

ABBIE LIEBERMAN AND LAURA BORNFREUND

BUILDING STRONG READERS IN MINNESOTA

PREK–3RD GRADE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT CHILDREN'S
LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

About the Authors



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Reforming Early Education, Birth Through Third Grade

State and Local Reports

From 2015 through 2016, the Early Education Initiative will be producing a series of reports from states and localities across the United States to provide an inside look at efforts to support children's learning from infancy and extending into the early grades. Access to the reports is available through Atlas (atlas.newamerica.org), the data and analysis tool designed for New America's Education Policy Program. Reports are forthcoming, or have already been published, in the following geographic areas.

A report that provides analysis and ranks all 50 states and Washington, DC on progress in advancing early education policies will be published in November 2015.



The San Francisco Unified School District

Focused on aligning teaching and learning across grade levels.

The David Douglas School District in Portland, OR

Focused on supporting dual language learners' linguistic and academic development.

California

Focused on improving the workforce.



Massachusetts

Focused on helping children achieve success in literacy.



Minnesota

Focused on helping children achieve success in literacy.

San Antonio, TX

Focused on supporting dual language learners' linguistic and academic development.

**District of Columbia
Public Schools in
Washington, DC**

Focused on supporting dual language learners' linguistic and academic development.

INTRODUCTION

In a large, colorful classroom at Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, student artwork and posters displaying the alphabet and sight words line the walls. There is a reading corner and a dramatic play area in the back of the room. Kindergarteners sit on a rug in the middle of the room, staring up at their teacher, squirming in their seats, and raising their hands as high as they can, eager to answer her question.

“What sound does popcorn make?” the teacher asks. One lucky kindergartener responds, “Pop!” The teacher asks the students to say it together as she writes the word three times on her easel. “Pop, pop, pop!” she reads. Excitedly the students repeat, “Pop, pop, pop!”, nearly jumping out of their seats. The teacher is enthusiastic and attentive, keeping the students actively engaged. There is also an assistant teacher in the classroom, ready to attend to any student who has trouble staying on task. The class is writing a poem together, and afterward each student will write his or her own. This is part of the district-wide literacy curriculum that builds on what students learned in pre-k and prepares them for first grade and beyond. Because all kindergarteners in Saint Paul are enrolled in full-day programs, they are able to spend two-and-a-half hours of the day, uninterrupted, devoted to literacy.

Activities during the literacy block include whole group and small group instruction, literacy centers, listening, and writing activities. For most of these students, this is not their first experience in a school setting, since Obama Elementary also offers high-quality, full-day pre-K.

While the poetry lesson at Obama Elementary is what ideal instruction looks like for every kindergartener, it is not the experience of every student in Minnesota. Leaders at Obama Elementary have a strategy for alignment in the early years, specifically pre-K through third grade. In collaboration with the Human Capital Research Collaborative¹ at the University of Minnesota, they are creating a strong educational foundation that will help students read on grade level by the end of third grade, which is highly predictive of future success. The first eight years of learning lay a critical foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional skills on which the entirety of future learning rests. Children who do not have a firm foundation by the end of early childhood are at high risk for later educational failure and negative life outcomes. This paper explores how Minnesota’s pre-K through third grade education policies are helping or hindering the ability of school districts, schools, and teachers to ensure that all children are on track to read on grade level by the end of third grade.

BACKGROUND ON MINNESOTA

Minnesota is one of a handful of states that is often recognized as a leader in public education. On the whole, students of all ages in the North Star State score well above the national average in reading and math on national and international tests.² Minnesota has been at the forefront of numerous education reforms, including the creation of charter schools, which are now found in 42 states and the District of Columbia. The state also won a competitive Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant in 2012 to strengthen and coordinate education for the state’s youngest learners. This commitment to education is paying off, at least for the

state’s more advantaged students, who continue to test and graduate at relatively high levels.

Unfortunately, Minnesota continues to have one of the worst achievement gaps in the country³ despite having one of the most progressive funding formulas. Stubborn gaps persist based on socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and level of English proficiency.⁴ According to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), almost 40 percent of the state’s students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, a measure commonly used as a proxy for poverty. In 2013, only about 40 percent of these



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Why PreK–3rd Grade Alignment?

A high-quality, cohesive continuum of learning, beginning at birth and extending up through third grade, can provide young children with the services and supports they need to read on grade level by the end of third grade. This is especially true for children from low-income families. Intentional alignment of standards, assessment, curriculum, instruction, and professional development in pre-K and the early grades of elementary school can help narrow opportunity and achievement gaps, while at the same time raising the achievement and developmental progression of all students. Numerous state-level policies can be instrumental in supporting this goal, including:

- access to high-quality early learning opportunities, whether they be in home-based, center-based, or public school settings;
- access to free, full-day pre-K and kindergarten;
- highly effective educators and leaders who have knowledge of child development and evidence-based reading strategies;
- policies that support the unique needs of the growing dual language learner population;
- laws and initiatives that specifically emphasize the importance of literacy and provide appropriate supports to districts, schools, and students; and
- opportunities for parent engagement.

While each of these individual areas can support students in reading on grade level by the end of third grade, none is a silver bullet. It is the coordination of policies and programs that leads to meaningful progress. Aligning early learning programs with elementary schools and increasing coordination between the early grades is essential to fostering long-term gains for children.

at-risk students scored proficient on state accountability measures for English language arts and mathematics.⁵

The state has tremendous ethnic and linguistic diversity, which is the main challenge of the state in terms of the achievement gap. White fourth graders in Minnesota were more than twice as likely as their black and Hispanic peers to be proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁶ Asian students fare better, with 44 percent scoring proficient compared to 47 percent of their white peers.

These gaps remain through high school, leading to significantly lower graduation rates for students from low-income families; students of black, Hispanic, or American Indian origin; and English learners.⁹ The disparities are evident in the Twin Cities and throughout Greater Minnesota.

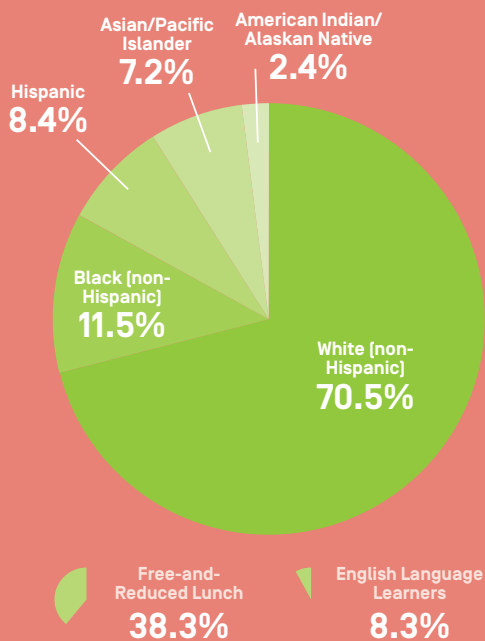
State policymakers are attempting to close this achievement gap and better serve the students whose needs are not being met in the existing system. Democratic Governor Mark Dayton, in office since 2011, has made education a focus. His efforts have spanned the education spectrum, from wholly funding full-day kindergarten to freezing university tuition. The governor has also been a strong proponent of strengthening early education in Minnesota, making school readiness and third-grade reading proficiency among his top priorities.

This year, Governor Dayton was presented with a unique opportunity: the state had a \$1.869 billion budget surplus due to economic growth and lower spending levels. He put forth a plan to devote approximately one-fifth of this surplus to creating a universal pre-K program for all four-year-olds in the state. However, the state legislature, which consists of a Republican-controlled House of Representatives and a Democratic-controlled Senate, had a different vision for this surplus and for the future of early education in Minnesota, one that included less funding and more targeted supports. This debate drew attention from policymakers around the country, highlighting the complexities involved in expanding pre-K.

While the decisions made by Dayton and the legislature matter a great deal, particularly in terms of funding levels, the state department of education's authority over policy implementation in public schools remains somewhat limited. Minnesota prides itself on being a local-control state, meaning districts and schools have a relatively high level of autonomy in education decisions. Accordingly, state-level policies rarely include mandates and are often designed to allow for significant local variation. While many communities are putting practices in place to help ensure more children are on a strong learning trajectory by the end of third grade, reforms are rarely aligned or coordinated from one district to the next. As a result, some districts are making greater headway than others when it comes to supporting children in the early years.

The picture is more worrisome for English language learners, the number of which is rapidly increasing in Minnesota, totaling more than 68,000 students in 2015.⁷ Latino, Somali, and Hmong students make up the largest minority populations in Minnesota public schools, and over 200 languages are represented throughout the state.⁸ Among English learners, only 17 percent were determined proficient on state accountability tests in 2013.

2015 Minnesota Public School Enrollment Demographics



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

PREK–3RD IN MINNESOTA

Officials in Minnesota first began working with funding dedicated to early grade alignment and early literacy back in 2002, when the state was awarded a Reading First grant by the U.S. Department of Education to implement evidence-based reading strategies in the early grades.¹⁰ This grant focused on kindergarten through third grade alignment and over time pre-K was incorporated.

In 2011 Minnesota’s literacy-focused work and PreK–3rd grade alignment efforts intensified at the state level. The state used a federal Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy formula grant of \$150,000 to create a state literacy team and develop a comprehensive literacy plan spanning from birth to 12th grade that aligned with state standards, including the early education standards, or the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs).¹¹ The state literacy team provided guidance on Read Well by

Third Grade, a comprehensive reading law that passed in 2011, requiring districts to develop their own local literacy plans to have every child reading on or above grade level by the end of third grade. Also in 2011, the governor created the Early Learning Council to serve as the “state advisory council on early childhood education and care” and provide recommendations to the governor and legislature regarding school readiness.¹² That year The McKnight Foundation sponsored a cross-sector team of state, district, and philanthropic leaders to attend the PreK–3rd Grade Harvard Institute where they developed a PreK–3rd Grade Theory of Action (see box), laying the foundation for the state’s alignment efforts.

The state used its \$44.8 million Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant in 2011 to strengthen early learning in four high-need communities, referred to as the Transformation Zones: White Earth Nation, Itasca County, Saint Paul’s Promise Neighborhood and Minneapolis’ Northside Achievement Zone. This work included expanding the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System, creating more informative and coordinated data systems, and supporting professional development of the early education workforce, and more.¹³ RTT-ELC initiatives were directed mostly at children between birth and age five, as this first round of RTT-ELC grants did not require states to focus specifically on PreK–3rd alignment. The RTT-ELC grant period was scheduled to end in December 2015, but MDE has applied for a one-year no-cost extension to continue its work through 2016. With the extension, MDE has proposed amendments to the original application that will redirect some remaining funds to PreK–3rd alignment efforts.¹⁴

During this time the state funded the expansion of the Minnesota Reading Corps, including in the Transformation Zones. Minnesota Reading Corps is an AmeriCorps program that has been in Minnesota schools serving students from age three up through third grade for over a decade through one-on-one literacy tutoring. Recent evaluations of Minnesota Reading Corps show that the program has had a positive and significant impact on student literacy from pre-K through elementary school.¹⁵

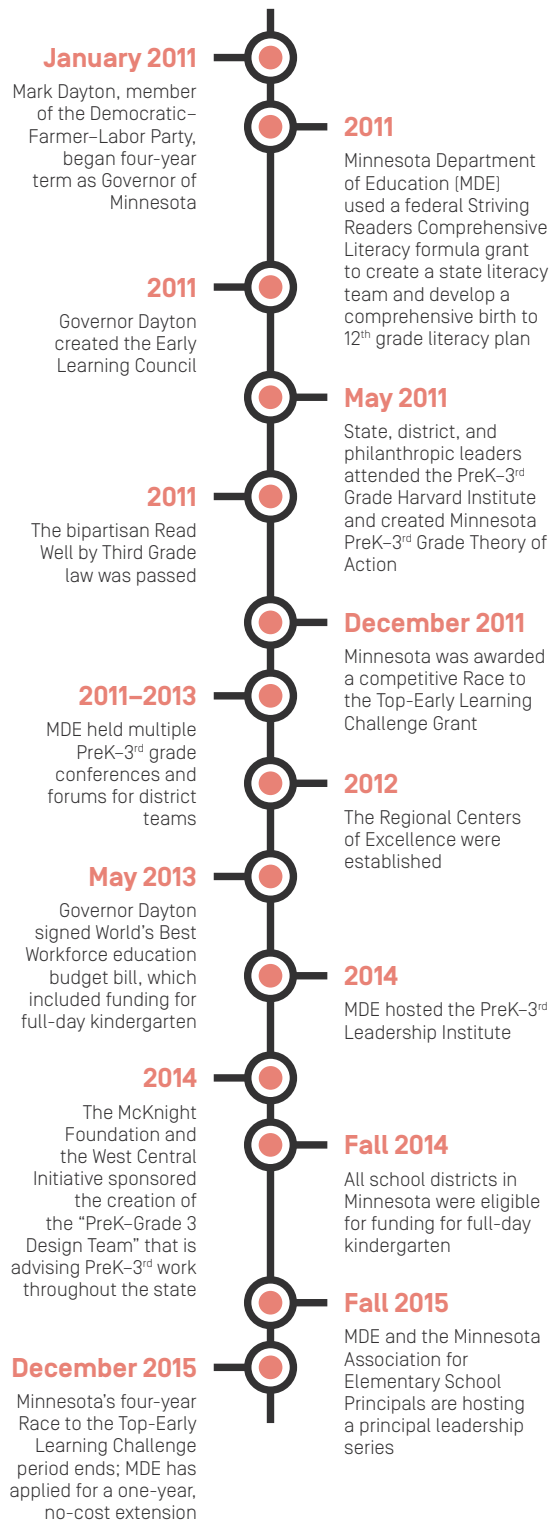
From 2011 to 2013, MDE held multiple PreK–3rd grade conferences and forums for district teams to introduce them to Kristie Kauerz’s and Julia Coffman’s highly regarded PreK–3rd alignment framework for school

Minnesota PreK–3rd Grade Theory of Action

- 1. Build statewide capacity for communities** in a partnership with local school districts, to plan and implement an aligned and systemic PreK–3rd framework in all current and future work.
- 2. Build statewide capacity for leaders** to provide on-going, job-embedded training and education for both early childhood and early elementary teachers, superintendents, principals, school boards, instructional leaders, early learning center directors, community organizations, and families.
- 3. Use Scientific Principles of Implementation**

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

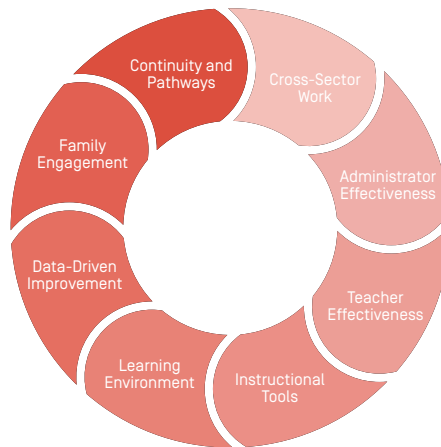
Figure 1
Minnesota PreK–3rd Timeline



districts.¹⁶ Kauerz is a leading expert in PreK–3rd grade alignment from the University of Washington and has been instrumental in Minnesota’s work.¹⁷ In 2014, she was the lead facilitator for MDE’s PreK–3rd Leadership Institute, which the department hosted in collaboration with the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association, United Way, and a host of foundations from Greater Minnesota.¹⁸ Teams of leaders from early childhood centers and elementary schools around the state attended a series of trainings and developed strategic plans to improve alignment in their communities. More training sessions are planned this fall, specifically for principals.

During this time, World’s Best Workforce legislation was passed, which aims to prepare students for college and careers of the 21st century by providing them with a strong educational foundation from pre-K through high school graduation (see page 9). This incorporates the goal of third grade reading proficiency with five major goals ranging from pre-K to college and career.

Figure 2
Framework for Planning, Implementating & Evaluating PreK–3rd Approaches



Source: Kauerz and Coffman, 2013

In 2014, The McKnight Foundation and the West Central Initiative, a foundation in Greater Minnesota, created a small advisory group of key philanthropists, advocates, and government officials termed the “PreK–Grade 3 Design Team” that is advising PreK–3rd work throughout the state. The group meets monthly to explore each bucket (see Figure 2 above) of the Kauerz and Coffman PreK–3rd grade alignment framework and develop policy recommendations.

Read Well by Third Grade and the World's Best Workforce

Read Well by Third Grade requires teachers across Minnesota to use comprehensive, scientifically-based reading instruction. The 2011 law also requires districts to develop local literacy plans and to assess students in kindergarten through second grade to determine if they are on track in reading. Pre-K does not need to be included in the literacy plan. In line with research that has found retention to be an ineffective method for improving literacy skills,¹⁹ Minnesota's reading law does not require students who are not proficient to be retained in third grade. Instead, schools must conduct annual reading assessments, notify parents when students are behind, and provide those students with appropriate interventions to help them get up to speed.²⁰ In order to monitor progress, districts are asked to report reading assessment data annually, starting in kindergarten, to the Education Commissioner. Districts use these data to inform staff development around literacy. However, there is no continuity in these data because districts can select their own assessments. MDE is planning to use extra RTT-ELC funds to build comprehensive assessments in kindergarten through second grade so that district data can be compared.²¹

While Read Well by Third Grade has increased state and district focus on third grade literacy, the law has done little to support districts to actually improve student language and literacy learning. The law does not provide any infrastructure or implementation support or any additional funding to districts to help them strengthen their assessments or other work.²² Districts are eligible to receive a small amount of money for every third grader who passes the state's reading test or shows growth in reading from third grade to fourth grade.²³ However, districts do not need to report how the money is being spent or even necessarily use it to fund their work in this area.

Governor Dayton signed the World's Best Workforce bill in 2013, which aims to ensure all students in Minnesota graduate high school prepared to succeed in college and careers of the 21st century. The program has five goals,

including “all children are ready for school” and “all third-graders can read at grade level.” The inclusion of school readiness and third grade reading in this program recognizes that a strong educational foundation is essential to success in later grades. Third grade reading proficiency is determined by a statewide test: the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA). School readiness assessments can be determined locally, but must align with the state's school readiness definition.²⁴ According to district officials, the World's Best Workforce has encouraged districts to think about pre-K and has increased the use of kindergarten entry assessments.²⁵ Districts must develop and implement plans to meet the program goals, and must report their progress to the Education Commissioner each year. The commissioner's office then identifies districts that are not making sufficient progress after three consecutive years and “may require the district to use up to two percent of its basic general education revenue per fiscal year during the proximate three school years to implement commissioner-specified strategies and practices.”²⁶

While implementation support connected to these laws varies across districts, Minnesota has directed its Regional Centers of Excellence to help struggling schools meet those goals. The six regional centers provide technical assistance and professional development to the state's lowest performing schools. Some of the centers provide job-embedded professional coaching, which can be an effective form of professional development if well implemented.²⁷ The centers have also helped schools design and implement the local literacy plans required by Read Well by Third Grade. This work was especially helpful for charter schools, each of which develops its own literacy plan.²⁸ According to the Minnesota Department of Education, in 2014, “eighty-three percent of Priority schools that worked closely with the centers are doing a better job today of closing achievement gaps than they were in 2011.”²⁹ However, it is difficult to attribute these results specifically to the centers, since there are numerous initiatives in place to support school turnaround at the local level.

HOW STATE POLICIES SUPPORT (OR FAIL TO SUPPORT) THIRD GRADE LITERACY

As discussed above, there are state policies that can help to build a strong PreK–3rd continuum and help ensure children are on the path to reading by the end of third grade. Certainly state efforts that are directly aimed at school readiness and building literacy skills play a strong role in children’s success, but other policies are just as and often more important. Minnesota has a number of state initiatives and policies aimed at positively affecting children’s learning trajectories.

Equally important is how those policies play out in local education agencies and schools. How do requirements around teacher licensing, for example, actually impact instruction and learning in the classroom? When it comes to literacy development what matters most is how teachers use language to extend students’ language, make connections across different subjects and experiences, and foster rich back-and-forth conversations. It is important for state officials to consider implementation needs when establishing policies or regulations, and include provisions to evaluate implementation and make the necessary policy changes as needed.

Minnesota’s Unique Approach to Pre-K

Minnesota’s 2015 budget surplus generated a heated debate among stakeholders in early education and drew national attention to the state’s unique pre-K landscape. The state currently funds pre-K through multiple means: Early Learning Scholarships, its School Readiness Program, and state funding for Head Start. Even with multiple programs, the state serves well under 50 percent of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K programs.³³

Over the last few years, Minnesota has been scaling up its Early Learning Scholarships program, a voucher program that helps families earning up to 185 percent of the poverty line send their children to school-based, center-based, or even home-based pre-K. To regulate quality, the scholarships can only be used at locations that have been rated by the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Parent Aware. The scholarship amount is higher for higher-rated programs, but only up to \$7,500, which falls below the average annual cost of full-day center-based pre-K for a four-year-old in Minnesota,

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) Funding Stream

Minnesota has a funding stream specifically for educating parents of young children. This was the state’s first initiative to promote early learning, beginning with parents. The pilot program launched in 1973 and has been expanding ever since.³⁰ Today, ECFE funding goes directly to school districts and they have discretion to develop programming services based on the needs of their community. ECFE funding may be used differently in each district, but program requirements include parent education, early childhood education, and parent-child interaction.³¹

ECFE funding is allocated to districts based on the number of children under age five in a district, regardless of family income level. This flat funding formula does not prioritize the needs of lower-income families who might stand to benefit the most from these services. However, state law requires ECFE programs to tailor their programming and services to the needs of families and parents prioritized in their community needs assessment. Districts can charge fees for ECFE services on a sliding scale, but cannot turn parents away based on inability to pay, giving them some ability to target services. In Bloomington Public School District, a suburb of Minneapolis, ECFE funds are used to run a variety of programs at the Pond Center, a community center that provides education for parents and young children. For instance, the Pond Center’s Family Literacy Academy, funded partially through ECFE, is a dual-generation program that provides parents with adult education classes, including English classes, while their children attend high-quality child care.³²

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\$11,000.³⁴ Prior to the 2015–2016 school year the cap was only \$5,000.

Before the scholarship program went statewide, it started as a four-year pilot program in Saint Paul that served 650 children and families. Evaluations of the pilot found that the scholarships had a positive impact on important school readiness indicators, including select literacy, math, and social-emotional skills. However, scholarships in the pilot program were much more generous and usually covered the full cost of attendance for families; they were as high as \$13,000 for full-time, center-based care.³⁵ The pilot also incorporated a parent-mentoring component through home visiting services, which could account for some of the positive outcomes.

Last year the Early Learning Scholarships only reached about 10 percent of eligible children in Minnesota because of limited funding. Instead of investing more in the scholarship program, Governor Dayton wanted to use approximately \$343 million in the 2016–2017 biennium and \$914 million over the 2018–2019 biennium to fund free pre-K for all four-year-olds in Minnesota. While some school- and district-level officials saw potential benefits to universal pre-K, the governor’s proposal was strongly opposed by many in the state’s early education advocacy community and both chambers of the state legislature. The Governor’s Early Learning Council also had reservations about the proposal. These entities all agreed that expanding the reach of the targeted scholarship program was a better route.

After significant turmoil, Dayton lost his fight for universal pre-K. The legislature and the governor ultimately settled on a \$17 billion education-funding bill that increased dollars for early learning scholarships to \$48 million, almost doubling last year’s allocation.³⁶ Instead of increasing the number of children who receive scholarships, the Education Commissioner chose to

increase the cap to \$7,500 so that families would have access to more service options. MDE has predicted that fewer children will be served than last year.

The bill also significantly increased funding for two other state funding streams that support pre-K: Head Start and the School Readiness Program. Minnesota supplements funding for the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs to provide home visiting, child care, and pre-K for children from prenatal to age five. Grantees that receive federal Head Start funding are eligible for supplemental state appropriated funds. Even with supplemental funding, Head Start only serves about eight percent of Minnesota’s four-year-olds.³⁷ The education bill added around \$10 million to Head Start over the biennium, a 25 percent increase from previous years.³⁸

School Readiness aid provides funds directly to school districts to prepare children for kindergarten. During the next biennium this program will receive \$31 million, up from only \$12 million.³⁹ Districts have significant discretion in using this money as long as they meet several requirements, such as using research-based program content and involving parents in program planning and decision making.⁴⁰ School districts can

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contract with charter schools or community-based organizations but rarely do. In the past, School Readiness aid has been extremely limited, in some districts only equating to around \$200 per student, which falls well short of what is necessary to adequately prepare a child for kindergarten. While in 2014 more than 28,000 children participated in programs funded with School Readiness dollars, program quality and intensity varies greatly with most school districts offering only half-day programs that range from one to five days per week and/or summer programming. For instance, the vast majority of children served by School Readiness aid in the Twin Cities attend pre-K for five half-days per week, whereas the majority of children in St. Louis County attend one to three days per week.⁴¹

Since neither School Readiness dollars nor Early Learning Scholarships fully cover the cost of providing pre-K, school districts offering pre-K must combine funding from multiple sources. School-based pre-K programs can accept Early Learning Scholarships, but the scholarship model can be difficult for schools to use because in order to begin offering pre-K, they need to commit time, physical space, and teachers to pre-K classrooms, but cannot predict how many (if any) children in their neighborhood will receive scholarships or choose to attend. Policymakers attempted to address this issue by creating two “pathways” for early learning scholarships. Pathway I scholarships go directly to parents as vouchers,

whereas Pathway II scholarships go directly to approved programs that receive the highest rating in Parent Aware. Through one of the state’s RTT-ELC projects, numerous districts have been awarded additional incentives to dedicate a portion of their federal Title I dollars⁴² to building pre-K programs.

Bloomington Public Schools’ pre-K program, Kinderprep, uses School Readiness, Pathway II scholarship dollars, Title I funds, and funding from the general formula. Kinderprep is a tuition-free, half-day, early literacy pre-K program serving at-risk four-year-olds in the district. The program was first offered at Pond Center, where the district provides family education services. In 2009, the district decided to expand Kinderprep to Washburn Elementary School because a school-based pre-K program could allow children and parents to develop relationships with the school earlier, potentially easing the transition from pre-K to kindergarten.

Since then, Kinderprep has slowly expanded to four of the district’s Title I elementary schools, but the program remains separate from the elementary schools in significant ways. Some schools include Kinderprep teachers in staff meetings with K–5th grade teachers, but the pre-K teachers continue to participate in professional development at the Pond Center instead of at the elementary school. Principals report limited communication between pre-K and kindergarten teachers

Charter Schools and Pre-K

There are 100 elementary charter schools in Minnesota, but only 20 of them offer pre-K because the existing system discourages charters from serving pre-K students. A recent report by the Fordham Institute found that “Minnesota’s climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is not hospitable.”⁴³ School readiness aid goes directly to public school districts in Minnesota, of which charters are not a part. The only way for charters to access School Readiness dollars is if school districts subcontract with them to provide pre-K. Charter schools with a four-star Parent Aware rating, the highest possible rating, can apply for Pathway II scholarships, but according to the Fordham report, no charter schools have completed this process.⁴⁴

Community of Peace Academy (CPA), a PreK–12 charter school in Saint Paul, used to charge tuition for pre-K on a sliding scale and accepted Pathway I scholarships from parents. According to the school’s Executive Director, Cara Quinn, “the [Pathway I] scholarships were complicated and labor-intensive” for both the school and the families. With the Pathway I scholarships, charter schools can only receive up to \$7,500 for pre-K students, compared to the \$11,429 per pupil it costs to serve K–12 students, and they cannot guarantee access to School Readiness dollars to supplement the cost.⁴⁵ As Quinn explains, “for a charter school like ours that conducts a lottery in March for the following school year, this makes enrollment planning difficult for both the family and the school.” CPA has had to reorganize its budget to fund pre-K but is still searching for ways to offset the high cost of offering a high-quality program.

Bloomington has managed to secure a Kinderprep spot for every eligible child who wishes to attend.

at some schools and pre-K teachers are paid less than higher grade teachers. At Valley View Elementary, pre-K is physically separate from the rest of the school: the newly added Kinderprep wing has its own entrance. Former principal Andy Kubas described Kinderprep as being “more of a visitor at the school and not part of the school,” and felt that further integration of the program would benefit children, families, and teachers. He would like to bring pre-K under the school’s umbrella and break down any barriers between Kinderprep and the later grades. While the new wing of pre-K classrooms provides beautiful space for the students and sends the message that investing in early learning is a priority for the school, it also reinforces that Kinderprep is separate from the other grades.

Whether in the elementary school building or at the Pond Center, Kinderprep has made big strides in preparing Bloomington children for kindergarten. Even though the program only runs for two-and-a-half hours per day, evaluation shows that Kinderprep students score higher on both literacy and math on the Early Kindergarten Assessment (EKA) than their peers who did not attend Kinderprep.⁴⁶ It is difficult to quantify the social benefits of pre-K, but teachers in the later grades report fewer behavioral challenges for children who attended Kinderprep.

Limited state funding is a major barrier to Bloomington’s work. The district only receives about \$160 per student from School Readiness aid and Kinderprep costs approximately \$4,800 per student, even as a half-day program. However, Bloomington has managed to secure a Kinderprep spot for every eligible child who wishes to attend.

Of all Minnesota’s school districts, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) has one of the most comprehensive public pre-K systems in terms of access and alignment. Like Bloomington, the district uses federal Title I funds to expand access, which is prioritized for children from low-

income families, dual language learners, and those who qualify for special education services. In the 2014–2015 school year, 32 out of 41 schools offered pre-K in SPPS, but there were only seven full-day classrooms. While SPPS serves a greater proportion of four-year-olds than most districts, over 300 students are on the waitlist for pre-K at any given time.⁴⁷ The district has been trying to generate slots, but has also made quality and alignment top priorities. SPPS pre-K teachers are required to have bachelor’s degrees and Early Childhood Education licenses; higher education and specialized training in early childhood can give teachers the content knowledge and pedagogy needed to effectively educate young children. To support high-quality teaching, pre-K teachers in SPPS work with a coach at least twice per month; embedded, differentiated professional development is offered to all teachers.⁴⁸ According to Teajai Anderson Schmidt, Assistant Director, Office of Teaching and Learning for SPPS, “77 percent of children who attend pre-K at a school remain at that school for kindergarten, providing continuity for families, teachers, and children.”⁴⁹

Five Saint Paul schools have pre-K programs modeled after the renowned Child-Parent Center Education Program that has been in Chicago Public Schools since the 1960s.⁵⁰ Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary School is one of those schools. Arthur Reynolds, Human Capital Research Collaborative Co-Director, and a team of partners at the University of Minnesota received a five-year federal Investing in Innovation, or “i3,” grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand and revise the comprehensive early education program that supports children from low-income families from pre-K through third grade. Termed the Midwest Child-Parent Center (MCPC) Program, initial evaluation has found the expansion to be effective at improving children’s literacy skills.⁵¹

The program’s impressive outcomes can be attributed to its structure. MCPC children attend full-day, developmentally appropriate, language-rich, activity-based pre-K at ages three or four.⁵² MCPC teachers must have a bachelor’s degree, the adult-to-child ratio is two adults to 17 three- and four-year-olds, and there is an emphasis on parent engagement. From kindergarten through third grade, the MCPC program provides “reduced class sizes, teacher aids for each class, continued parent involvement opportunities, and enriched classroom environments.”⁵³ SPPS has invested significant time and resources—including matching funding for full-day pre-K, Title I funds, and professional development—to make MCPC a true PreK–3rd intervention.

Realizing the potential of this model, state policymakers applied for a federal Preschool Development Grant to scale up elements of the MCPC model. The proposal was not funded.⁵⁴

In addition to the MCPC model, two Saint Paul schools are implementing a comprehensive PreK–3rd approach as part of The McKnight Foundation Pathways Schools Initiative, a partnership with the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute. The goal of this work is to improve third grade literacy. Participating schools have full-day pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and developmentally appropriate and aligned instruction and assessment from pre-K through 3rd grade. The McKnight Foundation provides Pathways Schools with a suite of supports, including coaches who work with school leaders to identify areas for improvement.⁵⁵ The McKnight Foundation supports five additional Pathways Schools in the state.

Saint Paul and Bloomington are arguably among the leaders when it comes to districts offering pre-K in Minnesota. All districts can receive limited School Readiness funding, but it has to be braided with other funding, such as the scholarships, in order to

provide high-quality pre-K. School leaders feel that the application process for the Pathway I scholarships can be difficult for non-English speaking families and undocumented families who may have a hard time navigating the system or be reluctant to fill out the application.⁵⁶ The structure of the Pathway II model is more school-friendly, but is still difficult to navigate. Despite these challenges, the scholarship model plays an integral role in keeping high-quality center-based, home-based, or family providers in business.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

The effectiveness of Minnesota’s Early Learning Scholarships program depends largely on the quality of Parent Aware, the state’s QRIS. The purpose of Parent Aware, and QRIS in general, is twofold: to accurately assess the quality of childcare and early education programs and to help these programs improve their services. By rating programs on a scale of one to four stars, Parent Aware can empower parents to make more informed decisions about where they send their children for child care and pre-K.

White Earth Nation’s Scholarship Design

White Earth Nation, the largest tribal nation in Minnesota, received \$1.2 million for Early Learning Scholarships through RTT-ELC. With this funding, it was able to design the scholarship program to meet the needs of its community. Its scholarships are prioritized for children in families earning up to 200 percent of the poverty line, who are in foster care, receive child care assistance, or are eligible for Head Start. Children can receive scholarships from birth to age five, which allows for continuity of care. The scholarship amount is not capped, allowing recipients to attend whichever program best fits their needs without worrying about the cost.

White Earth policymakers wanted to empower parents with the scholarships beyond just letting them choose the right early learning program for their children. Parents are required to attend two early childhood classes per year; in the past these classes have focused on brain development, social-emotional development, parent involvement, and literacy. The staff always gives away books, provides food, and offers child care during these events. According to Mary Metelak, White Earth Early Learning Scholarship Coordinator, parents were reluctant at first, but now “attendance is high and parents are excited to be there.” Parents also have access to mentors and receive packets every month containing developmentally appropriate activities to do with their children. One hundred and eighty five children have received scholarships in White Earth, and 64 percent of the children awarded scholarships were not previously in any type of early childhood program.

The White Earth community reports that the scholarship program has not only made high-quality pre-K more accessible for families and increased kindergarten readiness for children, but has also had dual-generation benefits. White Earth reports that parents who received scholarships had less job turnover, were able to work more hours, and could accept jobs that they would not have been able to without access to full-time, tuition-free pre-K.⁵⁷

Minnesota’s 2012 RTT-ELC grant supported the expansion of Parent Aware, and as of January 2015, the tool was available statewide. An increasing number of programs throughout the state are joining Parent Aware; all school-based programs and all Head Start programs now have a star rating. According to a recent evaluation, around 80 percent of eligible programs still did not have a star-rating at the end of 2014. This number reflects the large number of family providers that have not yet joined.⁵⁸

There are two ways that programs can receive a Parent Aware rating: through the intensive full-rating pathway or through the Accelerated Pathway to Rating (APR) process. Accredited child care centers,⁵⁹ accredited family providers, Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education programs, and school-based pre-K are all eligible for the accelerated APR process because their standards are already closely aligned with the Parent Aware standards.⁶⁰

Table 1
Paths to Receiving a Parent Aware Rating

	Full-Rating Pathway	Accelerated Pathway to Rating [APR]
Eligible Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-accredited center-based programs • Non-accredited home-based programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accredited child care centers⁶¹ • Accredited family providers • Head Start • Early Head Start • Early Childhood Special Education programs • School-based pre-K
Time from Application to Rating⁶²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 to 12 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 to 8 weeks

While 75 percent of APR-eligible programs have completed the APR process, only eight percent of programs eligible for the full-rating pathway have received a star-rating.⁶³ Earning a star-rating takes about six to eight weeks for APR-eligible programs, compared to six to 12 months for programs going through the full-rating pathway.⁶⁴ Earning a three- or four-star rating can take some programs up to two-and-a-half years through the full-rating pathway.⁶⁵ This is significantly longer than most other states’ QRIS timelines.⁶⁶ In a 2014 survey, 28 percent of non-rated programs reported that going through the full-rating pathway was “not worth the investment of their time.” However, the primary reason for choosing not to undergo the full-rating process was that providers did not need to attract families to their programs. The number of programs rated by Parent Aware has grown rapidly over the past two years. However, there is still much work to be done, as Parent Aware has had limited success reaching most eligible non-accredited center-based and home-based programs,

which make up the vast majority of early education options in Minnesota.⁶⁷ This leaves some families, especially those in rural areas where there are not many center-based options, with limited or no access to Parent Aware- rated programs.

Nonprofit organizations are working to increase the number of Parent Aware-rated programs in Minnesota, specifically these non-accredited programs that have been slower on the uptake. Think Small provides coaching, financial resources, and materials to licensed family child care providers and community-based organizations in the Twin Cities. Recently, Think Small has been focusing on reaching new immigrant providers. The organization has made progress: 82 percent of Parent Aware-rated family care providers in Minneapolis and Saint Paul are providers of color, many of whom are recent immigrants, representing 10 different languages.⁶⁸ Think Small has hired a diverse coaching staff to train and assist community providers in multiple languages.

The demographics of the child care providers are reflective of the children they serve, which is rarely the case when children enter Minnesota public schools, where 96 percent of teachers are white.⁶⁹ According to Think Small President Barbara Yates, “these family providers are able to provide culturally-relevant child care to children in the Twin Cities, which is important. We are helping add elements of academic quality to culturally relevant child care.”

Nonprofit organizations are working to increase the number of Parent Aware-rated programs in Minnesota, specifically these non-accredited programs that have been slower on the uptake. Think Small provides coaching, financial resources, and materials to licensed family child care providers and community-based organizations in the Twin Cities.

In Greater Minnesota, the Northland Foundation has created the Parent Aware Pathways Program with funding from the Mardag Foundation and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation. The organization is helping to engage as many family and center-based pre-K providers as possible by offering free or subsidized trainings that will help them to earn a star rating. Attendance at trainings is high and the organization has received positive feedback from participants who report that they are learning important information about child development and how to professionalize the early education workforce. Lynn Haglin, Vice President of the Northland Foundation, explains that a Parent Aware star rating “is an indication to parents that the program has gone above and beyond licensing requirements. The banner in the facility says ‘I am a star rated program’

and doesn’t say how many stars. When the program has a star rating of any level, it demonstrates to parents the commitment of the child care program to offer quality care.”

While QRISs across the country have continued to grow, there has been little research done on the systems and there is no evidence yet that the ratings are actually connected to child outcomes.⁷⁰ However, the Parent Aware Ratings incorporate many of the evidence-based indicators of quality identified by other national researchers as the practices in preschool programs that are most predictive of kindergarten-readiness.⁷¹ While the recent evaluation of Parent Aware finds that early education programs are improving and parents find the resources helpful and easy to use, tangible evidence is not yet available to determine whether a higher rating in Parent Aware is associated with sustained cognitive or noncognitive gains for children.⁷² A validation study to determine whether Parent Aware’s tiers are related to school readiness outcomes is required by the RTT-ELC grant and is expected to be released later this year.

The Transition to Full-Day Kindergarten

Access to tuition-free, full-day kindergarten is another key step in successful PreK–3rd grade alignment. Kindergarten is the year in which children transition into the traditional K–12 education system. As one principal in a Minnesota focus group put it, “I believe kindergarten and pre-K are a dress rehearsal for life, a dress rehearsal for your entire academic experience . If we get it right in those early grades then children are not wandering around wondering ‘what does it mean to be a student?’”

Research shows that full-day kindergarten is associated with improved literacy skills and that access to full-day programs can shrink the achievement gap.⁷³ While more time is not necessarily synonymous with higher quality, full-day programs do allow more opportunities for high-quality interactions between teachers and children, which are necessary for learning . In programs operating less than three hours each day, teachers do not have sufficient time to develop the whole child *and* adequately prepare her for first grade.

Like the majority of states, Minnesota does not require districts to offer full-day kindergarten. However, in 2013 Governor Dayton signed a bill that made full-day kindergarten funding available to all districts that wished to participate. In the 2014–2015 school year, 99.6 percent of Minnesota kindergartners attended a full-day program;



only one public elementary school in the state did not offer free full-day kindergarten.⁷⁴ While the minimum length of the kindergarten school day can be shorter than first grade,⁷⁵ it is funded at the same level as the later grades.

Previously, districts only received half-day funding and they were allowed to charge parents tuition for full-day services, making full-day programs less accessible for children from low-income families who stand to benefit the most. As one Minnesota principal explained in a New America focus group convened in April 2015, “basically we were creating or exacerbating the achievement gap. People who couldn’t afford it got half as much kindergarten. People who could afford it got all day, every day. So by the end of kindergarten we had to act like that was okay, but realistically we are creating the gap.” Many districts, including Bloomington, tried to mitigate this problem by offering a free full-day for children from low-income families and charging tuition for more affluent families.

Providing funding to all districts for full-day kindergarten was an important step in the right direction for aligning pre-K through third grade. Some districts, like Saint Paul Public Schools, were already offering full-day kindergarten before Governor Dayton increased funding. All Saint Paul students have had access to full-day kindergarten for over ten years. Kindergarten in Saint Paul is aligned with the later grades and includes a two-and-a-half hour literacy block, small group instruction, and the use of formative assessments, all of which are associated with better student outcomes.⁷⁶ For Saint Paul and other school districts and schools already offering free full-day kindergarten to all students, the state-level investment freed up funding that the schools were then able to direct to other services.

As one principal in a Minnesota focus group put it, “I believe kindergarten and pre-K are a dress rehearsal for life, a dress rehearsal for your entire academic experience.”

While more time is not necessarily synonymous with higher quality, full-day programs do allow more opportunities for high-quality interactions between teachers and children, which are necessary for learning.

In districts and schools where full-day services were not previously offered, the 2014–2015 school year was one of transition. Schools experienced growing pains, especially in regards to physical space and the need to hire more teachers. Despite the challenges, teachers readily acknowledge the benefits. Kari Sickman, a kindergarten teacher at Bloomington’s Washburn Elementary school, explained, “full-day kindergarten is a more relaxed atmosphere than half-day. There is more freedom to extend lessons when children are interested. I was able to add in a writing component that we didn’t have time for before.” Teachers also reported more time for intensive group guided reading.

Administrator and Educator Preparation and Professional Development

The Minnesota Department of Education’s (MDE) Division of Early Learning Services has made PreK–3rd grade alignment a growing priority in recent years, and department officials believe that elementary school principals must be deeply engaged in these efforts. Principal participation was a fundamental component of the PreK–3rd Leadership Institute that MDE hosted in 2014. Teams of leaders from over 30 Minnesota communities participated in this professional development series. Two of the stated goals of the leadership institute were to:

- “Support and expand educational leaders’ knowledge of developmentally appropriate educational practices across the PreK–3rd continuum with a focus on sustainable implementation of an aligned PreK–3rd Grade

System through leveraging resources to build a continuum of high-quality early learning environments; and

- Create positive relationships and professional learning communities among early childhood educators and elementary school leaders and community partners in the communities served by Institute participants in order to develop common language and goals PreK–3rd grade.”⁷⁷

Strong leaders who prioritize and understand early learning are key to successful PreK–3rd alignment, and getting more principals on board with PreK–3rd strategies is a promising way to increase efforts. That is why MDE is working closely with the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association to host a five-day Principal Leadership Series in fall 2015 which will give more principals the opportunity to learn about Kauerz’s and Coffman’s framework as well as the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ “Six Competencies for Effective Principal Practice.”⁷⁸

Minnesota lawmakers have long acknowledged that it is important for elementary school principals to have a basic understanding of early childhood education. Minnesota is one of only a few states where licensure law requires principals to understand the developmental needs of children and to apply appropriate literacy

systems in their schools.⁷⁹ However, specific coursework on early childhood education is not required for principals, which is an area for future consideration. When principals have limited understanding of the early grades, there is a potential barrier to creating developmentally appropriate environments for students.⁸⁰

While principals, and their teachers, are integral to the success of school-based reforms such as PreK–3rd grade alignment, to sustain and expand this kind of work across a district, superintendent support and leadership is essential. The superintendent establishes the vision and priorities for the district and builds backing for those priorities. Minneapolis has had recent leadership changes. While new Superintendent Michael Goar appears to have taken interest in The McKnight Foundation’s Pathways Schools, time will tell whether the PreK–3rd grade efforts that have started will continue to grow and seed work across the district.

For early educators, the state offers two types of licenses: the early childhood education license that certifies teachers for birth through third grade, and the elementary education license that certifies teachers for kindergarten through sixth grade with the choice to add on a pre-K endorsement. Both licenses have a strong emphasis on teaching reading, and teachers applying for either license must pass a test on reading instruction in order to be approved for licensure, a requirement

School Leaders as Vehicles for PreK–3rd Alignment

MDE’s Leadership Institute was an important step to increasing principals’ focus on early grade alignment. In Greater Minnesota, each of the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations supported local leadership teams (which had to include a principal) in attending the institute. For instance, the West Central Initiative (WCI), faced with complicated logistics and the expense of getting an entire leadership team to the Twin Cities, decided to use technology to host institute sessions locally through the web and ITV-based sites. The local option paid off, with 17 school districts participating. Local teams received grant funds from WCI to help cover the costs of transportation, substitute teachers, and other accommodations. Afterward, WCI offered grantees another \$1,000 to continue to meet to discuss PreK–3rd alignment over the year. The grants were small in size, but encouraged principals to keep up with this work. The Northland Foundation, which serves rural northeastern Minnesota, took a slightly different approach. It has worked closely with the school districts in their seven-county region to support kindergarten transition programs and PreK–3rd alignment for eight years. After attending the PreK–3rd Leadership Institute in Minneapolis, Northland leaders decided to bring Kristie Kauerz to their area so that more community stakeholders could attend this leadership training.⁸¹ The Northland Foundation has also been offering \$1,000 grants to school and community groups to continue their PreK–3rd work. An April 2015 analysis found that most grantees are using the funds for professional development, especially professional learning communities.⁸² Anecdotal evidence suggests that these small grants are changing the way teachers think across grade levels, but it is difficult to measure effectiveness of these initiatives.

that only eight other states have.⁸³ The early childhood education license requires extensive knowledge of child development and has a deeper focus on how to teach in the ways that young children learn best. The elementary education licensing requirements include language on child development, but focus most heavily on content knowledge.

Strong leaders who prioritize and understand early learning are key to successful PreK–3rd alignment.

The two licenses have a significant amount of overlap between grades, and the vast majority of kindergarten through third grade teachers in Minnesota have the elementary education license. According to MDE data, just over 57,000 teachers held an elementary education license as of 2014, while only about 3,000 teachers held a standard early childhood education license. Many elementary school principals seem to have limited knowledge of the birth–third license or feel that it is limiting to hire teachers with this license because they can only teach certain elementary school grades. In a principal focus group held in Minnesota last spring, one principal said, “I interviewed four to five preschool teachers [to teach kindergarten] last year and interviewing them compared to a K–6 [licensed] teacher was drastically different. They were not prepared to go into the kindergarten classroom just based on their past experiences and what they’ve been taught in school and what they learned. They were not ready for that experience. I could tell by the interview.”

Based on the targeted education requirements for the early childhood license, teaching candidates should be well prepared to teach the early grades. While the elementary school license may make it easier for principals to move teachers across grade levels, it does not provide the same level of knowledge around early learning. As one Minnesota principal explained during the focus group, “I think that K–6 licensing is really kind of wild when you think about it. The [kindergarten] job is different [than the sixth grade] job.”

Preparing Children for Kindergarten: Aligning Early Learning Providers and Elementary Schools

The transition to kindergarten is easier for families, teachers, and students if children are prepared for school, which can mean everything from knowing how to tie their shoes to recognizing whether they are holding a book upside down. When four-year-olds attend pre-K in an elementary school setting or in a community-based program that works closely with the local elementary school, there is a natural opportunity for alignment with kindergarten. Because of the structure of Minnesota’s state-level pre-K investments, the majority of four-year-olds do not attend pre-K in a school setting, and many participate in informal pre-K settings or do not attend pre-K at all. Children who do not have a high-quality pre-K experience often arrive at kindergarten unsure of what to expect and behind their peers who have been exposed to more enriching environments.

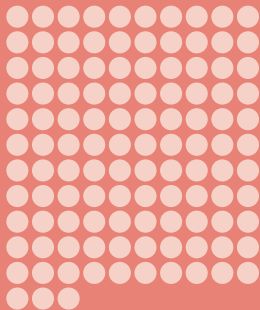
One way to ease the transition to kindergarten for these students is to strengthen the relationships between elementary schools and local early education providers, including center and home-based providers and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. Establishing relationships with community providers, particularly FFN providers, has been a slow process in many areas and policymakers have had to get creative.

In Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), the PreK-K Transition Team goes to child care centers and Head Start programs to teach providers about High Five, the district’s

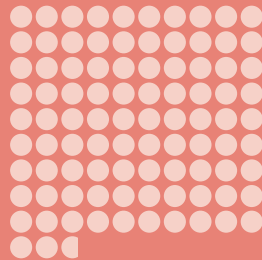
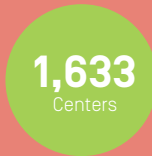
Because of the structure of Minnesota’s state-level pre-K investments, the majority of four-year-olds do not attend pre-K in a school setting, and many participate in informal pre-K settings or do not attend pre-K at all.

Local Early Education Providers in Minnesota

1. Family Child Care Homes



2. Child Care Centers



3. School Readiness Sites



4. Head Start/ Early Head Start Sites



Source: Ericca Maas [Executive Director, Parent Aware for School Readiness Minnesota]

half-day pre-K program that is free for at-risk children. According to Elizabeth Fields, Director of Early Childhood for MPS, the surrounding child care providers have been receptive. MPS has worked to develop relationships between child care centers in the community and elementary schools: the community providers and High Five pre-K teachers participate in shared professional development, community providers have come to visit the elementary schools, and vice versa. This gives both groups an opportunity to share their expertise and better understand what is happening in the other setting.

In Minneapolis, pre-K students are not automatically guaranteed placement at the elementary school at which they attend High Five. Parents must request kindergarten

at that school and if space is available the request is typically granted. For the two Pathways Schools that receive funding from The McKnight Foundation, the district has given pre-K enrollment preference to those students who live within the schools' attendance boundaries, in an effort to build a stronger pre-K-to-kindergarten continuum in those schools.

Not every school offers High Five, though, so a child may get a pre-K spot at school in a different neighborhood from where he lives. In some cases, families may want children to attend the rest of elementary school at their neighborhood school, or they may move or want their kindergartner to attend the same school as an older sibling. This kind of mobility is difficult to avoid, but

districts can be more intentional about establishing school assignment policies that make it easy for children who attend pre-K at a given school to stay there for kindergarten and beyond. Children who attend pre-K in one elementary school should be provided a spot in kindergarten at that same school.

Some districts are also working directly with families to ensure that parents are informed about school readiness. While child care providers and early educators play an important role in preparing children for kindergarten, the role of parents is paramount. Educating parents about kindergarten readiness is also important, especially for the thousands of young children in Minnesota who do not participate in any form of pre-K. School districts throughout the state are reaching out to families to teach parents about kindergarten preparation and expectations.

For example, Hermantown Community and Proctor Public School Districts, where more than 50 percent of students are not involved in any school-based early education program, have developed the Bridges to Kindergarten program to aid families with the transition to elementary school.⁸⁵ With a start-up grant from the Northland Foundation several years ago, these districts now invite families with four-year-olds to their local elementary school on three evenings in the year before kindergarten to develop relationships between the families and the schools, help children feel comfortable in the school, and educate parents about school readiness. The elementary schools host a social-emotional night in October, a literacy night in November, and a math night in January. Attendance is high considering that these events are completely voluntary: 50 percent of prospective kindergartners participate.⁸⁶ Parents spend the first part of the evening interacting with their children in a kindergarten classroom set up with developmentally appropriate activities based on the evening's topic. For the second half of the evening the children stay with early childhood teachers while the parents attend a panel discussion with the principal, an early childhood teacher, a Head Start teacher, and in Proctor, a kindergarten teacher. As Lori Fichtner, the Program Manager for the Proctor and Hermantown Early Childhood Program, explains, "we feel the more times a child/family can see their kindergarten surroundings and meet potential kindergarten staff, the easier the transition will be when they do start kindergarten."

Examples like Minneapolis's Ways to Grow and Hermantown and Proctor's Bridges to Kindergarten exist throughout the state, but this work is slow and small-scale. It is also inconsistent. Some communities have

been building these relationships for over a decade, while others are just getting started. MDE's PreK-3rd Leadership Institute did help to foster partnerships between early learning providers and elementary schools, but there is still no state funding source specifically for this work.⁸⁷ This leaves stakeholders—who realize the value of strengthening these relationships—to piece together funds from various sources, such as ECFE (see box on page 10).

MPS has worked to develop relationships between child care centers in the community and elementary schools: the community providers and High Five pre-K teachers participate in shared professional development, community providers have come to visit the elementary schools, and vice versa. This gives both groups an opportunity to share their expertise and better understand what is happening in the other setting.

Aligning Pre-K and Kindergarten with the Later Grades

State policymakers in Minnesota have had a limited role in aligning pre-K and kindergarten with the early elementary grades. While the World's Best Workforce initiative and Read Well by Third Grade acknowledge the importance of early learning and third grade reading, these laws allow for a significant level of local flexibility.

Minnesota has college-and-career ready standards that align from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and state policymakers are currently using RTT-ELC funds to revise the early learning standards, ECIPs, to align with the later grades. The statewide longitudinal data system collects student data beginning in pre-K, but only for children receiving early intervention or preschool special education under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. So, with limited data on children participating in pre-K programs and because districts are not required to use a common kindergarten entry assessment (KEA) or common assessments in kindergarten through second grade, data are incomplete and difficult to compare across districts.

Much of the vertical alignment in elementary grades ends up being informal and left to local school districts and philanthropic groups. In the absence of prescriptive state-level policies in place to support PreK–3rd alignment, progress varies significantly throughout the state. District leaders cited lack of funding as a barrier to more formal alignment work, as this work is time-intensive and many schools do not have funds specifically dedicated to this purpose. One area that multiple districts pointed to when asked about vertical alignment across grades was the “unpacking” of the Common Core English Language Arts Standards. Minnesota adopted the standards in 2010 and districts and schools have been familiarizing themselves with the standards over the last few years. Both Bloomington Public Schools and Saint Paul Public Schools are going through the standards one by one, using this opportunity to collaborate across grade levels and ensure that there is alignment between grades. There are also less formal ways that schools are aligning the early grades. For instance, Andrew Wilkins, Principal of Washburn Elementary in Bloomington, has his teachers use the “informal but powerful Big 5 method” each year. Teachers simply answer the question, “What are the five main things we need our incoming students to know?”

Much of the vertical alignment in elementary grades ends up being informal and left to local school districts and philanthropic groups.

When coupled with adequate professional development, the STEP tool can help teachers align their instruction across and between grade levels.

and relay the information to the teachers in the grade below them.

One formal tool that has been found to be particularly effective in aligning the early grades and improving literacy skills is the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) Assessment system, developed at the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute (UEI). The McKnight Foundation Pathways Schools are using the STEP tool to ramp up their PreK–3rd alignment. Through rigorous assessments, the tool provides teachers with high-quality, longitudinal data about student literacy progress from pre-K through third grade. STEP assessments reveal both school-level trends and areas for individual student improvement. Teachers and leaders at Pathways Schools work with experts at UEI to align and improve the quality of literacy instruction based on STEP data. The tool provides data about student literacy development, which inform how teachers plan instruction.

Schools have found the STEP tool helpful. Teachers start using STEP for literacy instruction in pre-K and continue with the tool up through third grade; the students go at their own pace until they achieve proficiency. All teachers receive training and extensive professional development on how to use the tool. The McKnight Foundation also provides funding for a full-time literacy coach who observes teachers in the classroom, provides feedback, and supports them with STEP assessments. When coupled with adequate professional development, the STEP tool can help teachers align their instruction across and between grade levels.

School leaders and teachers at Community of Peace Academy, a PreK–12 charter school in Saint Paul, are being intentional about early grade alignment since their McKnight Foundation grant began two years ago. Teachers there report that STEP assessments are more

rigorous and informative than the tools they were using before. The assessments are also time-intensive: the process takes two days, four times per year. But the efforts are worthwhile, teachers say, because STEP assessments provide detailed data regarding precisely which literacy skills a student has mastered and which areas she needs to work on. Because of STEP, literacy instruction at CPA is now data-driven. As the literacy coach at Community of Peace Academy explained, “there is an exit ticket every day to see where students are.” The extensive professional development and support allows teachers to use these data to meet students where they are and help them progress to the next “step.”⁸⁸

Using the STEP tool to teach literacy can be a drastic transition for schools. Jefferson Elementary, another McKnight Foundation Pathways School in Minneapolis, experienced challenges during the first year of STEP implementation. Many teachers were reluctant to change their teaching practices and transition to the new system. STEP is more time intensive and structured than typical reading instruction, and the right supports need to be in place, as well as the right climate at the school. Teachers need to be on board with the changes and willing to put in the required effort. While the first year of STEP implementation at Jefferson was difficult, Principal Bridget Hall reported that there was huge improvement during the second year, once many teachers could see the benefits of the tool. With professional development led by two literacy coaches, teachers at Jefferson are now more prepared to teach reading. The staff found STEP so useful that it even requested that STEP be brought in for fourth grade for students who still need reading support.

Addressing the Needs of Dual Language Learners

The dual language learner (DLL) population in Minnesota is rapidly increasing and discussion of the state’s early education system is incomplete without a focus on these students. Addressing the needs of this growing population is essential to effectively close the achievement gap in literacy. State policymakers have laid the groundwork to address DLL needs, passing the Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act (LEAPS Act) in 2014. This legislation aligns with the leading research, and is arguably the most

comprehensive law in the United States for DLL supports. The LEAPS Act views a student’s native-language skills as an asset. Accordingly, bilingual classrooms and language immersion programs are common in Minnesota’s public schools. Minnesota has also adopted the Seal of Biliteracy, further communicating the value of bilingualism to students, educators, institutes of higher education, and employers.⁸⁹

Perhaps the most important aspect of the LEAPS Act is the requirement for all teachers to know how to teach DLLs, which will necessitate changes in both professional development and teacher preparation programs. In a brief released last fall analyzing the legislation, Conor P. Williams of New America and Colleen Gross Ebinger suggest creating

a partnership between Minnesota’s Department of Education, district professional development coordinators and multilingual staff, and teacher preparation programs to build a staff development curriculum for [English learners]. This curriculum should address both pre-service and in-service experiences and the links between them. The curriculum could be disseminated through the Minnesota Department of Education’s Regional Centers of Excellence and through the Minnesota Center for Professional Development.⁹⁰

While state-level practices around the LEAPS Act are still unfolding, schools have found unique ways to address the needs of their DLL populations. For example, 30 percent of students at Community of Peace Academy in Saint Paul are DLLs. This fall the school will be implementing a co-teaching model, where every two classes will share the time of a third teacher, essentially giving each classroom one-and-a-half teachers.

While it is not a strict requirement, the goal is for every co-teacher to have an English as a Second Language License so that all students have access to a teacher with the specific skills and knowledge necessary to support their academic language growth and development. The school will also employ two English as a Second Language paraprofessionals to work closely with students who have minimal English language skills.



RECOMMENDATIONS

State-level PreK–3rd initiatives to improve early learning and close the achievement gap are still in the early stages of implementation in Minnesota. The state has built a framework on which districts can build that includes various pre-K funding streams, an expanding Quality Rating and Improvement System, funding for full-day kindergarten, a birth–third teacher license, professional development for principals, a comprehensive reading law, and legislation supporting dual-language learners. Staying true to its designation as a local-control state, MDE has embraced the role of nudging localities towards this work instead of implementing policies that mandate a PreK–3rd mindset. Therefore, many of the policies around PreK–3rd alignment have not trickled down to the local level unless there have been strong district or school leaders who prioritized this, as seen in examples throughout this paper. Based on our interviews with local and state officials, review of Minnesota policies, and review of research on improving children’s literacy development, New America makes the following recommendations to support an effective PreK–3rd grade learning continuum while also recognizing the state’s strong local-control structure:

1. Rethink Pre-K funding and quality. The Early Learning Scholarships are currently the main vehicle for pre-K for children from low-income families and this program should be reformed to better ensure access to high-quality programs. The program needs sufficient funding to both serve more children and increase the scholarship cap to provide adequate funding for families. Only around 10 percent of eligible children are currently served through the scholarship program, making Minnesota one of the worst states in

MDE has embraced the role of nudging localities towards this work instead of implementing policies that mandate a PreK–3rd grade mindset.

the country for pre-K access. The majority of children attending pre-K with scholarship dollars attend programs offered by non-public school providers. The Pathway I scholarships, which provide funding directly to low-income families for early learning programs, are difficult for schools to navigate. While the Pathway II scholarships, which provide dollars directly to early learning programs, are easier to manage, they are not available to all schools and still create unnecessary burden.

a. Remodel the Early Learning Scholarships to reach more children and better meet the needs of at-risk families. The new \$7,500 scholarship cap is an improvement from the previous \$5,000 cap, but is still not sufficient to provide access to full-day programs in many parts of the state. While all Parent Aware-rated programs are currently eligible to receive scholarships, only four-star programs can receive the full amount. The highest-need families rarely have the resources to supplement the cost of full-day programs, which are often a necessity for working parents. The scholarship cap should match the average cost of full-day early education programs in each region.

MDE should consider creating a sliding scale for scholarship eligibility to protect parents from unexpectedly losing all financial assistance with a small change in income and to ensure the scholarship amount accurately reflects the needs of the family. Scholarships are currently reserved for families earning up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line and families that cross this threshold are not eligible for any assistance. Families earning up to 150 percent of the federal poverty line—approximately \$36,000 for a family of four⁹¹—should be eligible for the full scholarship amount, and families earning between 150 percent and 200 percent should be eligible for a reduced scholarship. The current funding cliff may discourage families from earning more money because they could be scared to lose the scholarship and not able to afford the cost of early childhood programs on their own.⁹²

The foundation of the scholarship system rests on the validity of Parent Aware to accurately rate programs. The forthcoming validation study will

shed more light on the tool's effectiveness, and it should be updated based on the evaluation's findings and recommendations.

b. Provide the supports and funding necessary to encourage schools to offer pre-K programs.

In interviews with school and district leaders, numerous people reported that the scholarship model was complicated and confusing; instead, school and district leaders wanted an increase in School Readiness funding. School-based pre-K should not be the only option, but it is the right option for some students and schools. Schools that are interested in expanding pre-K should be able to do so without having to figure out how to braid various federal, state, and local funding together. The School Readiness stream is working well for schools, and for the sake of simplicity, MDE should use this funding stream as the main mechanism for public school pre-K in schools that agree to meet the quality indicators. To do so, the pot of money allocated for School Readiness will need to be increased. Right now, School Readiness funding is extremely limited and does not reach nearly far enough in most districts to provide full-day pre-K slots.

Since charter schools serve a significant number of children in Minnesota, School Readiness aid should also be available to charter schools directly so that they do not need to contract with a local school district. Additionally, MDE should start collecting better data on School Readiness aid to appropriately track the race and income of children being served and whether the local programs effectively prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.

A mixed delivery system for public pre-K should be the long-term goal for Minnesota and this means the role for school-based pre-K needs to be expanded. While high-quality pre-K can and does exist in multiple settings, there are benefits associated with school-based programs, largely because of the natural opportunity for alignment with the later grades. Over time, the School Readiness dollars should be increased to serve more three- and four-year-olds and emphasize quality, funding only those districts, schools, and providers that agree to meet certain quality indicators for pre-K as set by the state. As the School Readiness Program expands, the scholarship program should continue, but shift over for families seeking early learning opportunities for their infants and toddlers.

2. Minimize the overlap in grades between licenses and communicate the value of the early childhood education license to principals and prospective teachers. Currently, pre-K through third grade teachers can have either an early childhood education license or an elementary education license with a pre-K endorsement. The state should reduce the overlap between licenses so that teacher preparation and licensure requirements more accurately reflect the needs of children in this age group. Teachers should be able to choose between the birth through third grade license and the license that begins at third and goes through the middle grades.

MDE and educator preparation programs should also communicate the value of the Early Childhood License to both principals and prospective teachers. When done well, this license provides the essential elements to effectively teach children from birth to age eight, yet principals appear reluctant to hire teachers with this license because of concern that the requirements are not strenuous enough or that it will limit their ability to move teachers to different grade levels. Consequently, prospective teachers may fear that the Early Childhood License limits their job prospects. In reality, this license provides specialized knowledge that is critical for teaching the early grades. One way to strengthen this license and potentially ease principal and teacher apprehension would be to include similar depth in content knowledge as the elementary education license that is specific to kindergarten through third grade.

Strengthen elementary school principals' pre-service and in-service training requirements around early education. Too often, elementary school principals have limited or no previous experience with the early grades. The state should bolster pre-service and in-service training to ensure that elementary school principals have a full understanding of the importance of the PreK–3rd grades. As instructional leaders and evaluators of their teachers, principals should have at least some training in early child development to help them understand what appropriate, content-rich instruction looks like in the early grades. Currently, Minnesota licensure law only requires principals to have an understanding of children's developmental needs, which is the bare minimum.⁹³ Minnesota should look to Illinois as an example of a state that reformed its principal licensure law to include pre-K in the scope of licensure, by adding, for example, early childhood content on the licensure exam.⁹⁴

In-service training is equally important. The five-day Principal Leadership Series that MDE is hosting this fall will educate principals on the importance of PreK–3rd alignment. However, attendance is voluntary, meaning those who already prioritize or value early education are more likely to choose to attend. MDE should offer incentives to increase participation among principals from struggling schools that have not previously prioritized early education. MDE should also ensure that all interested principals are able to participate in the leadership series, even if that means hosting another session at a later date. Principals are central to the success of PreK–3rd grade alignment. High-quality professional development opportunities are one way to help them realize the value of the work.

- 3. Require consistent assessments or allow districts to choose from a short list of approved assessments for students in kindergarten through second grade.** Currently, each school district selects its own annual assessments for children in the early grades, and students do not participate in a statewide assessment until third grade. MDE is currently piloting a few kindergarten entry assessments (KEAs) and districts will be allowed to select from a short list of KEAs that are aligned with the state standards. MDE should consider a similar model for early grade assessments. If each district has a unique assessment, it is difficult to compare student progress across districts. Standard assessments would allow for better

data and make it easier to identify discrepancies from one district to the next.

- 4. Expand the use of strong assessments and data systems that span the PreK–3rd continuum to improve teachers' and school leaders' practice.** High-quality assessments in the early grades can provide teachers with the necessary information to support student's literacy development. For example, the STEP tool, used in The McKnight Foundation Pathways Schools, provides teachers and leaders with the data they need to meet student needs and improve instruction. STEP and similar tools should be available to Title I schools that wish to participate. Schools that have implemented the STEP tool for literacy in pre-K through third grade have found that it is immensely helpful in identifying student strengths and weaknesses, monitoring student progress, and informing teacher practices. STEP is also time-intensive and expensive compared to other literacy interventions. For the best success, buy-in from leadership and staff is key, so participation should not be mandated but encouraged. Minnesota Management and Budget has predicted that the state will face another significant budget surplus in 2016. Policymakers should consider increasing funding for high-quality PreK–3rd assessments in the budget surplus for interested districts and equip Regional Centers of Excellence to help with implementation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This is an opportune time for PreK–3rd grade in Minnesota. Governor Dayton and his administration have made early learning, namely the expansion of pre-K, a top priority. The Minnesota Department of Education is ramping up its focus on PreK–3rd alignment, bringing leaders in the field together with state and local policymakers to help realize their vision for a strong, cohesive early education system. Philanthropies in the state are behind and in many cases driving district and school PreK–3rd grade initiatives. While some districts and schools have actively embraced the PreK–3rd approach—or even led the way—others have been slow on the uptake.

Successful and meaningful alignment across pre-K and the early grades is not a one-size-fits-all process. It does require intentional coordination of standards, curricula, assessment, data, professional development, and instruction, all with the goal of supporting high-quality teacher-child interactions. The PreK–3rd approach

requires leadership from the school district and buy-in and leadership from principals. It requires building strong relationships: between early childhood providers and elementary schools, between principals and center directors, between teachers across grade levels, between families and schools. It requires commitment to evaluate what is effective at improving outcomes for children, investment to expand the efforts that are showing promising results, and flexibility to shift course in investment and policy to match.

The recommendations put forth in this report will help advance Minnesota's PreK–3rd work and help strengthen the state's efforts to build stronger readers. While there is still much work to do, there are many lessons that other states can learn from Minnesota's work. Minnesota is a promising example and can truly be a North Star for other states looking to improve the education experiences and outcomes of early learners.



Successful and meaningful alignment across pre-K and the early grades is not a one-size-fits-all process.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

- **Zane Bail** – Director of Development & Special Projects, Northland Foundation
- **Bobbie Burnham** – Director of Early Learning Services, Minnesota Department of Education
- **Karen Cadigan** – Early Childhood Specialist, Bloomington Pond Center
- **Victor Cedeño** – Director of Networks & Education Policy, Generation Next
- **Ann Clark** – Director of SE-Metro Regional Center, Regional Centers of Excellence
- **Terri Darco** – WCI Coordinator, White Earth
- **Lori Erickson** – Interim Assistant Director, SPPS
- **Lori Fichtner** – Program Manager, Hermantown/Proctor Public Schools
- **Elizabeth Fields** – Director of Early Childhood Family Education, Minneapolis Public Schools
- **Lynn Haglin** – Vice President/KIDS PLUS Director, Northland Foundation
- **Bridget Hall** – Principal at Jefferson Elementary School, Minneapolis Public Schools
- **Rae Jean Hansen** – Vice President of Early Childhood, SMI Foundation
- **Momo Hayakawa** – Program Manager, Human Capital Research Collaborative
- **Dave Heistad** – Executive Director of Research, Evaluation & Assessment, Bloomington Public Schools
- **Tom Holton** – Executive Director of Community Education, Bloomington Pond Center
- **Carol Huttner** – Director of Youth & Family Management Services, Bloomington Pond Center
- **Melissa Jackson** – PreK–3rd Literacy Coach, Community of Peace Academy
- **Nancy Jost** – Early Childhood Coordinator, West Central Initiative
- **Arianna Kiener** – Public Affairs Manager, MinnCAN
- **Jill Knudsen** – Administrative Intern, Obama Elementary
- **Andrew Kubas** – Executive Director of Le. Educational Services Center, Bloomington Public Schools
- **Erin Lease** – Research & Dissemination Manager, Human Capital Research Collaborative
- **Ericca Maas** – Executive Director, Parent Aware for School Readiness
- **Jonathan May** – Director of Data & Research, Generation Next
- **Mary Metelak** – Child Care Program Assistant & WEEL Scholarship Coordinator, White Earth Nation
- **Jon Millerhagen** – Executive Director, Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association
- **Mary Mischke** – Early Childhood Specialist, Bloomington Pond Center
- **Mary Otto** – Assistant Director of Education, White Earth
- **Cara Quinn** – Executive Director, Community of Peace Academy
- **Arthur Reynolds** – Co-Director, Human Capital Research Collaborative
- **Art Rolnick** – Senior Fellow & Co-Director, Human Capital Research Collaborative at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs
- **Gloria Rosso-White** – PreK–3rd Grade Content Coach, Wellstone Elementary
- **Jenna Ruble** – Former PreK–3rd Grade Program Manager, Formerly with SPPS
- **Teajai Anderson Schmidt** – Assistant Director Office of Teaching and Learning, Saint Paul Public Schools
- **Teri Steckelberg** – Early Childhood Director, SMI Foundation
- **Bao Vang** – Elementary Principal, Community of Peace Academy
- **Jodi Wambeke** – Early Childhood Family Education, Willmar School District
- **Andrew Wilkins** – Principal at Washburn Elementary, Bloomington Public Schools
- **Barbara Yates** – President & CEO, Think Small

NOTES

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