

# BUILDING SUCCESSFUL P-3 INITIATIVES

## Foundations and Catalysts for Systems Change



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: BUILDING SUCCESSFUL P-3 INITIATIVES

## *Foundations and Catalysts for Systems Change*

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### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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

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

These increasingly popular initiatives:

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

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

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

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

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

### FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

We have identified six foundations for P-3 work:

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

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

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

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

## Foundation 2: Dedicated, Willing Leadership

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

## Foundation 3: Effective Collaborative Teams

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

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

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

## HOW ONE COMMUNITY DEFINES P-3 WORK

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

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

## Foundation 4: A Shared Vision for Long-Term Success

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

## Foundation 5: An Informed Action Plan

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

## Foundation 6: Meaningful Inclusion of Family and Staff Voice

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



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

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

### Building P-3 Foundations

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

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

### CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

We have identified three catalysts for P-3 initiatives:

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

### Catalyst 1: Capacity to Support P-3 Work

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

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

### Catalyst 2: Intentionality

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

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

### SHARED DECISION-MAKING

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



### Catalyst 3: Ongoing, Data-Informed Shared Learning

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

### Utilizing P-3 Catalysts

P-3 initiatives in which the collaborative environment is energized by these catalysts can build more quickly on initial successes and move more quickly toward desired outcomes. They can also avoid false starts, failures and wasting resources on activities that are unlikely to achieve meaningful change. When ongoing attention is paid to these catalysts, P-3 work is more likely to

become a sustainable community-driven endeavor that achieves lasting changes in the systems that support families and children from birth to grade 3.

### CONCLUSION

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

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

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