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Early Childhood Literacy: Policy for the Coming Decade

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is now widely accepted that the early childhood period from preschool through third grade (P-3) is an especially significant—and arguably the most significant—period for learning to read and write in an alphabetic language.[1] Research has been notably productive over the past two decades in helping us understand both the nature of early literacy and evidence-based practices for instruction in preschool and primary grades. As a result, we know quite a bit about what to do: the Illinois Early Learning Standards, Illinois Kindergarten Standards, and Illinois/Common Core State Standards-English Language Arts are all aligned with current literacy research and ambitious practice. And yet, state, national, and international indicators suggest that we have not made significant strides in raising overall levels of early literacy achievement in the U.S. or in Illinois, nor in closing the achievement gaps among various cultural and social groups. To inform what can be done to enhance early literacy practice and achievement, the UIC Center for Literacy conducted a comprehensive review of research, policies, and practices, seeking to identify gaps and opportunities that would enable formulation of policy recommendations for enhancing literacy education across our systems of early care and education and elementary schooling. The findings indicated a need for the following key efforts in order to achieve the desired impact:

- coordination to achieve early literacy curricular coherence across P-3
- coordination of early literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment in preschool and school settings
- coordination of the early literacy content of teacher education programs, professional learning

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1   National Early Literacy Panel, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Panel* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2008); Shanahan, T., & Lonigan, C., *Early Childhood Literacy: The National Early Literacy Panel and Beyond* (Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes 2013).

policy BRIEF

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programs for practicing teachers, and the preparation of leaders of early childhood education

• coordination of home and school early literacy supports

• a coordinated early literacy research agenda for the children and families of Illinois

The recommended actions indicated by the analyses have implications across the spectrum of participants in early literacy education: state and city leadership; local schools and early care entities; parents, teachers and child care providers; researchers; and foundations and other funders of programs and research.

INTRODUCTION

The need for effective policies and programs in early literacy has never been more critical. Early childhood, particularly the period from preschool through third grade, is an especially significant time for learning to read and write. Research indicates, for example, that a good start in reading and writing usually means successful literacy achievement throughout elementary and middle school[2] and is also the best defense against achievement difficulties as one progresses through school and career.[3] Thus, what happens in preschool (ages 3-4) and the primary grades (K-3) significantly sets the literacy trajectory for the rest of one's life.

Research in emergent literacy and beginning reading and writing has been quite productive over the past two decades, giving us clear ideas about both the nature of early literacy learning[4] as well as evidence-based practices for instruction during preschool and the primary grades.[5] Yet, national and international indicators suggest that, during these same decades, we have not made significant strides in raising overall levels of early literacy achievement in the U.S. or Illinois,[6] or in eliminating the achievement gaps between various cultural and social groups.[7] The most recent NAEP results show that approximately one-third of children at Grades 4 and 8 achieve at the Proficient level in reading,[8] and less than 30% at grades 8 and 12 write at a Proficient level.[9] Internationally in reading literacy, the US ranked 17th in reading among the 34 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries taking the test in 2012, not differing significantly from the average score of all participating entities.[10] Between the early 1970s and 1990 the differential literacy achievement gap between White and African American or Latino/a students decreased markedly. Since that time there has been little

2   Phillips, L. M., Norris, S. P., & Mason, J. M., "Longitudinal Effects of Early Literacy Concepts on Reading Achievement: A Kindergarten Intervention and Five-year Follow-up," *Journal of Literacy Research*, 28, no. 1 (1996): 173-195.

3   Snow, C., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P., *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1998)

4   Scarborough, H. S., "Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory and Practice." In F. Fletcher-Campbell, J. Soler, & G. Reid (Eds.), *Approaching Difficulties in Literacy Development: Assessment, Pedagogy and Programmes* (London: Sage; Whitehurst, 2009): 23-38; Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J., "Child Development and Emergent Literacy," *Child Development*, 69, no. 1 (1998): 848-872.

5   Gambrell, L.B. & Morrow, L. M. (Eds.), *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (5th ed.) (New York: Guilford, 2015); National Early Literacy Panel, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Panel* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2008); Teale, W. H., et al.. "What It Takes in Early Schooling to Have Adolescents Who Are Skilled and Eager Readers and Writers." In K. Hall, et al. (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Learning to Read: Culture, Cognition and Pedagogy* (London: Routledge, 2010): 151-163.

6   National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Long-Term Trend Assessments* (2012). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltt_2012/.

7   National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Gains by Group* (2013). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/gains-by-group; National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Writing* (2011). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/writing_2011/.

8   National Assessment of Educational Progress, *2013 Mathematics and Reading* (2013). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013.

9   National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Writing* (2011). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/writing_2011/.

10   Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *PISA 2012 Results* (2012). Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/PISA-2012-results-US.pdf

policy **BRIEF**

progress toward lessening those differences.[11]

What is holding us back from making greater progress with early literacy education efforts in Illinois and nationally? The University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Literacy undertook a review of existing policies, practices, and research related to early literacy learning and teaching. Our findings show that a major issue is a lack of coordinated policy and practices for a comprehensive strategy addressing preschool and early grades (P-3) language and literacy education.

This lack of coordination has led to gaps in three important areas that need to be addressed in order to significantly move the needle on early literacy:

- Standards and curriculum
- Capacity of educational leaders and teachers
- Family involvement

To improve literacy achievement and build positive literacy dispositions among the children of Illinois and our country, leadership is needed to bring together the policy, education, funding, and research communities to address P-3 literacy in a coordinated, strategic way. We must recognize the necessity of implementing a true P-3 literacy continuum and not see preschool as something separate from elementary school. We must have the K-12 system work with

early education and care. We must increase productive family involvement in early literacy development. For, in many senses, we know what to do but have not been able to put in place policies for doing so effectively or doing so at scale across various entities that each currently play a role in the literacy education of our youngest children. This policy brief reviews the most current body of research on early literacy and makes five recommendations for action that can enhance literacy education across our systems of early care and education and elementary schooling.

Action 1: Consistently implement comprehensive early language and literacy standards and associated evidence-based curricula, instruction, and assessment, aligned from preschool through grade 3.

Illinois has recognized the importance of the early years in children's overall literacy learning trajectories, as evidenced in the 2010 adoption of the Common Core

State Standards[12] (CCSS) and the 2011 aligning of the *Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards*[13] with the CCSS. Such a policy can help promote a more consistent approach to literacy, which research has shown to be

Action 1 includes the following recommendations:

1.1 Ensure that the standards reflect the three critical areas of early language/literacy development: foundational skills, language and communication skills, and content knowledge.
1.2 Specify developmental steps across age levels for all standards.
1.3 Employ appropriate assessment instruments that will gather needed student literacy achievement information for all standards.
1.4 Identify appropriate curricula and instructional activities for all standards.
1.5 Use assessment data to appropriately support program quality improvement, inform student instructional needs, and identify early literacy intervention needs.

particularly important to strengthening P-3 education across schools and school systems.[14] This has resulted in a good foundation for early literacy, for while most states involved in the CCSS have worked to align curricula, materials, assessments, and professional development from kindergarten onwards, there has been limited attention nationally to such alignment for the preschool years.[15]

11   National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Gains by Group* (2013). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/#/gains-by-group; National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Writing* (2011). Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/writing_2011/

12   National Governors Association, *Common Core State Standards* (Washington DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

13   Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards for Preschool (3 Years Old to Kindergarten Enrollment Age)* (2013).

14   Patton, C. and Wang, J., *Ready for Success: Creating Collaborative and Thoughtful Transitions into Kindergarten* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2012).Retrieved from http://www.hfrp.org/content/download/4287/116636/file/ReadyForSuccess.pdf.

15   Hoffman, J. L., Paciga, K. A., & Teale, W. H., *Common Core State Standards and Early Childhood Literacy Instruction: Confusions and Conclusions* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Literacy, 2015)

policy BRIEF

Thus, the macro level structures for early literacy that have been put in place in Illinois provide a solid foundation; what remains, as indicated in this recommended action, is work at the implementation level throughout the state to ensure that the content, attention to developmental learning, assessment instruments, and the procedures that constitute the curriculum and instruction enacted in classrooms afford children the best chance for early literacy success.

1.1 Ensure that the standards reflect the three critical areas of early language/literacy development: foundational skills, language and communication skills, and content knowledge.

Literacy learning begins in the very first years of a child's life and rapidly develops through the preschool and early schooling years. Decades of research have shown that the roots of literacy form through children's earliest experiences[16] and span three broad,

but interconnected areas: foundational literacy skills,[17] oral language and communication,[18] and background/content knowledge.[19] The foundational skills associated with early reading and writing are readily recognized and widely taught in the early grades: letter knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, phonological awareness, and early decoding and spelling skills. These skills give children the tools to transition from emergent literacy to the conventional literacy skills expected in early elementary grades.[20] Children lagging in acquiring these skills often find it difficult to catch up later in school.[21] But what is equally important to note is that these foundational skills, while absolutely necessary, are insufficient for comprehensive literacy development.[22]

Oral language and communication are also fundamental to effective early literacy learning. As children hear and speak words, phrases and sentences, they build sensitivity to the sound system of language, vocabulary, and critically important

listening comprehension and speaking skills.[23] Oral language and communication skills have often been placed on the backburner of standards because the link between oral language and literacy is not always well understood.[24] However, low levels of oral language ability and poor overall language skills have consistently been linked to reading comprehension difficulties in third grade and beyond.[25] Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in particular are in danger of never catching up to their more advantaged peers if they lack strong oral language in their early years.[26]

Third, and perhaps the most neglected area crucial for early language and literacy learning, is the development of content or background knowledge. Language and literacy are tools used to communicate meaning – the depth and breadth of meaning communicated hinges on children's access to content, which forms the strong knowledge base from which comprehension and writing abilities

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16   Burchinal, M., & Forestieri, N., "Development of Early Literacy: Evidence from Major U.S. Longitudinal Studies." In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Vol. 3* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011): 85-96; National Early Literacy Panel, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2008); Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (Eds.), *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986).

17   Dickinson, D. K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K., "Speaking Out for Language: Why Language Is Central to Reading Development," *Educational Researcher*, 39, no. 4 (2010): 305-310; Farran, D., Aydongan, C., Kanyg, S.J., & Lipsey, M., "Preschool Classroom Environments and the Quantity and Quality of Children's Language and Literacy Behaviors." In D.K. Dickinson & S.B. Neuman (Eds), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Vol. II* (New York: Guilford, 2006): 257-268; Foorman, B. R. & Connor, C. M., "Primary Grade Reading." In M. L. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, E. B. Moje, & P. P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. IV* (New York: Taylor & Francis, (2011): 136-156; Lesaux, N. K., *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success Strategies for Improving Children's Language and Literacy Development, Birth to Age 9* (Boston: Strategies for Children, 2012). Retrieved from http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/0reading.html.

18   Dickinson, D. K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K., "Speaking Out for Language: Why Language Is Central to Reading Development," *Educational Researcher*, 39, no. 4 (2010): 305-310

19   Neuman, S. B., & Carta, J. J., "Advancing the Measurement of Quality for Early Childhood Programs That Support Early Language and Literacy Development." In Zaslow, M., Martinez-Beck, I., Tout, K., & Halle, T. (Eds.), *Quality Measurement in Early Childhood Settings* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2011); Neuman, S. B., "N is for Nonsensical: Low-income Preschool Children Need Content-rich Instruction, Not Drill in Procedural Skills," *Educational Leadership*, 64, (2006, October): 28-31; Wasik, B. H. & Newman, B. A., "Teaching and Learning to Read." In O. A. Barbarin & B. H. Wasik (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Development and Early Education* (New York: Guilford, 2009): 303-327.

20   Paris, S. G., "Reinterpreting the Development of Reading Skills," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40, no. 2 (2005): 184-202.

21   Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V., & Baldwin, L., *The Reading Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

22   Teale, W. H., Paciga, K. A., & Hoffman, J. L., "Beginning Reading Instruction in Urban Schools: The Curriculum Gap Insures a Continuing Achievement Gap, *The Reading Teacher*, 61 (2007): 344-348.

23   McKeown, M. G., & Beck, I. L., "Encouraging Young Children's Language Interactions with Stories," *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, 2 (2006): 281-294; Tomasello, M., & Farrar, M. J., "Joint Attention and Early Language," *Child development*, 57 (1986): 1454-1463

24   Dickinson, D. K., McCabe, A., Anastasopoulos, L., Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., & Poe, M. D., "The Comprehensive Language Approach to Early Literacy: The Interrelationships among Vocabulary, Phonological Sensitivity, and Print Knowledge among Preschool-aged Children," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95, no. 3 (2003): 465-481.

25   Storch, S. A., & Whitehurst, G. J., "Oral Language and Code-related Precursors to Reading: Evidence from a Longitudinal Structural Model," *Developmental Psychology*, 38, no. 6 (2002): 934-947.

26   Hart, B., & Risley, T. R., "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator*, 27, no. 1 (2003): 4-9.

policy **BRIEF**

build. Coupling early literacy and language instruction with the use of literacy and language to develop strong content knowledge will advance all three elements necessary for early and later school success.

The three-legged stool metaphor is apt for early literacy and language development. The structure cannot be supported by one or even two of these elements. Instead, all three need adequate representation in early childhood learning standards, curriculum, and instruction. Thus, the implementation of policies that support an emphasis on all three can help to ensure that all children have access to a fully developed foundation.

1.2 Specify developmental steps across all age levels for all standards.

The Common Core State Standards are unique in that end-of-school (i.e., College and Career Readiness) goals were established first, and individual grades' standards were back-mapped down to kindergarten. Aligning the *Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards* with the CCSS means that we now have early childhood indicators of what children should know and be able to do in terms of English Language Arts at each age/grade level from preschool through grade 3.

The standards documents claim they are "research and evidence based, aligned with college and work expectations, rigorous, and

internationally benchmarked".[27] In general, this is true about the standards. However, what needs to be kept in mind is the lack of empirical evidence of developmental steps articulated from K to grade 1 to grade 2 to grade 3 in the CCSS. Early childhood standards for the preschool years, like the *Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards*, have typically included some developmental benchmarks to guide teachers in identifying student progress toward mastery of standards as well as appropriate instructional activities to meet those benchmarks. Lacking a strong research base on developmental appropriateness, the authors of the CCSS consulted an independently identified group of literacy and early childhood scholars to identify particular early language and literacy standards at each grade level.[28] Although the authors of the standards were able to satisfy the experts with whom they consulted on developmental appropriateness, there are benchmarking questions and need for further clarity of developmentally appropriate steps across age levels for all language and literacy standards P-3.

The CCSS are ambitious standards that aim to prepare children to be capable, flexible and critically literate adults in order to succeed in the 21st century. The rising demands of literacy require careful effort to identify the trajectory of development through which children progress in line with achieving the intended outcomes of the standards, especially given the non-linear nature

Illinois can seize the opportunity to launch a coordinated effort to identify developmentally appropriate benchmarks (and) activities for instruction.

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27   National Governors Association, *Common Core State Standards* (Washington D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

28   Beach, R., *Analyzing How Formalist, Cognitive-processing, and Literacy Practices Learning Paradigms Are Shaping the Implementation of the Common Core State Standards*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Literacy Research Association, Jacksonville, FL (2011); Pearson, P. D., "Research Foundations for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts." In S. Neuman & L. Gambrell (Eds.), *Reading Instruction in the Age of Common Core State Standards* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2013): 237-262; Pearson, P. D., & Hiebert, E. H., "Understanding the Common Core State Standards." In L. M. Morrow, T. Shanahan & K. Wixson (Eds.), *Teaching with the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts: PreK-2* (New York: Guillford Press, 2013): 1-21.

policy BRIEF

of development in these areas during the early years.[29]

Illinois (and other states) can seize the opportunity to launch a coordinated effort to identify developmentally appropriate benchmarks aligned with the CCSS, as well as developmentally appropriate activities for instruction. Individual schools and districts may have already attempted to establish systems for guidance on developmentally appropriate benchmarks; however, this can lead to fractured and inconsistent instruction and assessment across a state system. For Illinois to realize the ultimate potential of the CCSS, we recommend the state coordinate resources to establish guidelines schools and districts can use as they implement the CCSS in P-3.

1.3 Employ assessment instruments that will gather needed student literacy achievement information for all standards.

Establishing developmentally appropriate benchmarks is a necessary precursor to identifying and employing assessment instruments that align with the ways young children develop as readers and writers.[30] However, with the increased demands for accountability, the assessment of young children in relation to learning standards has emerged as perhaps the most controversial aspect of the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.[31]

The current assessment demands at state and national levels point to the crucial need for identification and coordination of assessment instruments so that young children are not subjected to excessive formal testing and end up losing needed instructional time for the purposes of generating data that ultimately do not help teachers teach better.

Because young children acquire so many literacy skills and abilities between preschool and third grade, and because early childhood development trajectories do not move in a straight line and vary across different cultural and social groups, we caution against the implementation of strict age-based benchmarks and instead advocate for a progression framework that outlines a general developmental "roadmap" that provides teachers and parents with profiles of expected early literacy and language development in terms of broad and overlapping age ranges. This developmental roadmap would be aligned to continuum-driven assessment data that would depict children's current abilities and create a portrait of child learning that early childhood educators can use to inform the logical next steps in standards-based, developmentally-aligned instruction.

In other words, what are needed are alternatives to static checklists of "a 4-year-old child should be able to A, B, C," and "a 6-year-old should be able to X, Y, Z." Instead, we urge

that Illinois help early childhood teachers move closer to an "If a child can do X, we should next introduce Y" approach to decision making. This assessment model for young children supports the implementation of standards by early childhood professionals in a logical manner consistent with what we know about early literacy and language development.[32] Assessment must not live alone as a separate entity, but become an integrated component of all early literacy environments that intentionally create opportunities for early educators to make informed instructional decisions based on the gathering and interpretation of assessment data.

1.4 Identify appropriate curricula and instructional activities for all standards

Illinois/CCSS English Language Arts standards are not designed to specify the instructional activities teachers should employ in the early childhood classroom to address a standard. On the one hand, standards that include concrete explanations of classroom practices often restrict the robustness of what happens in a classroom. On the other hand, standards with little clarity are in danger of being ignored, reduced to simplified or 'dumbed-down' versions, or translated into inappropriate practices for young children like 'skill & drill' flashcards or overemphasis on memorization.[33] In seeking to build ambitious early

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29   See discussion of early development in 1.3.

30   Teale, W. H., "Developmentally Appropriate Assessment of Reading and Writing in the Early Childhood Classroom," *The Elementary School Journal*, 89, no. 2 (1988): 172-183.

31   U.S. Department of Education, *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

32   Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R.C., "Learning Opportunities in Preschool and Early Elementary Classrooms," In R. Pianta, M. Cox, & K. Snow (Eds.), *School Reading and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, 2007): 49–84.

33   Hoffman, J. L., Paciga, K. A., & Teale, W. H., *Common Core State Standards and Early Childhood Literacy Instruction: Confusions and Conclusions* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Literacy, 2014).

policy **BRIEF**

literacy instruction in Illinois classrooms, teachers would benefit from clear guidelines on how to identify appropriate curricula and instructional activities that are aligned to standards and reflect best practices for all three areas of early literacy (i.e. foundational literacy skills, oral language and communication, and background/content knowledge).

To this end, we recommend that a state-level process be developed to review curricula and instructional activities so educators can have access to reputable data on early literacy program quality. At the same time, we stress that this is a tricky issue for state policy. There has never been any evidence that a particular early literacy curriculum or one set of instructional activities is best for all children or all instructional standards.[34] And it is not possible for one program to meet the needs of all districts, schools, or classrooms across the state. Instead, policy can turn to research to establish a set of core components and practices[35] that constitute a high quality early literacy program. Such a set of guidelines could then be employed at the local level to enable informed decisions about which practices are best suited to the needs of a school or district. Once standards, curricula and assessments are aligned at the local level, teachers and district personnel can more clearly identify needed professional development and program improvement.

1.5 Use assessment data to appropriately support program quality improvement, inform student instructional needs, and identify early literacy intervention needs.

Illinois has recognized the need for supporting overall program quality improvement in preschool, committing millions of dollars to core supports and infrastructure systems as part of its Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, a central aspect of which is comprehensive child and program assessment.[36] A similar commitment is needed to coordinate the collection and use of literacy assessment data from preschool through third grade. This coordinated approach to early literacy assessment would include two major dimensions:

1. Collection and analysis of large-scale formalized assessment data that can be used for state- and district-wide evaluation of children's literacy achievement levels

2. Recommended classroom-based assessment instruments and formative assessment processes that teachers can use for instructional planning

Each of these dimensions will provide information necessary to an effective approach to early literacy that will then contribute to increased student literacy achievement. Formal assessment results can be

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34 For example, the What Works Clearing House examined evidence of effectiveness of programs intended to increase literacy skills but did not determine any one program to be more effective than others. See http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topic.aspx?sid=8.

35 National Early Literacy Panel, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 2008); Strickland, D. S., & Shanahan, T., "Laying the Groundwork for Literacy," *Educational Leadership*, 61, no. 6 (2004): 74-77.

36 Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, *Early Learning Challenge*. Retrieved from http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/OECD/Pages/EarlyLearningChallenge.aspx.

policy BRIEF

used by district and school personnel as gross indicators of program impact. Such results reveal overall achievement patterns across a number of dimensions of early reading and writing development (e.g., decoding skills, reading comprehension, writing, spelling) and can also be used to examine program effects at different grade levels or across schools. These overall early literacy results are also useful in communicating with the public. Since Illinois is using PARCC as the state assessment and accountability measure for the New Illinois Learning (Common Core) Standards in English Language Arts at grade 3, early literacy data collected P-Grade 2 should align with the PARCC. However, research suggests that the reliability of large-scale, formal literacy assessments before grade 3 is largely suspect and therefore, at best, an unwise investment of resources and at worst disruptive to instructional time that will benefit young children more.[37] Therefore, we recommend that literacy assessment efforts at P-3 be focused on helping teachers effectively gather and use assessment information that arises from the context of teaching and can be used to plan differentiated instruction.

Reliable classroom-based assessment information is necessary for all age levels P-3 because it, unlike the aforementioned large-scale, formal early literacy assessment results, can be used by teachers to plan day-to-day instruction for the individual children in the classroom. Policy should not seek to specify a particular set of classroom-based assessment instruments/procedures because current research evidence has not established a specific assessment regimen as contributing to enhanced student performance.[38] However, recommendations for the use of student data to plan instruction are well established[39] and early literacy program implementation evaluations have shown that teachers can learn to use student data about vocabulary knowledge, alphabet knowledge, and reading fluency to plan appropriate instruction.[40]

Currently, the practice of regularly using classroom-based, teacher-gathered literacy assessment data to plan instruction is grossly inconsistent across Illinois P-3 classrooms. Hence, we recommend that Illinois policy makers form a statewide task force that would create a plan for developing in the state's early childhood educators the

expertise to employ classroom-based assessment data in the service of improving early literacy achievement.

To implement this comprehensive early literacy assessment program, professional development will be necessary for many P-3 teachers. It is our conclusion that this investment can be a primary lever for moving the needle on early literacy achievement. We know that the instruction of individual teachers and school districts is influenced by assessment regimens;[41] an Illinois teacher workforce skilled in conducting and utilizing appropriate assessment data that arise from early literacy instruction will result in higher quality teaching.

Action 2: Provide professional learning experiences for early childhood teachers that enable them to implement high-quality early language and literacy instruction in their classrooms.

There is a robust body of research showing that teachers matter to children's literacy achievement.[42] Teachers who completed initial teacher preparation programs with high quality attention to teaching reading were found to be more effective at teaching reading in the

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37   Petscher, Y., & Kim, Y. S., "The Utility and Accuracy of Oral Reading Fluency Score Types in Predicting Reading Comprehension. *Journal of School Psychology*, 49, no. 1 (2011): 107-129; Riedel, B. W., "The Relation between DIBELS, Reading Comprehension, and Vocabulary in Urban First-grade Students," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, no. 4 (2007): 546-567; Roehrig, A. D., et al., "Accuracy of the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Measure for Predicting Third Grade Reading Comprehension Outcomes," *Journal of School Psychology*, 46, no. 3 (2008): 343-366

38   García, G. E., & Pearson, P. D., "Assessment and Diversity," *Review of Research in Education*, 20 (1994): 337-391; Pearson, P. D., & Hamm, D. N., "The Assessment of Reading Comprehension: A Review of Practices—Past, Present, and Future." In. S. G. Paris & S. A. Stahl (Eds.), *Children's Reading Comprehension and Assessment* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005): 13-69; Valencia, S., & Pearson, P. D., "Reading Assessment: Time for a Change," *The Reading Teacher*, 40, no. 8 (1987): 726-732.

39   Mokhtari, K., Rosemary, C. A., & Edwards, P. A., "Making Instructional Decisions Based on Data: What, How, and Why," *The Reading Teacher*, 61, no. 4 (2007): 354-359; National Center for Education Statistics, *Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional decision Making* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

40   DeStefano, L., Rempert, T., & O'Dell, L., *Charting a Course to Literacy: Early Reading First in Chicago Charter Schools External Evaluation. Final Report* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010); DeStefano, L., Rempert, T., Innes, E., & Glaze, C., *Achieving Preschool Language and Literacy Excellence: Early Reading First in Chicago Archdiocese Schools External Evaluation-Year Four Report* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012).

41   Au, W., "High-stakes Testing and Control: A Qualitative Metasynthesis," *Educational Researcher*, 36, no. 5 (2007): 258-267; Berliner, D., "Rational Responses to High Stakes Testing: The Case of Curriculum Narrowing and the Harm That Follows," *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41, no. 3 (2011): 287-302.

42   Darling-Hammond, L., Berry, B., & Thoreson, A., "Does Teacher Certification Matter? Evaluating the Evidence," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23, no. 1 (2001): 57–77.

policy BRIEF

primary grades, and their students were the beneficiaries of enhanced achievement.[43] Data from statewide initiatives examining teacher education have shown substantive links between the quality of the teacher preparation program and the achievement of students taught by graduates of the program.[44] Also clear is the finding that the initial teacher preparation program, no matter how good, cannot do it all; well-designed, ongoing, job-embedded professional development is needed in addition.[45] And the final component that makes for an outstanding early literacy instructional program is how effectively the teacher is able to engage families in their children's literacy development at home during the preschool and primary grade years.[46]

January 2014, 17 states required elementary teacher candidates to pass an assessment measuring their knowledge of evidence-based reading instructional practices prior to certification; 13 states require the same of early childhood teachers. Illinois does not require teacher candidates, either early childhood or early elementary, either prior to or following certification, to demonstrate knowledge of early literacy on any such assessment.[47]

Current professional teaching standards in Illinois require knowledge in reading instruction approaches, including those that "develop word knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and strategy use in the content areas."[48] However, these standards

In seeking to build ambitious early literacy instruction in Illinois classrooms, teachers would benefit from clear guidelines on how to identify appropriate curricula and instructional activities....

2.1 Align teacher licensure and program accreditation requirements to Preschool-Grade 3 language and literacy standards.

The first step in teachers' professional development is initial licensure through an accredited preparation program. As of

Action 2 includes the following recommendations:
2.1 Align teacher licensure and program accreditation requirements to Preschool-Grade 3 language and literacy standards.
2.2 Provide in-service teachers (including classroom assistant teachers and paraprofessionals) with evidence-based professional learning programs focused on early language and literacy development and instruction.
2.3 Ensure that classroom personnel develop the knowledge and skill needed to work effectively with families on children's early language and literacy development.

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43   Hoffman, J. V., Roller, C., Maloch, B., Sailors, M., Duffy, G., & Beretvas, S. N., "Teachers' Preparation to Teach Reading and Their Experiences and Practices in the First Three Years of Teaching," *The Elementary School Journal*, 105, no. 3 (2005): 267-287; International Reading Association, *Teaching Reading Well: A Synthesis of the International Reading Association's Research on Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2007).

44   Goldhaber, D., Liddle, S., & Theobald, R., "The Gateway to the Profession: Assessing Teacher Preparation Programs Based on Student Achievement," *Economics of Education Review*, 34 (2013): 29-44; Tennessee Higher Education Commission, *2014 Report Card on the Effectiveness of Teacher Training Programs* (Knoxville: Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2014).

45   Neuman, S.B. & Kamil, M. (Eds.), *Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators: Principles and Strategies for Improving Practice* (Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes, 2010).

46   Van Voorhis, F. L., Maier, M. F., Epstein, J. L., & Lloyd, C. M., *The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

47   See http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/OECD/Pages/EarlyLearningChallenge.aspx.

48   Section 24.130 - The Illinois Professional Teaching Standards. Retrieved from http://www.ilga.gov/commission/jcar/admincode/023/023000240001300R.html.

policy BRIEF

...the initial teacher preparation program, no matter how good, cannot do it all; well-designed, ongoing, job-embedded professional development is needed in addition.

are not currently robust enough to ensure appropriate knowledge in the science of reading instruction. In certain respects what is needed is for Illinois teacher preparation standards in the English Language Arts to catch up with Illinois student learning standards in the English Language Arts that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards. This recommended action for the P-3 sector parallels Action 2.1 in the accompanying UIC Center for Literacy policy paper on CCSS.[49]

2.2 Provide in-service teachers with evidence-based professional learning programs focused on early language and literacy development and instruction

Professional learning for practicing teachers has been an area of robust activity in recent years, and this is especially the case with respect to professional learning related to P-3 education. This work has arisen from multiple areas: over a decade of Early Reading First projects,[50] the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program funded by the US Department of Education,[51] work arising from various sectors focused on providing online professional learning experiences for early childhood educators,[52] studies of literacy coaching in the early grades,[53] and more. The work has provided us with

solid research evidence that high quality professional learning opportunities make a significant difference in improving teachers' classroom practice and raising student achievement. It has also yielded a rich understanding of how to create professional learning communities focused on P-3 literacy education that are built on evidence-based adult learning principles and practices.

The evidence is compelling that a coordinated program of professional development focused on P-3 early literacy can make a significant, positive impact on instruction and thereby raise student achievement levels to scale in the state. Effective early literacy professional learning programs for teachers are sustained (one-shot workshops or presentations have no evidence of affecting practice),[54] based on sound principles of adult learning, and embedded in the contexts of teachers' work. An especially effective feature of several early literacy professional learning initiatives has been the use of literacy coaches who work in the classroom to support teachers' instructional change efforts.[55]

Our recommended policy action is to systematically provide such professional learning programs focused on early language and literacy to Illinois preschool and

49   Woodard, R., & Kline, S., *Moving Beyond Compliance: Implementing the Common Core State Standards in Literacy* (Chicago: Research on Urban Education Policy Initiative and UIC Center for Literacy, 2015).

50   For example, see *UIC Early Reading First*. Retrieved from http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/; Early Reading First/SmartStart. Retrieved from http://www.smartstartga.org/_downloads/UWMA_SmartStart_READERS_Grant_2006-2010.pdf; Han, M., et al., "Beating the Odds: Longitudinal Investigation of a Low-income, Dual-language and Monolingual Children's English Language and Literacy Performance," *Early Education and Development*, 25, no. 6 (2014): 841-858.

51   Neuman, S.B. & Kamil, M. (Eds.), *Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators: Principles and Strategies for Improving Practice* (Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes, 2010).

52   For example, see the My Teaching Partner Project. Henry, A. D., & Pianta, R. C., "Effective Teacher-Child Interactions and Literacy: Evidence for Scalable, Aligned Approaches to Professional Development," In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, *Vol. 3* (New York: Guilford, 2011): 308-321.

53   Atteberry, A. & Bryk, A. S., "Analyzing Teacher Participation in Literacy Coaching Activities," *The Elementary School Journal,* 112, no. 2 (2011): 356-382.

54   Martin, S., Quatroche, D., & Bauserman, K. (Eds.), *Handbook of Professional Development in Education* (New York: Guilford, 2014).

55   UIC College of Education, *UIC Early Reading First*. Retrieved from http://www.uic.edu/educ/erf/; Atteberry, A. & Bryk, A. S., "Analyzing Teacher Participation in Literacy Coaching Activities," *The Elementary School Journal,* 112, no. 2 (2011): 356-382; Neuman, S. B., & Cunningham, L., "The Impact of Professional Development and Coaching on Early Language and Literacy Instructional Practices," *American Educational Research Journal*, 46, no. 2 (2009): 532-566.

primary grade educators.

Such a process is currently underway in one sector. Through Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge funding, the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development has implemented the Preschool Instructional Excellence project, which, through grantee the Ounce of Prevention, is helping early childhood programs throughout the state strengthen organizational supports to structure and facilitate embedded professional development for teachers in order to achieve higher levels of instructional excellence.[56]

Extending this type of systematic effort to other sectors – for K-3 teachers across the state – is highly recommended. Such an effort could be coordinated at the state level and made available to school districts. Another possibility is to tie such professional development to licensure renewal. The key is to make early language and literacy an explicit part of professional learning programs for primary grade teachers.

2.3 Ensure that classroom personnel develop the knowledge and skill needed to work effectively with families on children's early language and literacy development.

A 2013 meta-analysis of family involvement research over a 10-year period summarized the impact of family involvement on learning and development for children ages 3-8.[57] A main, not unexpected, finding was that family involvement positively impacts children's development in literacy and math. However, it is important to note that the weakest influence was the variable called Family Involvement in School – attending open houses, parent-teacher conferences, participating in the classroom, and volunteering. Yet, since the introduction of Title 1, these have been the most frequent means schools use to encourage parent involvement. The body of research did indicate benefits from family literacy programs and home visiting programs that implement research-based literacy practices in the home, but such programs currently reach only a limited number of parents.

Thus, to have the best potential benefits of parent involvement, it is necessary to prepare P-3 teachers and leaders to be able to collaborate with parents in ways that go beyond the typical outreach activities. This means enhancing home-based literacy activities to effectively and efficiently extend family engagement and thereby raise student achievement. In Action 4 below, we discuss in more depth specifics for engaging families in their children's early language and literacy learning, but we raise the issue here also because of the need for professional development that will equip P-3 educators with the knowledge and skill needed to engage and support families in

productive ways that extend beyond the typical school-based involvement described in the preceding paragraph. Most of the current P-3 workforce in Illinois is underprepared to accomplish the recommendations in Action 4 without this targeted professional development.

Such professional development would be based on sound practices of adult learning and would target areas such as:

- How to Select Good Books with Your Child
- Effective – and Fun – Home Read Alouds
- Having Conversations with Your Child: A Key to Building School Readiness
- Words, Words, Words: Better Vocabulary Means Better Learning throughout School
- Listening to Your (First/Second/Third) Grader Read To You
- How (P, K, Gr. 1/2/3) Children Develop in Writing, and What You Can Do to Support It

Key to the successful uptake of such activities in the home is making sure that each one includes attention to children/families who speak languages other than English and sensitivity to developmental differences in young children.

There are numerous research-based examples of effective home literacy activities for family engagement. The policy challenge in this case is

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56   See http://www.theounce.org/what-we-do/professional-development-LLE.

57   Van Voorhis, F. L., Maier, M. F., Epstein, J. L., & Lloyd, C. M., *The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

policy BRIEF

establishing means of getting teachers/administrators familiar with them and developing the capacity (and will) to implement them across P-3.

Action 3: Build the capacity of preschool administrators, elementary school principals, and relevant early education personnel to lead high-quality early language and literacy programs that improve student learning.

The vast majority of the current early childhood leadership workforce in Illinois is underprepared to engage in what is needed to create and sustain excellence in early literacy education. This situation exists for a number of reasons. Historically, preschool education and K-12 education have occupied largely separate "universes" and therefore what it meant to be an early childhood program director and a school principal were quite different. Early "normal schools" and, later, teacher education programs, offered very little in early childhood education for professional preparation of teachers, and today's prekindergarten teacher preparation often takes place in programs separate from K-12 programs. In addition, until relatively recently preschool education concerned itself largely with fostering areas of early childhood development other than academic skills, whereas teaching children to read has been perhaps the most fundamental part of children's

first years in elementary school. In the past it was not typical for an elementary school to have a prekindergarten housed in its building, and even today rarely do elementary schools collaborate with preschools in their surrounding community. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that, from a leadership standpoint, the P-3 continuum that is so important to literacy development in the early years and beyond, is considerably underdeveloped.

This situation needs immediate attention because, as current research on school reform makes clear,

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Action 3 includes the following recommendations:

3.1 Ensure that preparation programs for leaders of learning organizations serving young children are based on program standards and activities that foster leader knowledge, skills, and dispositions aligned with current early language and literacy research.

3.2 Implement policies that foster among current preschool leaders, elementary school principals, and district leadership necessary knowledge, advocacy, and skill in instructional leadership, organizational leadership, policy, and developing adult learning related to early literacy education.

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organizational capacity is what is key to high achievement; and leadership is a prime lever for increasing organizational capacity.[58] A parallel situation exists in early care: leadership is key to a high quality early childhood program.[59] With respect to leadership and the P-3 literacy agenda in Illinois, our hope is

> **...to have the best potential benefits of parent involvement, it is necessary to prepare P-3 teachers and leaders to be able to collaborate with parents in ways that go beyond the typical outreach activities.**

58   Cosner, S., Tozer, S.E., & Smylie, M.A., "The Ed.D. Program at the University of Illinois Chicago: Using Continuous Improvement," *Planning and Changing*, 43 (2012): 127-48; Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C., "What Do We Already Know about Educational Leadership?" In W. A. Firestone & C. Riehl (Eds.), *A New Agenda for Research on Educational Leadership* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005): 12-27.

59   National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014).

policy **BRIEF**

that policy changes will help all school principals to become early childhood literacy educators and all early education program directors to become literacy leaders. Our review of research and leadership preparation programs indicates that a two-pronged approach will be effective in realizing this goal.

3.1 Ensure that preparation programs for leaders of learning organizations serving young children are based on program standards and activities that foster leader knowledge, skills, and dispositions aligned with current early language and literacy research.

It can be argued that of the five major Actions in this report, Actions 1-4 are deeply dependent for their success on district, building, and center leadership. At the preschool level, the factors currently emphasized in Illinois licensure for Child Care Directors include preparation in "child care and/or child development from birth to age 6"[60] and assume completion of a credentialing program focused on the "growth and education of children zero to six years of age."[61] In the area of elementary school principal preparation, programs typically emphasize understanding the learning environment, creating a positive school culture, curriculum, assessment, and resource management,[62] although progress toward a P-3 orientation has been achieved with the passage of a new

Illinois Pre-K-12 Principal Endorsement requiring early childhood education curriculum content, field experiences, and licensure exam content for all candidates who aspire to the principalship at any level.[63] The aforementioned content and experiences are all critical to grooming competent educational leadership, but, overall, preparation standards and programs in both areas are not comprehensive enough: preschool leader preparation does not attend specifically enough to early literacy development and pays scant attention to the continuum of P-3 development while school principal preparation struggles for curricular space to attend to the skills and strategies necessary for preschool leadership. Overall, current standards and requirements to lead a learning organization serving young children understate the importance of language and literacy. We need leaders in our systems of early education who can effectively promote and implement the P-3 literacy agenda; such leaders:

- Embrace a P-3 early literacy learning and teaching continuum
- Understand early literacy development and what constitutes high quality early literacy curriculum and instruction for the diverse children served in their program

- Foster teacher/staff teamwork that addresses early literacy instruction and assessment for the diverse children served in their program
- Use data to assess children's early literacy growth *and* to address explicitly the ongoing adult learning necessary to improve that growth, P-3, in each early educational setting
- Connect the center/school to families and the community in order to foster P-3 literacy learning

Such standards and competencies require infusion of enhanced early literacy content into leader preparation in Illinois at the district leadership as well as the building leadership levels. In the area of school principal preparation, we offer the UIC Ed.D. in Urban Education Leadership as an example of what that can look like in practice. This program has built in the following features to enable future leaders of Chicago Public Schools and other school districts to enact a P-3 early literacy agenda:

- An entire course on Leading Improvement of Literacy Learning designed to promote effective organizational and instructional strategies for P-12 reading and writing education across the curriculum.
- Attention to issues of principal leadership in early childhood infused into all principal

60   Illinois General Assembly. Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, *Section 407.130, Qualifications for Child Care Director*. Retrieved from http://www.ilga.gov/commission/jcar/admincode/089/089004070d01300r.html.

61   Illinois General Assembly. Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, *Section 407, Appendix G: Early Childhood Teacher Credentialing Programs*. Retrieved from http://www.ilga.gov/commission/jcar/admincode/089/08900407ZZ9996gR.html.

62   Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Administrative Code* (2013). Retrieved from http://www.isbe.net/rules/archive/pdfs/25ark.pdf.

63   For full information on the new Illinois principal licensure law P.A. 096-0903, see Illinois School Leader Taskforce, *Working to Prepare Illinois School Leaders*. Retrieved from http://illinoisschoolleader.org.

policy BRIEF

preparation and development coursework – preservice and inservice – through a faculty-implemented "default" rule: The default expectation is that early childhood education will be included in the curriculum of every course in the program, whether in instructional leadership, organizational leadership, practitioner inquiry, or other content area.

- Program field experiences are unusually extensive because of a partnership with Chicago Public Schools that provides a 12-month, full-time, full-salary leadership residency; and whether one's residency is in an elementary school with early childhood programs or in a secondary school (without such programs), the residency requires structured site visits to early childhood programs.

Standards and programs enhanced for early literacy content and experience will set the stage for providing leaders at both the preschool and elementary school levels who will positively impact reading and writing achievement for years to come. The focus on the P-3 continuum has particular potential for bridging dialogue between early childhood directors and elementary principals in ways that can build a common vocabulary and more systemic approaches to making the continuum an institutional reality.

3.2 Implement policies that foster

among current preschool leaders, elementary school principals and district leadership necessary knowledge, advocacy, and skill in instructional leadership, organizational leadership, policy, and developing adult learning related to early literacy education.

While the implementation of policy recommendation 3.1 contributes to more effective P-3 literacy programs in the immediate years to come, there also needs to be action taken to upgrade existing leaders' capacity with respect to early literacy. Recently, both the National Governors Association[64] and the National Association of Elementary School Principals[65] have issued publications focused on leading early learning communities. We recommend extending the initiative of these organizations by launching a campaign directed at current preschool leaders and elementary school principals focused on building awareness of the critical importance of P-3 literacy achievement – and district leadership will be crucial to the success of such an initiative. That campaign can then be followed with a targeted program of high quality professional development to help current Illinois leaders build their skill in four areas specifically related to early literacy education:

- Instructional leadership
- Organizational leadership
- Policy
- Adult learning for their teaching staff

In addition, professional support should be given to help district and building leaders incorporate into their family/community involvement efforts enhanced focus on early literacy. This professional development initiative could be accomplished through a collaboration among Illinois IHEs, ISBE, the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Head Start, nonprofits in the early childhood sector, the state's professional associations for superintendents and principals, and foundations.

Action 4: Engage and support families in their children's early language and literacy learning.

Virtually every preschool program in Illinois aims for family involvement in their children's education. In some cases, such as Head Start, regulations require agencies to "engage in a process of collaborative partnership-building with parents to…identify family goals, strengths, and necessary services and other supports."[66] At the K-3 level, home-school connections are stressed as contributing significantly to children's academic achievement. The process of maintaining school/center and home partnerships has a deep research base,[67] and various facets of family engagement – health; parent employment, English language learning and education; children's social emotional and cognitive

64 National Governors Association, *A Governors' Guide to Early Literacy: Getting All Students Reading by Third Grade* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2013); National Governors Association. *Leading for Early Success: Building School Principals' Capacity to Lead High-Quality Early Education.* Retrieved from http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/1306LeadingForEarlySuccessPaper.pdf.

65 National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (Alexandria, VA: Author.2014)

66 Head Start, *Head Start Policy & Regulation*. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/hspps/1304/1304.40%20Family%20partnerships..htm.

67 Henderson, A., & Mapp, K., *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement* (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002); Van Voorhis, F. L., Maier, M. F., Epstein, J. L., & Lloyd, C. M., *The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

policy **BRIEF**

development – can be part of partnership activities.

Our review of research indicates that attention to early language and literacy development should be an integral element in family engagement at both the preschool and K-3 levels. This has certainly been the case throughout the preschools and elementary schools of Illinois, but the research review resulted in three recommendations for how attention to early literacy can be enhanced to achieve better outcomes for children.

4.1 Fund and implement a campaign designed to increase the numbers of families actively engaged in their children's early language and literacy development in the home.

Research has indicated a number of home programs and activities that have been shown to have significant positive impact on children's early literacy development.[68] Thus, in many respects, as a state we know what to do, and we are in position to continue implementing such programs. A shortcoming at this time, however, is that we have not successfully engaged enough families in these early literacy family involvement activities to take overall early literacy achievement to the next level. Therefore, it is recommended that a campaign aimed at both families and educators be designed to raise significantly the number of family members who are actively engaged

in supporting their young children's language and literacy development in conjunction with the early care institutions and schools that their children attend. Ideally, this campaign would be a cross-sector collaboratively planned and conducted initiative. Both childcare entities and schools would participate, as would both the public and private sectors. This broad-based approach is needed to (1) inform the public and educators about the need for enhanced home-school collaboration, (2) increase actual family engagement, and (3) equip teachers and administrators with up-to-date, research-based strategies for working collaboratively and productively with families on early literacy.

Action 4 includes the following recommendations:

4.1 Fund and implement a campaign designed to increase the numbers of families actively engaged in their children's early language and literacy development in the home.

4.2 Inform educators about home supports for facilitating young children's literacy development during two critical learning transitions that occur during P-3: from emergent to conventional literacy and from beginning to fluent reading.

4.3 Embed evidence-based early language and literacy supports as part of all home visiting programs.

The vast majority of the current early childhood leadership workforce in Illinois is underprepared to engage in what is needed to create and sustain excellence in early literacy education.

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68   For example, see Rodrıguez-Brown, F. V., "Project FLAME: A Parent Support Family Literacy Model." In B. Wasik (Ed.), *Handbook of Family Literacy* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004): 213–229.

policy BRIEF

4.2 Inform educators and families about home supports for facilitating young children's literacy development during two critical learning transitions that occur during P-3: from emergent to conventional literacy and from beginning to fluent reading.

We have already stressed the critical importance of the P-3 period for children's lifelong literacy development. That said, research shows that there are two especially important transitions during this time of a child's literacy life. One typically occurs around age 5 as a child moves from emergent literacy[69] (engaging in such literacy behaviors as 'pretend' readings[70] and invented spelling[71]) to being able to read and write conventionally (i.e., decoding the words on the page, using conventional spellings of words, etc.). The other usually happens during second grade or the early part of third grade when the child transitions from reading word by word to reading fluently – with accurate word recognition, adequate speed, and expression.[72] Each of these transitions represents a significant leap forward for children's literacy development, but each of them can also be a stalling point, causing a child to lag behind in literacy achievement and find it much harder to catch up again.

A considerable amount is known about children's development through each of these periods and about effective supports that can help children develop the skills needed to smoothly go through these transitions.[73] However, comparatively little has been systematically implemented in early education with respect to how parents and others in the home environment can support children's literacy development during these periods.

Because these are such important learning phases and because effective home and school/center collaboration has been shown to significantly enhance children's early literacy development, we recommend that the Illinois Early Learning Council (http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/OECD/Pages/EarlyLearningCouncil.aspx) take the leadership in forming a task force that would (1) inform preschool and K-3 teachers and administrators about the importance of coordinated classroom and home support to help children make these transitions smoothly and (2) recommend a funding/development/distribution plan for making available resources/activities that could be used by families at home to extend children's learning in these areas.

4.3 Embed evidence-based early language and literacy supports as part of all home visiting programs.

Home visiting programs are widely regarded as an evidence-based policy choice for supporting families with preschool children,[74] and current trends suggest that home visiting initiatives will increase in the coming years.[75] At the federal level under the *Improving Access to High-Quality Child Care and Early Education* portion of President Obama's proposed 2015 budget, funding for "voluntary, evidence-based home visiting" is extended and expanded.[76] In general, home visiting programs enable medical personnel, social workers, and other professionals to connect families to services that support children's health, development, and ability to learn.

We support the continuation in Illinois of evidence-based home visiting, but our review of the learning development content related to the literacy development of 3/4-year-olds that is currently included in home visits indicates a need for strengthening and sharpening that content in order to adequately support the P-3 early literacy agenda addressed in this policy brief.

We recommend that the Home Visiting Task Force Subgroup of the Illinois Early Learning Council form a committee that would make

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69   Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (Eds.). *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986).

70   Sulzby, E., "Children's Emergent Reading of Favorite Storybooks: A Developmental Study," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 20, no. 1 (1985): 458–481.

71   Read, C., "Pre-school Children's Knowledge of English Phonology," *Harvard Educational Review*, 41, (1975): 1–34.

72   Kuhn, M.R., Schwanenflugel, P.J., & Meisinger, E.B., "Aligning Theory and Assessment of Reading Fluency: Automaticity, Prosody, and Definitions of Fluency," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45 (2010): 232-253.

73   Snow, C., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P., *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1998).

74   Avellar, S., Paulsell, D., Sama-Miller, E., Del Grosso, P., Akers, L., and Kleinman, R. *Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness Review: Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014).

75   National Conference of State Legislatures. *Home Visiting Enacted Legislation in States* (2014). Retrieved from http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/home-visiting-enacted-legislation-in-states.aspx.

76   The White House Administration Office of Management and Budget. *Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Overview* (2015). Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/overview.

policy **BRIEF**

recommendations for how attention to early literacy supports could be increased in the current home visiting sessions. The UIC Center for Literacy would be happy to partner with this committee of the Home Visiting Task Force Subgroup to suggest individuals and entities that would be able to offer concrete and evidence-based, practical recommendations for how the attention to early literacy supports could be enhanced during home visits.

Action 5: Collaborate in and support the development of needed research in early language and literacy.

Policy and practice alike can and should be informed by research. Research is useful for instrumental purposes, conceptual insight, and political strategies; collaborating on research and evaluation projects also offers policymakers and practitioners insights into the logic of research, which may ultimately inform their own work in new and useful ways.[77] However, policymakers and practitioners do not always turn to research as much as to other resources to inform their work,[78] though not necessarily for lack of interest or desire,[79] and thus there is frequently a disconnect between research and policy/practice. The disconnect may be due to a number of factors, but the following are often at work[80]:

- Research reports may be complex and even contradictory, thus inhibiting policymakers' and practitioners' ability to use and apply research results in their work.
- Sifting through numerous studies laden with caveats and limitations to develop a coherent understanding of the research base on a particular topic can be time-consuming and burdensome, especially for individuals unused to research norms.
- Researchers may be unaware of the issues and questions that policymakers and practitioners identify as relevant or timely.

Finding ways to bridge the divide is key to developing better policy and practice that are grounded in research evidence.

Given that early literacy is arguably the most highly researched area of any in the field of education, it may seem odd that one of our policy recommendations is to conduct more early literacy research. But, given national results on NAEP,[81] international comparisons on literacy achievement,[82] and the persistent achievement gaps in reading and writing across cultural and socioeconomic groups,[83] we still need to know more about the P-3 period, which sets the achievement

...we have not successfully engaged enough families in...early literacy family involvement activities to take overall early literacy achievement to the next level.

77   Nutley, S. M., Walter, I. & Davies, H. T. O., *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services* (The Policy Press: Bristol: UK, 2007).

78   Elliot, J., Emlen, A., Tvedt, K., & Weber, B., *Research and Child Care Policy A View from the States* (1991). Retrieved from http://health.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/sbhs/pdf/1999-Research-and-ChildCare-Policy.pdf.

79   Bogenscheider, K. & Corbett,T. J., *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Insights from Policy-Minded Researchers and Research-Minded Policymakers* (Routledge: NY, 2010).

80   Nelson, S.R., Leffler, J.C., & Hansen, B.A., *Toward a Research Agenda for Understanding and Improving the Use of Research Evidence* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2009). Retrieved from www.nwrel.org/researchuse/report.pdf.

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policy BRIEF

trajectory for the rest of students' schooling.

5.1 Engage with researchers in Illinois, nationally, and internationally to develop a coherent early language and literacy research agenda for Illinois.

The development of a coordinated, coherent early literacy research agenda is key to addressing issues faced by the various sectors in applying research to policy and practice. First, the process of engaging in concerted efforts to develop an agenda offers an important opportunity for coordination *across* sectors. Simply facilitating opportunities for interactions and dialogue between researchers and policymakers can help build trust and mutually respectful relationships. Indeed, policymakers and researchers sometimes hold erroneous assumptions about the ability or interest of the other party to engage in such efforts. Yet policymakers indicate their use of research often hinges on access to reliable, expert intermediaries to distill and explain research findings.[84] Researchers themselves can benefit from direct feedback from policymakers and practitioners to improve the format, style, and content of their work in order to make it more useful to the policy and practice worlds. Without a context and reason for collaboration, however, such interactions are difficult to manufacture.

Thus, we recommend the development of the Illinois Early Literacy Research Agenda through coordinated, intentional efforts to identify and prioritize for researchers topics and issues that policymakers and practitioners find most directly relevant to enhancing the quality of home and school efforts to enhance young children's early literacy development. Such a coordinated effort helps researchers see that what may seem mundane to them may be enlightening to the practitioner or what may be groundbreaking in the research world may be of little relevance to practice. Negotiating a common set of questions is a key means to break through communication and 'cultural' barriers across sectors.

Once developed, a clear agenda can foster coordination *within* the research community. Researchers, particularly in academia, often work independently, and individual studies do not always cohere easily. Additionally, academic researchers are mostly rewarded for peer-review publications of studies with novel findings. In the academic context, replications and seemingly mundane results are not always valued or disseminated. As a result, bodies of research can be slow to develop. A coordinated agenda can bring together individual researchers into a community focused on developing

coherent sets of recommendations about early literacy issues.

Recognizing such realities, the Data, Research, and Evaluation committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council put forth in 2014 a research agenda intended to communicate the desired research and evaluation needs of the Council. Although language and literacy were not listed among the primary areas of inquiry,[85] the committee's agenda can serve as a foundation for the specific efforts we recommend here.

5.2 Develop a system for

> ### Action 5 includes the following recommendations:
> 5.1 Engage with researchers in Illinois, nationally, and internationally to develop a coherent early language and literacy research agenda for Illinois.
> 5.2 Develop a system for adequately funding the Illinois early language and literacy research agenda.

adequately funding the Illinois early language and literacy research agenda.

Funding and support to build policy- and practice-relevant research capacity are clearly needed. Several existing models of research-policy/practice partnerships have had noted success in institutionalizing partnerships, collaborations, and consortia by drawing on various funding sources

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84   Bogenscheider, K. & Corbett, T. J., *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Insights from Policy-Minded Researchers and Research-Minded Policymakers* (Routledge: NY, 2010).

85   Early Learning Council, *Annual Report* (2014). Retrieved from http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/OECD/Documents/Early%20Learning%20Council/Council/ELC_AnnualReport_FY14.pdf.

and relying on local university capacity. For example, the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership (OCCRP), founded in 1995 with initial federal support from the Child Care Bureau's Child Care Policy Research Consortium, has been housed at various universities throughout its history.[86] Work is conducted in coordination with several state agencies and organizations to carry out its research agenda[87], thus developing critical research capacity among state childcare and early education agencies. In Illinois, the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) was created and designated by legislation to function as the research arm of the P-20 Council. The IERC conducts policy-relevant educational research, with projects funded through a variety of public/private sources.[88] The early care and education field in Illinois, however, currently lacks such an institutionalized body. Our recommendation is to bring together an Illinois Early Literacy Research Task Force comprised of state-level early education policymakers, representatives of foundations, and school district, Preschool for All, and Head Start leadership personnel to explore ways to fund the intentionally developed early language and literacy research agenda described in Action 5.1. We recommend that this task force look carefully at recommendations and research from leading literacy professional organizations such as the International Literacy Association, the Literacy Research Association, and National Association for the Education of

Young Children. Strategies for the task force can include: (a) developing consensus around the shared vision articulated in 5.1 and (b) identifying human capital and funding supports needed to implement this coordinated research.

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87   Oregon State University, School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences, *Research Activities*. Retrieved from http://health.oregonstate.edu/sbhs/family-policy-program/occrp-research-activities.

88   Illinois Education Research Council, *Current Projects*. Retrieved from http://www.siue.edu/ierc/projects/index.shtml.

policy **BRIEF**

ABOUT US

The Research on Urban Education Policy Initiative (RUEPI) is an education policy research project based in the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education. RUEPI was created in response to one of the most significant problems facing urban education policy: dialogue about urban education policy consistently fails to reflect what we know and what we do not about the problems education policies are aimed at remedying. Instead of being polemic and grounded primarily in ideology, public conversations about education should be constructive and informed by the best available evidence.

The UIC Center for Literacy is a public service and research center that works to improve literacy education, policy and research at the local, state and national levels. We provide leadership and technical assistance to Chicago area schools and community- based organizations for the purpose of enhancing the quality of literacy services. We also work with public and private entities to formulate policies that support effective literacy programs. The Center responds to issues in literacy education by serving as a public clearinghouse for literacy information; establishing partnerships with university departments and external agencies; contributing to enhanced graduate education for future leaders in literacy education; and creating innovative, research-based programs that serve as exemplary models for public practice. Our activities are especially focused on helping to reduce literacy as a barrier to full societal participation for all individuals.

OUR MISSION

RUEPI's work is aimed at fostering more informed dialogue and decision-making about education policy in Chicago and other urban areas. To achieve this, we engage in research and analysis on major policy issues facing these areas, including early childhood education, inclusion, testing, STEM education, and teacher workforce policy. We offer timely analysis and recommendations that are grounded in the best available evidence.

OUR APPROACH

Given RUEPI's mission, the project's work is rooted in three guiding principles. While these principles are not grounded in any particular political ideology and do not specify any particular course of action, they lay a foundation for ensuring that debates about urban education policy are framed by an understanding of how education policies have fared in the past. The principles are as follows:

- Education policies should be coherent and strategic

- Education policies should directly engage with what happens in schools and classrooms

- Education policies should account for local context

RUEPI policy briefs are rooted in these principles, written by faculty in the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education and other affiliated parties, and go through a rigorous peer-review process.

Learn more at http://ruepi.uic.edu and http://cfl.uic.edu

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