



BY GENE I. MAEROFF

The Critical Primary Years

Focusing educational priorities from preschool to third grade holds great promise for more productive learning in the higher grades.

When Lillian Emery Elementary School in Indiana died in 2005, it was almost immediately reborn as the Children's Academy of New Albany. Shorn of its fourth and fifth grades, it became a Pre-K–3 school. This new configuration meant that the Children's Academy could tighten its focus on primary education, a vital goal for a school that ended the year with the lowest-ranking fourth graders of all of southern Indiana's elementary schools.



Without fourth and fifth graders in the building, the entire atmosphere and orientation of the Children's Academy shifted and the staff could concentrate exclusively on the needs of students in the early elementary grades. Placing unprecedented emphasis on literacy instruction, the new Children's Academy fashioned a school day that gave teachers time for professional development and collaborative planning. Everything pointed toward third grade, by the end of which pupils everywhere, not only in New Albany, must shift from learning to read to reading to learn.

"[A] consensus has emerged over the last 20 years about the critical natures of the primary grades—Pre-K–3—in terms of literacy development," wrote Joseph Murphy (2004), an authority on educational leadership, in a book that examined the role of principals in leading reading instruction.

A Pre-K–3 school encompasses preschools, kindergarten, and the first three grades, positing its rationale on the commonalities of these grades and the opportunity that such an approach gives administra-

tors and teachers to enhance child development at its most fragile and potentially most productive time. The fragility was especially pronounced at the new Children's Academy, which drew 40 percent of its students from three publicly subsidized housing projects, and where poverty was so pervasive that more than nine out of 10 students qualified for federally subsidized meals.

But a Pre-K–3 configuration is by no means an act of desperation. These six factors underscore the advantages of focusing on primary education:

Emphasis. Designation of Pre-K through grade 3 as a unit unto itself is a first step toward assuring that the youngest children do not get shunted aside as older students receive precedence.

Staff Development. Educators from pre-kindergarten through third grade share common professional interests best addressed through joint continuing education that recognizes the interlocking nature of their work.

Planning. In a school or unit of their own, teachers and other Pre-K–3 staff members can more readily engage in planning that spans grade

levels and classrooms, viewing the youngsters they serve in every classroom as part of one large learning community.

Teamwork. Classrooms have so much in common through these years that it makes sense to form both horizontal teams embracing the teachers of a particular grade level and vertical teams that have one teacher from each grade level, pre-school through third grade.

Grouping. Small-group instruction of pupils that reaches beyond a single classroom and crosses grade levels acknowledges that uneven progress of students at these ages is more readily addressed in such a setting.

Culmination. Third grade, as a concluding point, takes on special significance as the point at which to gather the fruits of early learning so as to ensure that children possess the wherewithal for success in the upper elementary grades and beyond.

The Pre-K–3 Continuum

Unprecedented attention to schooling from preschool through third grade offers greater promise for improving outcomes than almost any step that educators might take.



IN BRIEF

The author presents a number of factors that underscore the educational advantages of focusing on a Pre-K–3 school configuration, including the need for less remediation and more productive learning in the upper elementary and secondary grades. He describes a self-contained Pre-K–3 continuum, including universal pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten, which would allow young children to progress at rates appropriate to their individual development.



SPECIAL SECTION

Doing it right in the first place is the most obvious way to give students what they will need to prosper in the classroom. Otherwise, every intervention afterward becomes remedial. As pre-kindergarten grows universal and kindergarten expands to fill the entire school day, schools will best sustain early gains by reinforcing the entirety of primary education. *Coordination* should be the watchword of this effort, with standards, curriculum, and assessment aligned across the Pre-K–3 continuum like the moving parts of a finely designed mechanical clock.

Students who come out of third grade as fluent readers can approach much of the rest of the curriculum with confidence. Learning to reason with numbers during the primary years will not make an Einstein of every child, but it will lift the mystery from mathematics. A Pre-K–3 focus, by reducing the need for remediation, can lead to more productive learning in the upper elementary grades and in secondary school.

This strengthening would be possible by looking on schooling from preschool through third grade as a unit unto itself. Ideally, educators would devote separate schools to children from ages 3 or 4 to the ages of 8 or 9. Short of this goal, the early primary grades could have their own discrete identity in the elementary school and perhaps their own assistant principal. Such an idea in neither new nor untried. The National Association of State Boards of Education (1998) has called on the nation's elementary schools to create early childhood units to serve children from the ages of 4 through 8.

Even 10 years earlier, Edward Zigler (1978) of Yale University, an originator of Head Start, proposed aligning preschool with the early

elementary grades. He thought that efforts to raise achievement, especially for the poorest children, depended on programs from birth to age 3, similar to Early Head Start, followed by preschool and then by a focus on the primary grades. He wanted “schools that provide quality education through grade 3 so that children read on grade level by the end of third grade” (Zigler 2004).

Pre-kindergarten amounts to a new grade added to formal schooling—at the beginning rather than the end. What has been a journey of 13 years will extend to 14 years—or 15 years if pre-kindergarten includes 3-year-olds. This is monumental. The period that begins with preschool and runs through the end of third grade accounts for more than a third of elementary and secondary education. No other phase of a student's schooling figures more prominently in shaping the future.

A self-contained Pre-K–3 continuum could also be a vehicle for a nongraded interage program, letting youngsters progress at rates appropriate to their individual development, with less concern about grade-to-grade promotion and more emphasis on assuring that students reach a specific threshold of learning by the end of third grade. Now, some parents delay the entrance of 5-year-olds into kindergarten for a year to give them more time to gain maturity. Other times, schools hold over pupils deemed unprepared for first grade for a second year of kindergarten. Such measures would be largely unnecessary in a Pre-K–3 setup, where multiage grouping could provide a more flexible learning ladder for children to climb. Such schools could also give closer attention to the uneven progress of disabled students and English language learners.

Universal Pre-kindergarten

Some call preschool the new kindergarten and maybe, to a certain extent, it does fill that role. Concern about asking too much of 3- and 4-year-olds, however, ignores accumulating evidence that youngsters at these ages can learn far more than educators and parents previously recognized. The linguistic and mathematical potential of children younger than 5 exceeds what people imagined just a few years ago.

Pre-kindergarten is the essential launching pad for the Pre-K–3 continuum. Children enjoy an edge when they have a sense of order and understand the routines that often are crucial to learning. Those who begin kindergarten recognizing letters, basic numbers, and shapes, and understanding the concept of relative size push off more quickly from the starting blocks. As a matter of fact, they are ahead of the others in their achievement in reading and math by the spring of their kindergarten year and remain so in the spring of the first-grade year (Levenstein, Levenstein, and Oliver 2002). The distance grows wider by the end of the third grade (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 2004).

Pre-kindergarten is not a new idea, having been around since 1903 (Mitchell 2001). There are parallels in the movement to offer pre-kindergarten to all children with efforts to make kindergarten universal. It took most of the 20th century for kindergarten to become available in most school districts and even by 2000 many American children still had only half-day kindergarten to attend. Universal pre-kindergarten—available for every family that wants it but required for no one—can breach walls that would otherwise surround a program often set apart by family income.



Pairing Schools

Children benefit most from a Pre-K–3 emphasis when they continue into the upper elementary grades at a school that builds on and collaborates with the efforts of the lower school. This kind of approach could be seen in the Greece Central School District in upstate New York.

Greece had four pairs of schools during the 2005–2006 school year. In one of those pairs, Paddy Hill Elementary School had 359 students from pre-kindergarten through second grade and Kirk Road Elementary School housed the same youngsters in third, fourth, and fifth grades.

The paired schools had a combined school improvement plan, shared staff, joint professional development, aligned committees and teams, and a common educational theme. Under a unified school improvement plan, for example, the two schools targeted, year by year, the percentage of students expected to meet or exceed learning standards—goals that Kirk Road could most readily meet if Paddy Hill did its part by getting pupils ready in the primary grades. The two schools shared an assistant principal, a psychologist, and a counselor. While teachers worked at only one school or the other, the two principals held joint professional development sessions at various points during the year and met regularly for planning sessions.

“The principal of Paddy Hill and I have forged a close working relationship,” Caroline A. Critchlow, principal of Kirk Road, said of Jean Biondolillo. “We are committed to common instructional strategies. We work hard to ensure a smooth second grade to third grade transition.”

Critchlow said that student success at Kirk Road depended a great deal on the earlier work of teachers at Paddy Hill, especially when it came time for students to take tests required for No Child Left Behind. Children first faced the tests in third grade, but results were listed as outcomes for Paddy Hill/Kirk Road, thereby acknowledging the contribution of the primary grades in shaping outcomes that appear down the line.

Studies that praise the merits of high-quality preschools in preparing youngsters to adapt to the demands of formal school programs (National Research Council 2001), have nudged the nation toward preschool. Findings from brain research and new insights into cognition have focused further attention on child development. The brain, that great plastic vessel of expanding knowledge, is a wondrous device that undergoes exponential growth in the earliest years at a rate unequalled at any later age. Opportunities not exploited during the preschool years may be lost forever.

The fact that schooling begins at age 5 instead of 4 is arbitrary. Parents must find childcare during working hours. Often, these facilities are inadequate and contribute little to the cognitive growth of children. Why not create a universal system of preschool available to 4-year-olds—and, eventu-

ally, 3-year-olds? It would serve not just the quest for childcare, but the developmental needs of children as well. Pre-kindergarten is the linchpin of the Pre-K–3 concept, the year between the nurturing of the home and the formal start of schooling in kindergarten.

Preschool expansion could follow the route of kindergarten and achieve universality through the public schools. Two obstacles obstruct this path: the cost and the existence of thousands of centers, churches, storefronts, and other sites—mostly nonprofit but for-profit, as well—that now serve preschoolers, mostly with childcare. More than half of the pre-kindergartners in state-supported programs in Georgia and New Jersey attend classes in private facilities. By and large, though, preschool outside the public schools is a low-budget operation that employs less qualified teachers.

A Full Day of Kindergarten

Full-day kindergarten is not universally available in the United States. Nine states do not even require local school districts to offer kindergarten—half-day or full day—and even when states mandate that districts have kindergartens, pupils must attend in fewer than a dozen states (Council of Chief State School Officers 2004).

Yet, kindergarten is crucial to the Pre-K–3 continuum, the link between the initial exposure to school for 4-year-olds and the demands of first grade. It is the year during which children who are barely self-reliant become learners who understand the regimen and demands of the classroom and hone their budding knowledge of words and numbers. The social interaction with classmates that began in preschool takes even more nuanced forms and play becomes a more complex vehicle for learning.



The Role of Head Start

Head Start was on the scene long before the movement for universal pre-kindergarten. President Lyndon Johnson unveiled Head Start as a centerpiece in his War on Poverty in 1965. It has grown to a \$6.7 billion enterprise enrolling 915,000 preschoolers. Efforts to expand preschool as the first link in the Pre-K–3 progression must take note of Head Start.

An overriding shortcoming of Head Start is that the gains it produces seem to fade despite the expenditure of \$86 billion on 25 million children over 40 years. Lurking behind any analysis of Head Start's cognitive effect is the question of the program's purpose. Disputes over Head Start too often take the form of an either/or argument—the program should lean toward academics or toward physical-social-emotional needs. It is a debate predicated on the false notion that good preschool education cannot fulfill both objectives. The larger issue has to do with identifying the role that Head Start should play in the merging movement toward universal pre-kindergarten and as a first step in Pre-K–3. Several possibilities should be considered:

- Reconstituting Head Start entirely as Early Head Start to serve poor children from poor families from birth to age 3.
- Using Head Start funds in conjunction with state-financed preschool and spending the money for added special services exclusively for the poorest children.
- Continuing Head Start exactly as it is, a federal preschool program alongside locally financed and private preschools.

So, what do kindergartens reasonably expect of children? They want them to gain control over their small and large muscles so they can perform physical tasks ranging from holding a pencil to jumping on one foot; to follow rules and know the reasons why; to listen during group instruction and become eager learners who develop strategies to solve problems; to begin to observe natural phenomena and draw comparisons among the objects they observe; to use language effectively for communication, retell stories with important details, and read simple words that they often hear; and to sort objects and identify patterns so as to gain a sense of length and weight, up and down, and what pennies, nickels, and dimes represent.

Three-quarters of kindergarten teachers consider it important that a child arrive able to count to 20 and fully 85 percent deem it important that a child arrives knowing the letters of the alphabet. At the same time, 86 percent

say it is important that a child not disrupt the class, and every kindergarten teacher considered it important that pupils start kindergarten able to get along with other children and show sensitivity to their feelings (Mason-Dixon Polling & Research 2004).

Research and common sense indicate that children are better off being in school all day. Full-day kindergarten expands learning opportunities. There is simply not enough time in the typical half-day program to get much done. The implementation of learning standards around the United States puts pupils coming out of kindergarten in the position of having very rapidly to measure up to first-grade standards.

With less than two-thirds of kindergartners in full-day programs, the country needs policy changes to make such classes available to all children. Only nine states require local districts to offer full-day kindergarten, an approach that the Education Commission of the States (2005) called for all states to take.

There remains the contentious issue—whether kindergarten runs for a half-day or a full day—of when a child should begin. For years, parents were eager to have youngsters start kindergarten as soon as possible and cutoff dates late in the calendar year enabled many children who were still 4 in September to enter. Increasingly, though, cutoff dates have moved closer to the beginning of the school year so that pupils will be older and more mature. Children must turn 5 before mid-October to enter kindergarten in 39 states (Ackerman and Barnett 2005).

Facing Realities

What has to happen to get more school systems to appreciate the merits of focusing on the youngest students? This is not the most propitious time to think about schools that concentrate on children from pre-kindergarten through third grade. Competition for public funds has never been more intense. The No Child Left Behind Act has diverted the attention and energy of educators to the upper elementary grades and secondary schools.

Yet, Pre-K–3 offers a compelling vision. Students will be prepared to show adequate yearly progress to meet No Child Left Behind requirements only if they have a firm foundation for learning. The evidence has never been stronger that investments in the early years pay education's largest dividends. Against this backdrop, though, one must weigh the political and fiscal realities of what it will take to win support for the Pre-K–3 concept.

The effort to establish universal pre-kindergarten across the United States remains incomplete but offers a model for what advocates of Pre-K–3 might pursue. A well-orchestrated plan enlisted politicians, editorial writers, parents, business people, and



even law enforcement officials in such states as Florida, Massachusetts, and New Mexico.

The challenge of finding more money for education today is not unlike that which the country faced during the depths of the Great Depression as officials sought to fund initiatives to put people back on their feet. When Harry Hopkins, the savvy adviser to President Roosevelt, spoke to a group of farmers in his native Iowa in 1935, he described the president's burgeoning vision of government-sponsored jobs and social services to rescue a beleaguered nation. Hopkins' skeptical audience asked how the United States could possibly afford so lavish a plan.

"This is America, the richest country in the world," declared Hopkins. "We can afford anything we want" (Hopkins 1999).

Indeed, the country has the wealth to underwrite whatever it wants to do, as shown by the more than a billion-dollar-a-week cost of the Iraq war and the instant infusion of money into New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after hurricanes wrought destruction there.

It's a matter of priorities. ■

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Gene I. Maeroff is a former education correspondent for *The New York Times* and founding director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at

Web Resources

The Council of Chief State School Officers site allows one to browse various entries on early childhood.

www.ccsso.org

The Education Commission of the States is a repository for information about all aspects of education at the state level, including reports and data on early learning issues.

www.ecs.org

The U.S. Department of Education site includes material on such topics as early childhood, reading, parents, and the No Child Left Behind Act—all with implications for students in the early grades.

www.ed.gov

The Foundation for Child Development site gives special consideration to aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment from pre-kindergarten through third grade.

www.fcd-us.org

This site was created to provide background material on Gene I. Maeroff's new book, *Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years of School*.

www.genemaeroff.com

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has a section of its site devoted to early childhood issues.

www.naeyc.org

The National Association of State Boards of Education provides an executive summary of "Right from the Start," the 1988 report dealing with the schooling of children from ages 4 through 8.

www.nasbe.org/Educational_Issues/Reports/Sum_rfts.pdf

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing information based on research.

www.nieer.org

Teachers College of Columbia University. His e-mail address is gim23@optonline.net.

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