be a part of the process from the initial development of the guiding coalitions. At a conference in the spring of 2019 hosted by the state education department of the state under study,

the director of the early learning department shared that an increase in accountability is on the horizon for all prekindergarten providers. The director's initiative was encouraging towards the recommendations and action plan of this study in connection with the involvement of community prekindergarten providers.

### **Conclusion**

To amend the state education plan in accordance with federal law is a daunting task. It may take several years for the strategies and actions recommended in this study to take shape and for the new policy to impact the educational context, culture, conditions, and competencies in several arenas. However, student achievement data at the national, state, and local levels indicate that remediating issues such as reading skill deficits in the tested grade levels of third grade and beyond are a moribund effort. While it will take time to move through all eight steps of the strategic plan and accompanying action steps, the time spent analyzing data and adjusting professional development and communication efforts will make the new evaluation tool as impactful and effective as possible for teachers and students at the prekindergarten and primary level.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Implications and Policy Recommendations

Under the educational context at the time of this study, federal lawmakers mandated measures of students' achievement in third grade through high school in accordance to Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). State mandates resulted from this law including assessments in grades 3, 4, and 5 in elementary schools. State education leaders used the scores from these assessments to rate schools and districts on a grading scale of A, B, C, D, or F (Education Commission of the States, 2018a). The weight given to the results of the assessments caused a gap in educational philosophy between state and district leaders.

The results of this study explain the gap between state initiatives and local practice which hinders a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education. The state leaders I interviewed for this study stated that the best point of focus for an elementary level principal regarding support and resources is the primary grade levels. This support may come in the form of coaching, placement of highly qualified teachers, and/or purchased materials. The school and district leaders I interviewed for this study said that the grade received by the school, as a result of the above achievement measures, is an important factor when making decisions for their campus. According to one district leader, their decision-making is impacted because the school grade impacts funding, the possibility of intervention by the state school improvement board, and the standing of the school within the community once school grades are published as required (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

In summary, state leaders believe that a focus on young students will result in increased academic achievement among students in tested grade levels, but the action of elementary school leaders indicate that the greater educational context of testing in grades three, four, and five can stymie their ability to focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels. Furthermore, by expanding the focus to prekindergarten and primary levels, including providers of private prekindergarten to the community, young children can benefit from vertically aligned curriculum and instructional practices by highly qualified teachers which may increase the likelihood of academic success and overall wellbeing as an adult (McCoy et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011; Stipek, 2017). One of the state leaders interviewed for this study stated that the initiatives in which the school leader is interested are the initiatives that will receive follow-through. If the context of accountability based on testing in three grade levels is driving administrator interest away from a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels, then the policy behind the context must change.

The authors of ESSA provide flexibility to states in regard to the inclusion of additional accountability indicators in connection to school quality. States may choose to include indicators such as attendance rate, but several states include measures of quality in prekindergarten classrooms including California and Washington D.C. (California Department of Education, 2017; Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2019). I recommend amending the ESSA plan submitted by state leaders in the state under study to include a quality measure of prekindergarten and primary level classrooms in the indicators listed for accountability. The policy shift will result in the creation of an

evaluation companion used by teacher evaluators in conjunction with current evaluation methods among school districts.

The organizational change plan recommended in this study and executed by members of state and local guiding coalitions will shift the paradigm towards an increased focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels. The combination of the new evaluation companion tool with high quality professional development, may result in the empowerment of teachers, principals, and prekindergarten program directors and remove barriers to a focus on early childhood and primary level education. The context of accountability beginning in third grade with achievement tests will shift to include a supportive accountability system in prekindergarten and primary grade levels based on instructional quality. This will then shift the culture of focusing on the tested grade levels to an increased focus on the grade levels serving young children. Prekindergarten and primary level educators will have a purpose and platform on which to collaborate and overcome the condition of separate departments. Barriers to building competency among teachers and administrators regarding early childhood and primary level education will be eradicated by an on-going, adaptable professional development program.

This policy recommendation fits in the larger education policy arena because it directly impacts the pinnacle of education law which is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) as updated by Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). All fifty states in the United States, and District of Columbia, submitted an education plan under ESSA and therefore held to the mandates in this law. The lawmakers behind the ESSA update maintained the preexisting accountability measures but offered flexibility for districts to add measures as long as they are measurable and

valid. A standardized measure of quality across all prekindergarten and primary grade level classrooms offers an additional measure of quality in schools and increases the need for educational leaders to focus on these classrooms in regard to coaching, resources, and teacher placements.

### **Policy Statement**

Two quotes from the interviews for this study summarize the need for a policy change. A state bureau of school improvement leader explained:

If I was an elementary principal, I would focus on the foundational grades which is K-2 [kindergarten through second grade] because, first, they have to learn how to read and have that foundation built. If they can be successful in early education that gives them a better chance of success when they are reading for information and for content knowledge versus learning to read. So, homing in on early years is essential. I believe, too, that in elementary education to have a support system, preschool...I have heard kindergarten teachers say that there is such a vast difference between students that are ready to read once they get in kindergarten than some that have never been in school at all. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

A principal who served at a school in the district under study, under the auspices of the state bureau of school improvement due to a low school grade, explained which grade levels received the most time, coaching, and funding:

Definitely I would say third, fourth, and fifth mainly because the school is in the situation it is being an “F” and we have one year to get it off of the “F”...the state told me this week that if we at least make huge progress even within [the score



range of] an “F”, they would leave me here as the principal. (Citation withheld to protect anonymity)

The state leaders want to see an increase in focus on primary grade levels but inconsistencies in policy are a barrier to that practice. Current policy bases school ratings on student performance in third, fourth, and fifth grades on federal and state mandated exams. When students do not perform at a satisfactory level on those exams, the school rating drops and the proverbial clock begins to tick towards state intervention, principal turnover, or potentially school closure (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). State policy based on ESSA is restricting the ability of school and district administrators to focus on prekindergarten and primary education, but a policy shift may increase focus on these grade levels which is an effort, according to the state education leaders I interviewed for this study, in which the members of the state education department are already interested.

I recommend an amendment to the state accountability plan to include the aggregate score of a quality measure for prekindergarten through primary grade instruction and student support. In November of 2018, the Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education, Frank Brogan, sent a letter to chief state school officers in regard to the amendment process for state plans under ESSA. The steps include an updated ESSA plan with changes noted, a cover letter in which the changes are described, the signature of the chief State school officer, and a description of how the state provided the public an opportunity to comment on the changes. While the deadline for the 2019-2020 school year occurred in March of 2019, Brogan (2018) stated that amendments can be submitted after that date.

Currently, the school quality indicator on the ESSA plan in the state under study is the performance by fifth grade students on the state science assessment (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). I recommend reducing the weight of the science assessment and distributing points to the aggregate results of the quality measure in prekindergarten through second grade in public schools. Because third grade students are a part of current academic achievement measures, this accountability piece will measure through second grade. State education leaders will base this quality measure on the results of the prekindergarten and primary teacher evaluation tool used as a companion to the current teacher evaluation tool present in school districts in the state under study.

The observation companion tool will connect with the current teacher observation and evaluation tool used by districts in the state under study. Authors of the evaluation tool will utilize the current evaluation domains such as planning, instruction, and assessment, and provide specific pieces to look for in accordance to standards of developmentally appropriate practice as supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). Education leaders of the public school district of Washington D.C. utilized an observation and evaluation tool for prekindergarten, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and included the results in the overall accountability measures for elementary schools in which prekindergarten students were served (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2017). Education leaders who authored the ESSA plan for this district stated:

A number of short- and long-term studies show the benefit of early childhood education on student learning and life outcomes. While not required in the U.S. Department of Education guidelines, the District of Columbia has significant

interest in continuing to support the accessibility of high-quality early childhood education for every family. Thus, OSSE [Office of the State Superintendent of Education] incorporates a measure of pre-K quality into its accountability framework for schools that have pre-K classrooms. (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2017)

Deborah Stipek (2017) informs the recommendations within this study through her work in which she explains that the benefits of prekindergarten may continue through the vertical and horizontal alignment of instructional efforts across and within primary grade levels to build on skills already learned instead of repeating the instruction. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) support Stipek's (2017) claim of the importance of interconnectedness in the prekindergarten through third grade spectrum. In their book on developmentally appropriate practices they stated, "In recent years, however, preschool's educational purpose and potential have been increasingly recognized, and this recognition contributes to the blurring of the preschool-elementary boundary. The two spheres now have substantial reasons to strive for greater continuity and collaboration" (p. 3).

There are alternatives to accountability based on observation data, but those alternatives may not produce the results required to remove additional cultural, conditional, and competency-based barriers to a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education. The first alternative is adding a standardized test to these grade levels. Two main concerns are present for this suggestion. First, there is not a standardized achievement test for the state under study in these grade levels and to develop one may deplete financial resources that education leaders may have utilized for critical professional development needs for these grade levels instead (Bornfreund, 2013).

Second, concerns arise in regard to the developmental appropriateness of such assessments. Regarding developmental appropriateness, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explained that concerning practices take place when standards-based achievement is the center of focus in prekindergarten through primary grade levels. These concerns included tight teaching schedules and reduced focus on problem solving, social and emotional development, and collaboration with peers (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p. 4). Standardized tests do not account for the gaps that students entering school can experience based on their home life nor the flexibility needed as students enter developmental stages at different rates throughout these grade levels.

The second alternative to observation data is shared attribution of third grade academic achievement scores as an evaluation of teaching practices in primary grade levels (Bornfreund, 2013). This method may be ineffective as it does not provide individual feedback to primary grade teachers and does not measure a teacher's impact on his or her students' learning (Bornfreund, 2013). With this method, a kindergarten teacher, for example, is held responsible for students who have not attended their class in three years and that is assuming the teacher worked at his or her present school the duration of those three years and that his or her students remained at the same school for that time. Immediate, actionable feedback from an observation-based accountability tool may increase the focus of education leaders on prekindergarten and primary grade levels, bring preschool and elementary schools closer together in regard to alignment of instruction, and result in increased professional development efforts for teachers and administrators in current, developmentally appropriate practices utilized in these grade levels.

Educational leaders should note that private prekindergarten service providers are not included in the accountability aspect of the ESSA plan. This does not mean that private providers cannot utilize the observational tool in partnership with the public schools in order to gain consistency of feedback and improvement among all prekindergarten service providers. In the district under study, for example, the board that supervises prekindergarten services includes those classrooms on public school campuses. The members of this board, and the state early learning department, are key members of the guiding coalitions in the organizational change plan of this study. They will be fully knowledgeable of the observation tool, its use, and its benefits. The members of the local early learning board and state early learning department could then choose to guide preschool directors, across the district and state, to use the tool at their locations in order to better collaborate with the public school district on professional development opportunities to increase ability and alignment.

I envision this policy to be effective in overcoming the primary barrier exposed in the responses to my interviews with state and local education leaders. The state leaders believed that a focus on the grade levels serving young children is critical, however state policy prevented elementary school leaders from having a strong focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels due to school and district accountability measures resting on third through fifth grade student achievement scores and growth. The recommended policy shift to include a measure of quality regarding instruction and student support in prekindergarten and primary grade levels will increase focus on these grade levels because state education leaders will include them in the context surrounding accountability for schools as part of the ESSA plan. This increased focus will positively

impact student learning due to increased capacity of teachers and administrators to serve young students as a result of improved, consistent observational data and the resulting professional development provided based on that data. Student learning may also improve due to better aligned instructional practices between prekindergarten and primary grade levels (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; Stipek, 2017). As a result, student performance on achievement tests may increase, a student's likelihood of graduating high school may increase, as well as the likelihood of students experiencing an increase in general well-being through adulthood (McCoy et al., 2017).

### **Analysis of Needs**

An analysis of needs and impact in regard to the implications of the policy recommendation of this study is critical in order to overcome the challenges that may become present in the change process. For each area of this analysis the four arenas of organizational change are considered. These four arenas, according to Tony Wagner et al. (2006) include the context, culture, conditions, and competencies present at the time of change and whether shifts in thinking are required.

**Educational Analysis.** The greater context of education in the state under study will change once the guiding coalitions at the state and local levels are successful at creating the amendment to the state ESSA plan and finalize the associated evaluation companion for administrators to utilize in their prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. The new accountability policy will increase focus on improving the quality of instruction in these classrooms because the evaluations will serve a quality measure for each school, the scores of which will count in their final school rating each year.

This shift in the educational context of the state under study is supported by

Danielle Ewen and Rachel Herzfeldt-Kamprath (2016) from the Center for American Progress. The authors explain how the shift in context can result in a cultural shift. For example, administrators and district leaders can prioritize the facilitation of professional development and collaboration opportunities for prekindergarten through primary grade level teachers. They recommend aligned systems of quality measurement across prekindergarten and primary grade levels that are developmentally appropriate and better inform teacher practice. Ewen and Herzfeldt-Kamprath (2016) suggest:

At the local level, schools and local providers [of preschool services] can work together to create teams across grade levels to share information about children's development... This information can help create plans to scaffold learning across grade levels that is individualized to the needs of students coming into kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and help teachers in early learning settings understand the standards and expectations of the early elementary environment.  
(p. 28)

In their suggestion, the authors also touch on the conditional change that will take place as the departments that separately run prekindergarten classrooms and elementary schools will be incentivized to frequently collaborate and develop their skills together.

Furthermore, the preexisting condition of placing the most highly qualified teachers in tested grade levels, sometimes at the expense of quality instruction in primary grade levels, will likely halt as principals will now be accountable for the instruction taking place in prekindergarten and primary classrooms.

The highest impact may be felt in the area of professional development. The new evaluation tool may reveal several areas of improvement for teachers of prekindergarten

and primary grade levels. This information is valuable in order to set up differentiated, targeted training opportunities in areas such as developmentally appropriate practice, scaffolding learning through play, maintaining anecdotal data on student progress, and early literacy instruction. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) and Ewen and Herzfeldt-Kamprath (2016) recommend teachers move away from didactic, or teacher-centered, learning experiences and instead build an internal toolbox of teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students in the classroom regardless of ability, culture, or developmental stage.

In my professional experience this takes job-embedded coaching, quality training sessions, and time. Whereas education leaders within the district may have not previously seen value in investing that amount of time and resources into grade levels that do not impact the annual school rating, the change in context sparked by the new policy recommended in this study may move districts towards such an investment. As a result of the focal shift towards prekindergarten and primary grade levels, intermediate grade level teachers on an elementary school campus may notice increased ability to problem-solve, improved social-emotional awareness, and academic ability among their incoming students as a result in their colleagues' improved teaching approach (Ewen and Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016). Beyond elementary school, the foundation set by a strong, well-aligned experience in prekindergarten and primary grades may result in a higher chance of graduating high school and enrolling in postsecondary learning opportunities (McCoy et al, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011).

**Economic Analysis.** Five participants in my study cited funding as a barrier to expanding prekindergarten opportunities in public schools during their interviews. They



explained that adding prekindergarten classrooms to public schools, purchasing materials for prekindergarten and developmentally appropriate primary classrooms, and paying for teaching trainings were not possible in the context at the time. In the organizational change plan of this study, I recommend exploration of federal dollars, grants, and local funds in order to responsibly respond to the shift in focus that will take place after the recommended policy is in place. Districts can utilize funding from Title II within ESSA to develop teachers. Federal education policymakers encourage the use of those dollars in the area of early learning (United States Department of Education, 2016). State and district leaders may need to reassess how that funding is presently utilized and determine if a shift is possible within those funds.

As state and district leaders reassess funding use, this may result in a reprioritization of funds away from remediation programs in upper elementary grade levels and towards prekindergarten and primary grades. The ability to make this cultural shift away from spending more on tested grade levels may be due to increased academic ability of students as they enter those grade levels resulting from a high-quality experience in their foundational years. Gene Maeroff (2006a) stated:

Doing it right in the first place is the most obvious way to give students what they will need to prosper in the classroom. Otherwise, every intervention afterward becomes remedial – expensive, difficult, bruising to children...schools will best sustain early gains by reinforcing the entirety of primary education. (p. 3)

The high-quality experience in the foundational years of education (i.e. prekindergarten and primary grades), requires an investment in the professional competency of teachers and administrators which the reprioritized funds may help district and state leaders

achieve (Copples and Bredekamp, 2009; Ewen and Herzfeldt-Kamprath, 2016).

Administrators will require training on the new observation tool that is the driving force underneath the policy recommendations in this study. This training will ensure proper and effective feedback regarding developmentally appropriate teacher practices and result in professional development needs. The investment of funds to fulfill these training needs may result in the reduction of costs that states, and districts incur in connection to remediation and retention of students.

McCoy et al. (2017) summarized the economic importance of investing in early childhood education programs by examining the state of public early childhood education investments across the United States. The authors stated:

Over the past several years, financial investments in public ECE have risen rapidly, with states spending \$7.4 billion in 2016 to support early education for nearly 1.5 million 3- and 4-year-olds. At the same time, approximately 6.4 million children are in special education classes, and more than 250,000 are retained each year, with annual per pupil expenditures for special education and retention amounting to more than \$8,000 and \$12,000, respectively. Even more costly is the fact that approximately 373,000 youth in the United States drop out of high school each year, with each dropout leading to an estimated \$689,000 reduction in individual lifetime earnings and a \$262,000 cost to the broader economy. These negative educational outcomes are much more frequent for children growing up in low- as opposed to higher-income families, and yet more than half of low-income 3- and 4-year-old children remain out of center-based care. Given the high costs that special education placement, grade retention, and dropout place on both

individuals and taxpayers, our results suggest that further investments in ECE programming may be one avenue for reducing educational and economic burdens and inequities. (McCoy et al., 2017, p. 3)

The impact of an increased focus on prekindergarten and primary education will not only shift the spending of state and district leaders in the state under study, but the results of said spending may impact positively the district, state, and national economy at large.

**Social analysis.** The social impact of an increased focus on prekindergarten and primary education occurs when students are of school-age as the potential for remediation and grade-level retention is reduced. This impact also occurs as students complete high school with an increased chance of graduation and improved socioeconomic wellbeing. In the economic analysis above, I quoted the meta-analysis of McCoy et al. (2017) where the authors discussed the negative educational outcomes of dropping out of school, remediation services, and retention and how those effects typically impact lower-income families. The social impact of these outcomes is a potentially widened opportunity gap for students who experience said outcomes.

One of the studies included in the meta-analysis by McCoy et al. (2017) is the work of Reynolds et al. (2011) and the study of students who attended early childhood programming in Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) and their wellbeing 25 years later. This study by Reynolds et al. (2011) shows how investments in early childhood and primary level education support can have positive societal effects, especially for lower-income families. The authors found that felony arrests among adult participants who took part in CPC programs as a child were reduced by 27% in comparison to the control group. Twenty percent of CPC program participants experienced improvement in their

socio-economic status as an adult (Reynolds et al., 2011). In the final thoughts, the authors felt that their comprehensive analysis showed strong evidence that early education programs are worth investment and focus. In summary, David Jacobson (2018) stated that “the combination of educational support and family services [in the P-3 continuum] is the single best strategy we have to address pernicious opportunity gaps and raise achievement for low-income children” (p. 19). Teachers of high-quality early learning and primary level instruction have the potential to help children overcome societal barriers and increase their chances of academic and lifetime success.

Another piece of the social analysis of the policy recommendation is the potential for teachers and administrators to find out that, according to the new observation instrument connected to the new accountability policy, their knowledge of early learning and primary grade levels may be lacking. If a teacher within these grade levels has many years of experience but relies on didactic teaching methods throughout the majority of the school day, it will take some adjustment to move towards individualized, differentiated, developmentally appropriate practice. Administrators as well may have served in elementary schools for a large portion of their career, but their experience in the classroom may not be in prekindergarten or primary level classrooms. Conversely, a teacher with few years of experience who graduated from a collegiate teacher preparatory program focused on early childhood education may rate higher on their classroom practice to the frustration of a veteran teacher.

To overcome the potential of social disequilibrium, school and district leaders must ensure that professional development offers support and challenge by building upon current understanding and offering job-embedded coaching and mentoring. Drago-

Severson, Blum-DeStafano, and Asghar (2013) recommended the development of an effective holding environment for teachers as they build their practice. A holding environment is the context in which growth occurs, and an effective one includes meeting individual teachers where they are in their practice, offering challenges with support, and extending long-term support which allows teachers to practice and learn from these challenges (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). The authors said:

We know that the process of growth is not often comfortable or easy. Instead, it is frequently painful as we let go of what we held tightly to – our old self – and strive to rebalance who we are growing to become. (Drago-Severson et al., 2013, p. 68)

If teachers feel that their current knowledge is respected, and their current understanding serves as a basis on which to build new knowledge, educational leaders may quell frustration and replace it with empowerment and improvement.

### **Political analysis.**

As education leaders in the state and district under study embark on the process to amend the state ESSA plan, pilot and implement a new observation tool, invest in professional development and materials, and ultimately shift the educational culture across the state, the political barrier that may arise from the state and local school boards is time. Student achievement data in third grade and beyond may not show improvement immediately during the organizational change process. Furthermore, the data from the initial prekindergarten and primary teacher observations using the new observation tool may reveal two elements that extend the time for the process to turn into effective practice.

First, results will fluctuate as administrators practice and calibrate in an effort to increase inter-rater reliability which takes time. The early observations may be inflated or restrained depending on the evaluator's knowledge of developmentally appropriate, early childhood education practices. Second, as reliability increases, teachers may show significant deficits in knowledge depending on their experience with teaching prekindergarten or primary grade levels and developmentally appropriate practice. Long-term, job-embedded professional development takes time to solidify and manifest as improved practice.

State and local school board members may wish to see a faster return on investment in regard to increased student achievement on state exams. Jim Collins (2005) compared the process of building a great organization to building a clock. Leaders of the change need time to piece together the final product, but those who oversee the organization keep asking for the time before the clock is built. In other words, developing a new approach in an organization, such as a change in the accountability plan that requires growth in capacity for multiple stakeholders, is not going to happen quickly. He does suggest that a laser-like focus on a strong vision and incremental results can help the organization's supervisors, in this case the state and local school boards, remain on board with the change process (Collins, 2005). This connects with the organizational change plan as recommended by John Kotter (2018) in this study. The guiding coalitions will maintain momentum through celebrating short-term wins, expanding their volunteer armies, and remaining focused on initiatives based on the vision of a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education (Kotter, 2018).

As progress is made, frequent and transparent communication may keep

supervisors on board for the long-haul. Change leaders may communicate various data during the intermittent period where teachers and administrators are building their capacity and cementing the contextual, cultural, and conditional shifts to increased collaboration between and increased accountability of prekindergarten and primary grade levels. These data may include reduced behavior referrals as prekindergarten and primary grade students become more engaged through developmentally appropriate teaching practice. Annual diagnostic data pertaining to reading and math skill growth may improve as teacher practice improves which may encourage top supervisors throughout the process as well. The guiding coalitions may stave off the need of state and local school board members to see immediate improvement by keeping lines of communication open throughout the change process.

**Legal analysis.** District and school education leaders are required to uphold the teachers' union approved contract. This contract is the result of bargaining between union members and district leaders and may include wording pertaining to the number of hours allowed for professional development, the requirement of payment for professional development outside of contract hours, and about performance assessment. In the district under study, the collective bargaining agreement acknowledges the performance assessment of employees using the current evaluation method. It is critical for union members to be a part of the initial guiding coalition charged with building the ESSA amendment proposal in order to avoid additional barriers once the group garners permission to move forward with the change process. The entire change plan may fall through if the inclusion of a classroom observational tool specifically serving prekindergarten and primary level teachers is halted in union negotiations. In that case,

changing the context to amend the accountability measures in the state ESSA plan will be fruitless as the resulting cultural, conditional, and competency based shifts are not possible without that accountability measure.

In California school districts, securing funding to pay teachers for their time during professional development opportunities outside of work hours helped education leaders overcome barriers with their teachers' union (Valentino and Stipek, 2016). In Montgomery County, Maryland, the superintendent created a team of union members and district leaders to form their "Teacher Professional Growth System" that included elements related to the change process of this study such as classroom observations and teacher evaluations (Marietta, 2010). By taking similar action, the district under study can gather the initial guiding coalition and set a precedent for other district leaders' involvement of their unions as the implementation of the new accountability measure takes place.

**Moral and ethical analysis.** There is a gap in understanding among state leaders and school and district leaders in regard to a focus on prekindergarten and primary level classrooms. State leaders interviewed for this study indicated that an increase in focus is needed whereas school and district leaders feel they cannot divert from a strong focus on grade levels that conclude in a state test. I recommend the inclusion of a measure of instructional quality in prekindergarten and primary grade levels in the accountability plan submitted by the state in accordance with ESSA. This action may result in an increased urgency to focus resources in those grade levels.

To measure instructional quality in these classrooms, a guiding coalition will create a companion observational tool that builds upon the current observational tool that



serves as the basis for teacher evaluations in the district under study. This tool will focus evaluative observations on the needs of prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms including developmentally appropriate practice and social and emotional development. To ensure reliable and honest results, inter-rater reliability will be as important to leaders serving as evaluators as it is to test security for teachers serving as proctors on state assessments.

There is a moral and ethical obligation for leaders of this change process to ensure the reported results of these observations are reliable and honest as the results will give points towards school and district ratings in the state under study. If leaders do not uphold this moral and ethical obligation, the contextual shift in educational accountability may be ineffective or removed which will hinder the cultural, conditional, and competency-based goals of the organizational change plan. For example, if leaders providing the evaluations decide to inflate scores, professional development will not enable teachers to grow in their practice and instead waste funding and time by not being appropriate to their needs. That ineffective use of professional development time will manifest in the inability of prekindergarten and primary grade teachers to support their students in a developmentally appropriate environment, and therefore, obstruct the goal of academic and general wellbeing described in the meta-analysis by McCoy et al. (2017) that can result from high quality early learning environments.

This moral and ethical dilemma is avoidable through effective training, the right tool, and reliability across multiple raters (Stuhlman, Hamre, Downer, Pianta, 2010). In a publication for the University of Virginia titled, "How to Use Classroom Observation Most Effectively," Stuhlman et al. (2010) explained that errors among raters are

avoidable through training, frequent calibration sessions, random assignment of raters to classrooms, and scheduling multiple raters for each classroom. Evaluating administrators will use an observation tool with wording tailored to prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms built from the current teacher evaluation tool, so the evaluation will have previously undergone scrutiny in regard to validity. In the district under study, administrators, both principals and their assistant principals, calibrate their ratings several times during the school year by practicing their observations in their classrooms as well as at other schools. Stuhlman et al. (2010) recommended periodic calibration sessions to “offer a refresher in scoring procedures and help improve the degree to which raters remain consistent with scoring protocols and with each other” (p. 4).

There is a larger moral and ethical consideration beyond the obligation to remain upstanding when reporting observation scores utilizing the recommended accountability tool. Multiple sources point to the benefit of increasing the quality and accessibility of prekindergarten services as well as increasing the quality and alignment of primary grade level instruction (Jacobson, 2018; McCoy et al., 2017; Maeroff, 2006; Stipek, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011). These benefits are academic including a greater likelihood of graduating high school and reducing chances of grade level retention, as well as societal including reduced likelihood of arrest and higher socio-economic status. If there is something the school community can do to reduce the impact of environmental factors like living in a lower-income household, it is of utmost importance for educational leaders to take heed and move forward with change towards that effect.

### **Implications for Staff and Community Relationships**

The majority of elementary school campuses in the district under study house prekindergarten classrooms. Though the principal of an elementary school serving prekindergarten students is responsible for the quality of instruction and wellbeing of students in all classrooms, district and state service of prekindergarten programs comes from a different department than services to elementary schools. The funding streams are generally separate, the amount of money available to prekindergarten versus elementary level classrooms differs, and professional development occurs on different days for each department. The proposal to amend the current state accountability plan to include a measure of quality for prekindergarten and primary level classrooms may unite the efforts of the two departments.

In my professional experience, unity between prekindergarten and primary grade levels is possible through active effort to form a partnership. For example, I secured funds for combined prekindergarten and kindergarten professional development through Title II dollars, which focus on teacher development, to jointly support efforts to bridge instructional approaches between prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. I worked with local Head Start teachers, directors, and parents to build understanding of expectations in kindergarten in order to better align instruction. Members of the community coalition for prekindergarten providers partner with me and district leaders supervising public prekindergarten services to ensure parents know when and how to enroll their children in kindergarten. As mentioned throughout this study, Deborah Stipek (2017) encourages this form of partnership in order to vertically align instructional efforts across the prekindergarten and primary grade continuum. These efforts build

relationships between prekindergarten and primary grade teachers and leaders as they grow together and collaborate about instructional practice.

When working in the realm of prekindergarten, it is vital to involve community stakeholders as parents may choose to enroll their children in a preschool provider outside of the public schools, but that child will likely enroll in public kindergarten thereafter. In the district and state under study, all voluntary prekindergarten classrooms operate under the local and state early learning offices (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). While the negative aspect of this is described above as a natural division of resources that accompanies the condition of separate offices, there is an opportunity to pull in all community providers of prekindergarten services through one organization.

In the change plan recommended in this study, representatives from the departments and organizations that serve prekindergarten classrooms throughout the community will be a part of the initial guiding coalition. They will be a part of the group responsible for developing the companion observation tool for the evaluation system of prekindergarten and primary grade teachers and the accompanying training for administrators and teachers. While private providers outside of the public school setting will not count for accountability scores of elementary schools, private providers can utilize the tool to increase consistency of instruction between all preschool providers.

Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explained why collaboration between public and private providers of prekindergarten and between prekindergarten providers and elementary schools is so crucial. The authors said:

Many [preschool] programs came into being primarily to offer childcare for parents who worked. In recent years, however, preschool's educational purpose

and potential have been increasingly recognized, and this recognition contributes to the blurring of the preschool-elementary boundary. The two spheres now have substantial reasons to strive for greater continuity and collaboration. (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, p. 3)

In this case, the substantial reasons include supporting educational leaders' focus on improved instruction across the grade level continuum in order to increase the benefit of preschool through elementary school and beyond (Stipek, 2017).

An additional stakeholder group is the public at large as the amendment process for a state ESSA plan includes an opportunity for public comment (Brogan, 2018). The state-level guiding coalition, in partnership with the local guiding coalition, will develop a plan to solicit feedback on the organizational change plan. Feedback may be obtained through a website that tracks the change process and houses a survey on the pieces of the observation tool. Parents and others in the school community may choose to take part, but this process also provides an opportunity to modify the change plan as it moves forward and increases the likelihood of buy-in from educators once the coalitions finalize the plan.

Before releasing a survey and collecting feedback, the guiding coalitions will pilot the survey questions to ensure the questions measure what they intend (James et al., 2008). Data collection will be utilization-focused with the intended user in mind throughout development of surveys or other data collection tools. In this case, the users are the leaders implementing the evaluation tool and the teachers receiving the evaluation. Before releasing the survey and deciding to make modifications to the change plan based on results, the guiding coalitions will determine the rate of desirability in

connection to the results (i.e. if 70% of those surveyed disagree with an element of the evaluation instrument, we will modify that element) (Patton, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

In order to increase the focus on prekindergarten and primary level education in the public school system, the context surrounding public education must change. This is evident in the results of this study through the inconsistent interview responses between state leaders and their suggestions of focusing on primary grade levels and those of school leaders who discussed the need to focus on the grade levels in which state testing occurs. To change the context and overcome this barrier, the policy recommendation in this study is an amendment to the state accountability plan for public elementary schools. Writers of the new accountability plan will reallocate some of the points once given to the fifth grade science assessment towards a new category measuring the quality of instruction in prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms. School administrators will evaluate quality using an addendum to the current teacher evaluation tool which will orient those evaluations to the specific practices expected in a prekindergarten or primary grade classroom.

Before moving forward with system-wide, organizational change, the guiding coalition of the change process must diagnose the system through an analysis of needs and potential impact (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009). This section summarized the educational, economic, social, political, legal, and ethical analysis in regard to the policy recommendation. The goal of the new policy is increased quality of instruction in prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms in an effort to lay a firm foundation for learning for all students.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusion

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine the barriers to a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade education in public schools within the state and district under study. In the education context during the time of this study, federal law mandated testing on reading, and other subjects pending the students' grade level, beginning in third grade (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2018). In the years leading up to this study, publishers of state and national reading assessments revealed data trends which indicated that reading proficiency was stagnant among fourth grade students and achievement gaps between student groups remained.

Meta-analyses, such as the study performed by McCoy et al. (2017), concluded that high-quality early learning experiences set up a student for academic success and life-long wellbeing. While some argue that the benefits of early learning experiences fade over time, authors such as Deborah Stipek (2017) argue that alignment of instructional practices between prekindergarten and primary grade levels can ensure that the benefits described by McCoy et al. (2017) remain for the students throughout the remainder of their school career and beyond. Therefore, it may be possible to ensure a greater probability for academic success, which may manifest as increased assessment scores, and higher quality of life for students who attend a school with an increased focus on the earliest years of education as opposed to a school in which the main focus of administrators is the tested grade levels.

## **Discussion**

The program evaluation included interviews of state and local education leaders and served to answer the primary research question of this study: What are the barriers to a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels? The school principals interviewed for this program evaluation said that state policy was not at fault for stagnant reading scores, as students should be able to show proficiency in reading by the end of third grade; however, they also revealed that the majority of their focus throughout the school year rested with tested grade levels due to the ratings the school received as a result of the test scores. The state leaders interviewed for this study, in contrast, claimed that the key grades on which local leaders should focus were prekindergarten and primary grade levels. The interviewed participants revealed a gap in understanding which guided me to the conclusion that the context in which public schools in the state under study operated needed to shift. This shift may give local leaders the supportive accountability needed to ensure a quality prekindergarten and primary grade experience for students.

The context of punitive accountability measures present in the state under study impacted the culture, conditions, and competencies within school districts. The strong focus on third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms due to the impact of testing in those grade levels was a culture set nearly twenty years prior to this study under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The conditions within the state and school district may have contributed to the culture as prekindergarten services and elementary school services were separate at the state and district levels in the state under study. A principal may serve prekindergarten students on campus but is subject to potentially disjointed goals and objectives held by the two departments.



Another condition under this context of accountability, which furthered the district under study from a focus on prekindergarten and primary education, was the practice by administrators to ensure the placement of high quality teachers in tested grade levels leaving primary grade classrooms in the hands of substitute teachers or under-qualified teachers. Five out of six state and district leaders said that administrator competency was critical to success of a prekindergarten and primary grade program. The majority of interviewed participants also cited a lack of teacher competency in regard to quality instructional practices in prekindergarten and primary classrooms. This context of assessment-centered accountability resulted in a culture, conditions, and competencies held within the state and district under study which prevented a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade education. Considering the weight of these results, the policy recommendation in this study is to change the context in regard to accountability.

The authors of Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) required state education leaders to submit a plan for moving their education program forward in connection to mandated testing requirements. ESSA did allow for states to choose another measure of accountability in the form of a school quality measure. I recommend that state education leaders amend state accountability policy to include a measure of quality connected to prekindergarten and primary education levels in the form of results from an instructional evaluation tool utilized by school administrators. These results will factor into overall school accountability scores and give greater weight to the need to ensure high instructional quality for young students. The evaluation tool will be a modification to the evaluation tool currently utilized by school administrators. A companion document to the tool will guide the observation process to help administrators

differentiate for teachers of young children. The context surrounding educational accountability in the state under study will shift to include prekindergarten and primary grade levels.

This shift in accountability will impact the culture within school districts across the state as the allocation of administrative focus within schools will increase in prekindergarten and primary classrooms in order to ensure high performance in the new evaluation category which will contribute to school ratings. The state and district department members serving prekindergarten and elementary schools will also have incentive to work together to align instruction and best serve school administrators in their efforts to improve the instruction of young children on their campuses. Professional development will also increase, and therefore, increase the capacity of teachers and the administrators charged with evaluating them. The supportive accountability under the new context in the state under study may result in increased capacity among educators in regard to developmentally appropriate, high quality prekindergarten and primary level instruction. As a result of improved instruction, students may enter tested grade levels with a lower risk of retention or dropping out before graduating high school.

The organizational change plan begins in the district under study as the initial guiding coalition of teachers, administrators, prekindergarten providers, and district leaders join together and become informed of the urgency at hand regarding stagnant reading proficiency rates and the need for change. After developing a proposal for state leaders to change the state context through an amendment to the accountability plan, a guiding coalition of state leaders will carry the amendment process forward. Both groups will then support the piloting and finalization of the evaluation tool companion and

professional development plan behind the pilot and eventual statewide implementation. The guiding coalition will maintain a focus on multiple stakeholder groups throughout the change process. These stakeholders include members of teachers' unions to ensure the change in evaluation method is approved under contract and community prekindergarten providers as they will also have access to the evaluation tool to ensure uniformity of access to targeted professional development based on school and community needs.

The purpose of the program evaluation was met as I determined barriers to a focus on prekindergarten and primary grade levels through interviews with individuals at different levels of the educational hierarchy in the state under study. The gap in belief regarding which grade levels required the greatest amount of attention and resources within a school revealed the primary dilemma to a focus on prekindergarten and primary level education – the state accountability policy. The organizational change plan will increase the needed focus on prekindergarten and primary grades by including the quality of education in those grade levels in the education accountability structure in the state under study. Furthermore, the plan will address issues raised by the program evaluation interviews such as increasing professional development for teachers and administrators and mobilizing various funding sources differently to meet the needs of the change plan. Once implemented, the members of the guiding coalitions behind the change plan will increase the quality of prekindergarten and primary grade levels, and therefore, the potential of young students to succeed.

## **Leadership Lessons**

Through this process, I learned to question everything and research deeply. I experienced an early wave of statewide accountability testing as an elementary and middle school student. I was held to testing requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as a high school student. As a teacher, coach, and district administrator I never knew a professional experience outside the realm of school and district accountability through mandated student achievement testing. I did not know where my research path would lead when I sought out variables to success in other states in which prekindergarten and primary grades were a focal point for educational leaders. I did not think the deeply entrenched culture of importance placed on tested grade levels could change, but through deep research of other state accountability plans and federal documents, the path became clear and it was exciting.

By focusing on what it takes to execute high quality prekindergarten and primary education programs, my work as a curriculum leader for a district primary grade program improved. I learned that an active partnership was required between the prekindergarten community and elementary school community because the state and district conditions kept separate the departments that served those communities. Without that knowledge, I may not have initiated that partnership. My research assisted me when I proposed new ideas to my supervisors and helped sustain initiatives that are now in their second or third phase of implementation within my district.

Going forward, I will have increased confidence as a leader knowing that I have deep understanding of federal and state education policy. This knowledge will increase my ability to discern which initiatives on which to focus and how to involve multiple

stakeholders in a complex organizational change plan. This process gave me a framework through which I can navigate change as a leader for years to come.

## **Conclusion**

The root of this program evaluation is the belief that increased support of prekindergarten and primary grade teachers will yield better support for young students as they develop their foundation in learning. Higher results on state accountability tests is not the point. Behind each score, however, is a child that may suffer grade-level retention, may drop out of school, or grow up to be met with fewer opportunities as a result of consequences due to low scores on accountability tests.

Behind test scores are teachers who resign because the pressure is too great to ensure their students perform on accountability tests and administrators who must choose between a primary and intermediate grade in which to place the only highly qualified teacher applicant they interviewed over the summer. If the form of school accountability changes, then support for those who teach students during the years in which they develop their foundational skills and love of learning may increase. From this strong foundation, academic success may follow.

In an article by David Jacobson (2018), he discussed the benefits of strong early learning opportunities, and subsequently well-aligned primary grade level instruction, particularly for children from lower-income families. He shared, “It is hard to imagine another set of reforms that has more potential to significantly raise achievement and social-emotional competence for low-income children” (Jacobson, 2018, p. 24). If strong, aligned instruction in prekindergarten and primary grade levels can achieve so much for the most vulnerable students, it is time for a change in focus.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: “As Is” 4 Cs Analysis

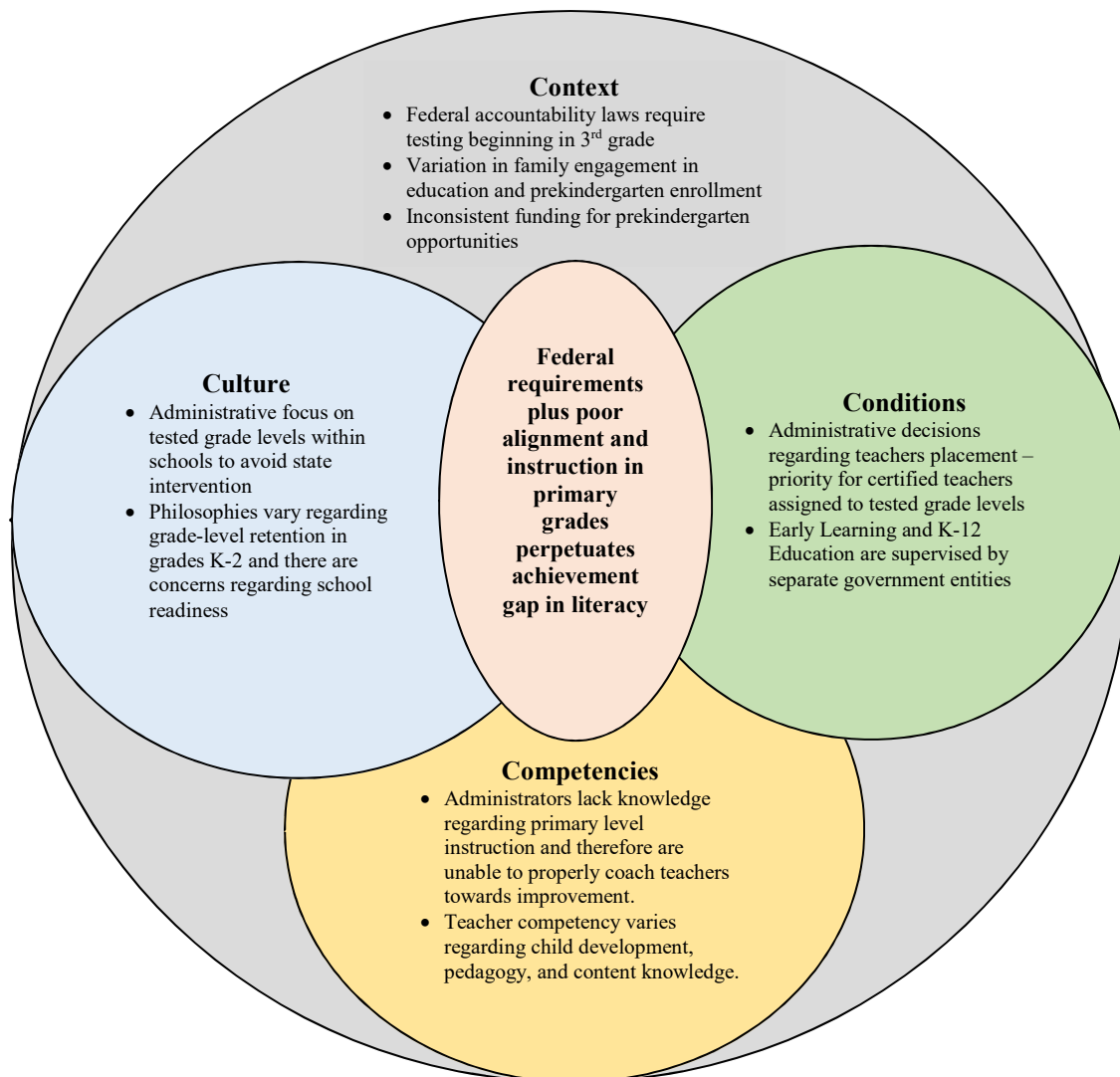
Appendix B: “To-Be” 4 Cs Analysis

Appendix C: Strategies and Actions Chart

## Appendix A

### “As Is” 4 Cs Analysis

“As Is” 4 C’s Analysis for The Primary Dilemma: Determining and Overcoming Barriers to a Focus on Prekindergarten through Grade 3

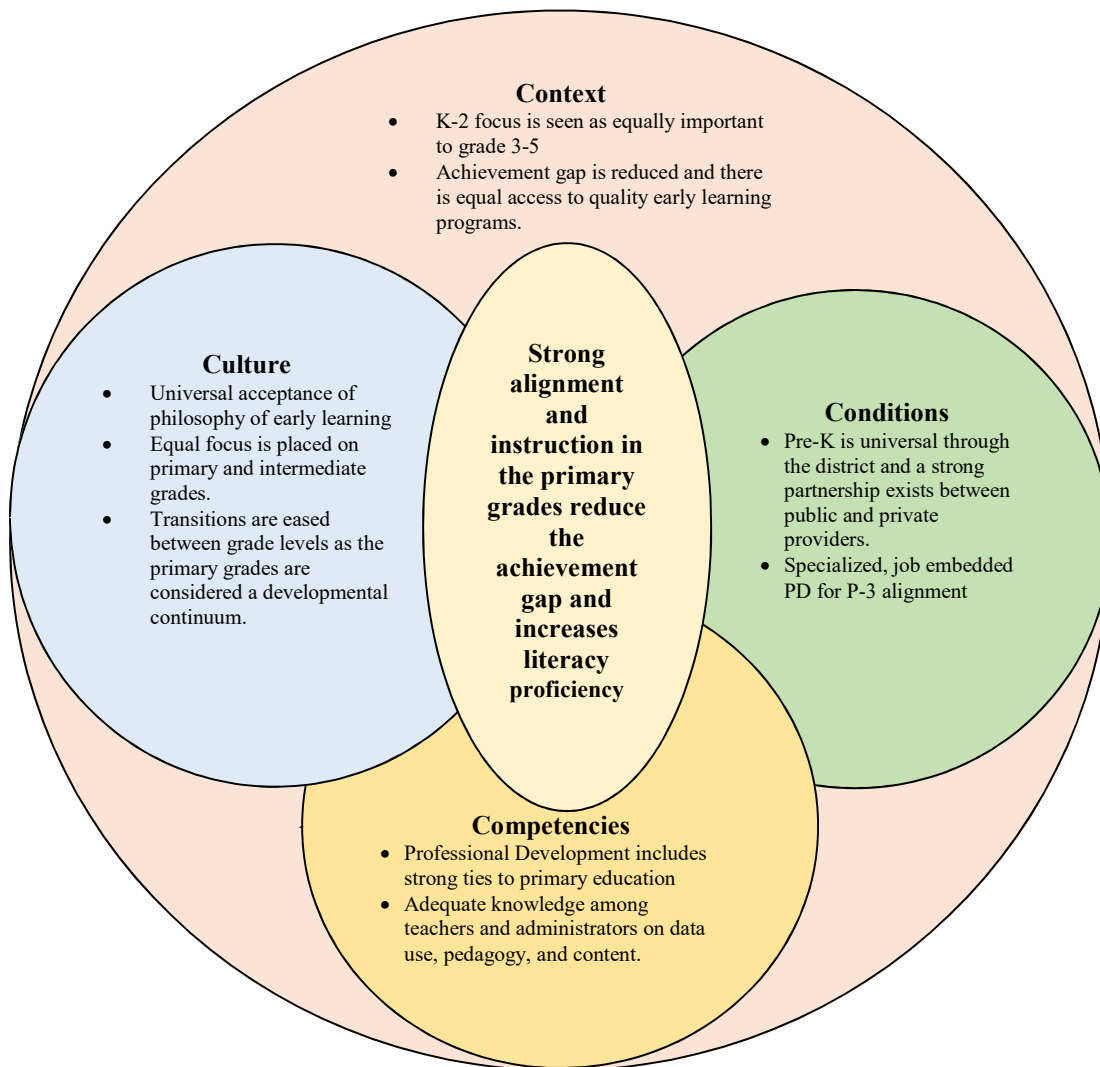




## Appendix B

### “To-Be” 4 Cs Analysis

“To-Be” 4 C’s Analysis for The Primary Dilemma: Determining and Overcoming Barriers to a Focus on Prekindergarten through Grade 3



## Appendix C

### Strategies and Action Chart

Strategies	Actions
<b>Create a sense of urgency.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gather stakeholders in the early learning and elementary education community and share the urgency for change indicated by low kindergarten readiness score, stagnant reduction of achievement gaps on national, state, and local reading exams, and the large percentage of students unable to read at a satisfactory or proficient reading level.</li> <li>2. Build awareness that a gap exists between state initiatives and local actions which may be due to the state educational context set regarding accountability measures and the lack thereof in prekindergarten and primary grade levels. Furthermore, there is a gap between prekindergarten and elementary education efforts at the state and local levels.</li> </ol>
<b>Build a guiding coalition.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The local prekindergarten coalition board, the district early learning team, district elementary education team, interested school administrators, and teachers will gather to create a guiding coalition charged with building a proposal to the state regarding an ESSA amendment and accompanying professional development support plan.</li> <li>2. State leaders and their associated team members will create a second guiding coalition to begin the amendment process and develop a plan to execute the initiatives catalyzed by the amendment statewide.</li> <li>3. Both coalitions will work together to pilot the tools and practices that accompany the amendment.</li> <li>4. The state coalition will communicate with district leaders across the state to develop a tertiary coalition that may also volunteer to pilot the initiatives.</li> </ol>

Strategies	Actions
<p><b>Form a strategic vision and initiatives.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The local guiding coalition will work together to form a strategic vision and share that vision with the state as their efforts converge. The strategic vision includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-informed leadership</li> <li>• High-quality student support</li> <li>• Supportive accountability</li> <li>• Increased Student Achievement</li> <li>• Two initiatives stem from the elements of the strategic vision</li> <li>• Create an evaluation companion tool that focuses an evaluator’s observation on the needs of early learning and primary level education as opposed to a uniform evaluation tool utilized across all grade levels.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Create a professional development plan for teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators on the new observation tool and differentiated professional development regarding reading instruction and developmentally appropriate practices. This plan will remain flexible and responsive to the capacity needs that are revealed through the observation process as it evolves.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Enlist a volunteer army.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Once the state and local guiding coalitions create the ESSA amendment outline, begin the development of the observation tool, and creates the professional development plan, volunteers are required to pilot the observation process and accompanying professional development sessions. The need for volunteers includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elementary school administrators with willing primary grade teacher participants</li> <li>• Directors of community preschools and willing teacher participants</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

Strategies	Actions
<p><b>Enable action by removing barriers.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The barrier of time is removed through multiple offerings of professional development and flexibility regarding meetings of the guiding coalitions and volunteers. District leaders can also prioritize professional development topics during days devoted to teacher and administrator trainings can also eradicate time issues.</li> <li>2. District and state leaders can overcome barriers of funding by fully understanding the use and limitations of federal funds, prioritizing local funds, and responsible use of grant funding.</li> <li>3. Transparency with the union and involvement of union members in the volunteer army will increase understanding of purpose and develop a partnership.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Generate short-term wins.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Short-term wins using the new observational tool and participating in professional development may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased empowerment of administrators in their ability to give specific feedback to prekindergarten and primary grade teachers</li> <li>• Increased willingness of teachers to accept feedback tailored to their needs</li> <li>• Student academic and behavior data may show improvement</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<p><b>Sustain acceleration.</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consistent communication between the state and local guiding coalitions as the local coalition pilots and monitors the new observation tool and the state coalition finalizes the tool for state-wide expansion in connection the ESSA amendment. The state coalition will keep consistent contact with all district leaders.</li> <li>2. Sustained, flexible, and responsive professional development efforts to prepare administrators to use the observation tool and give actionable feedback, as well as for teachers, in order to meet the needs of their young students.</li> <li>3. Constant communication with key stakeholders on progress of the pilot to overcome barriers and maintain momentum.</li> </ol>

Strategies	Actions
<b>Institute change.</b>	1. State leaders will now require a measure of school quality in regard to prekindergarten and primary grade education on the ESSA plan for accountability. The accountability measure will encourage school and district leaders to focus on these grade levels and provide actionable, high-quality feedback to teachers. Teachers and administrators will receive differentiated professional development opportunities to build their capacity to productively execute this change.