

RESEARCH ROUNDUP:

Alignment Produces Achievement

A selection of recent reports on alignment and student transitions

Compiled by Linda Fitch



With at least a dozen years of formal schooling ahead, children benefit from high-quality early learning. And if that high-quality early learning aligns with the instruction offered in elementary classrooms and encourages children's development in the outside world, they will be prepared for a lifetime of learning, develop better studying habits, and have a greater chance at success.

Administrators must be able to communicate the importance of alignment and assist parents, teachers, and students in making school transitions as smooth as possible. And they must be able to measure the impact of a chosen strategy in order to fine-tune it, encourage professional development, and ensure instruction appropriate to age and aptitude.

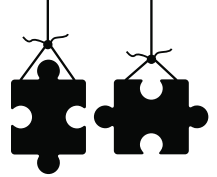
Turn to the following resources to read the latest research on alignment and its outcomes.

Assessment and Measurement

"Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School" says that measurement varies among 11 common school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions due to imprecise program targets or too-general outcome definitions. As a result, evaluation might fail to determine whether students have mastered whatever skills the programs seek to impart. To improve measurement, SEL programs should focus on skills appropriate to each grade and age rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, and policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should narrow their assessment of outcomes to the teacher and classroom level.

Jones, S.M., Barnes, S.P., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E.J. (2017). *Future of Children*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ej1144815.pdf.

"Unpacking Instructional Alignment: The Influence of Teachers' Use of Assessment Data on Instruction" finds that when upper elementary and middle school teachers try to align instruction and assessment with their state's curricula to improve student performance, day-to-day, informal assessments are essential to shaping instruction, while more formal assessments can help monitor student progress and remediation. However, challenges related to the misalignment of periodic assessments and instructional content, higher cognitive demands from new curricula, and a lack of data-crunching infrastructure often mitigate teacher progress.



Abrams, L., Varier, D., & Jackson, L. (2016). *Perspectives in Education*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ej1130896.pdf.

Early Childhood

“Educational Alignment for Young Children” stresses the importance of alignment of early education programs with K–12 education systems as a strategy to help more children succeed by the end of third grade. Early childhood education is the starting point for a “seamless pipeline” that addresses a range of academic, behavioral, health, and family issues, but its benefits can deteriorate if programs don’t meet public school standards for readiness or if children transition into elementary schools that don’t continue to support their development adequately.

Bosland, J., Cohen, M., Fischer, L., Goldberg, H., Rogers, J., & Rucker, T. (2012). <https://tinyurl.com/nlcedualignment>.

“Child Engagement in the Transition to School: Contributions of Self-Regulation, Teacher-Child Relationships, and Classroom Climate” examines the role of behavioral engagement in learning in kindergarten and the first grade and how emotional control and the classroom context affect it. Observation of 145 children shows that inhibitory control, close teacher-child relationships, and minimal peer-teacher conflict contribute to higher levels of behavioral engagement in kindergarten, which in turn contribute to improved engagement in first grade.

Cadima, J., Doumen, S., Verschueren, K., & Buyse, E. (2015). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. <https://tinyurl.com/researchgatetransition>.

Middle School Transitions

“An Investigation of the Concerns of Fifth-Graders Transitioning to Middle School” says that young adolescents already facing multiple cognitive, physical, social, and emotional changes typically experience apprehension about entering middle school. Surveying 225 students, the study found that undressing in front of others for physical education classes is the most often cited area of high concern among incoming middle schoolers. Gender, race, and school setting had an effect on the prevalence of concerns such as getting lost, peer pressure, bullying, making friends, going to the restroom, and academic performance, but a moderate level of concern by a majority of fifth-graders

regarding all of these issues points to a need for help in acclimating to such changes.

Bailey, G., Giles, R.M., & Rogers, S.E. (2015). *RMLE Online*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ej1059740.pdf.

“Transitioning Young Adolescents From Elementary to Middle School: Research Summary” says that students, families, and faculty involved in the transition to middle school can benefit from the implementation of an effective transition program. Once implemented, transition programs can improve attendance and academic achievement and produce more successful students. Teachers should start the conversation with surveys and questionnaires to better understand student and parent concerns, communicate their expectations of students, and build a sense of community that facilitates communication among all involved.


Gilewski, C.D., & Nunn, M.L. (2016). *AMLE.org*. <https://tinyurl.com/amletransition>.

Program Evaluation

The choice of alignment method depends on the goals a state or district wants to achieve, says “Evaluating Alignment Between Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction.” Those involved in selecting a program must conduct thorough research to ensure that the standards-assessment-instruction cycle of the method chosen facilitates student learning, promotes teachers’ professional development, and creates better understanding of the results from standardized assessments.

Martone, A., & Sireci, S.G. (2009). *Review of Educational Research*. <https://tinyurl.com/researchgatecurriculum>.

Included among the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s “Professional Standards for Educational Leaders” is the stipulation that effective leaders align and focus systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment within and across grade levels. Alignment can promote academic success, love of learning, and a healthy sense of self among students.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). <https://tinyurl.com/wallacestandards>. 

Linda Fitch is a librarian with Education Northwest, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming teaching and learning located in Portland, Oregon.



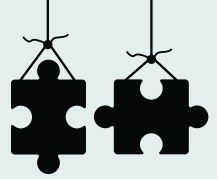
Meet Children Where They Are



An early childhood education continuum focuses on more than academics alone to foster student success



By Kelly Cobb



Great things are happening in the Coffee County School System. We're undergoing a paradigm shift in the way we pursue early childhood education, and it is producing a powerful impact on our youngest learners.

Over the last year, I participated in a year-long learning program for administrators, the NAESP Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy, through a joint partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools, and the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The course is designed to improve understanding among school and district leadership of child development and the pre-K–3 learning continuum, as well as help administrators improve instructional leadership practices.

I am grateful to have been a part of such an excellent professional learning opportunity. Our administrators and teachers are now more aware of how children develop, especially in the pre-K–3 early learning continuum. More importantly, we learned to better address our learning strategies to the children—meet them where they are—when they enter kindergarten. Our focus is no longer solely on academics; schools in our district have shifted to a whole-child development and learning approach that includes cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and academic learning domains.

Collaboration and Feedback

One valuable lesson we learned in building out our pre-K–3 continuum is the importance of school leaders building a collaborative working environment that supports professional growth, efficacy, and learning for teachers and support personnel. School leaders must focus on conducting appropriate and meaningful classroom observation and supplying ongoing teacher feedback.

Job-embedded professional learning experiences have helped our teachers deepen their knowledge of the different stages of child development and learning domains and the most effective ways to communicate the importance of social and emotional learning to stakeholders. Job-embedded professional development is beneficial when it addresses the individual needs of the classroom teacher and is grounded in day-to-day practice.

High Standards

Another lesson we learned while building a pre-K–3 continuum is that effective leaders

embrace new learning and are committed to high standards of quality. The district has embraced the concept of high-quality early learning for all children, no matter where they might be when they enter school. Ultimately, the goal is to develop and implement learning communities that foster achievement and prepare all students for success in school, work, and life.


Children's performance levels during the pre-K–3 continuum are significant predictors of later success in school and life. The best way to guarantee high-quality instruction every day, we found, is to offer a range of strategies that includes developmentally appropriate practices and authentic learning opportunities. Young children benefit most from teachers and administrators who have the skills and judgment to foster student development in all learning domains.

In planning developmentally appropriate practices in a pre-K–3 continuum, the curriculum is a critical tool in helping young learners achieve significant educational goals. The interactions occurring throughout the day between teachers and students are essential to the design of learning experiences and how teachers adapt their teaching pedagogy. Feedback and formative assessments also have a substantial effect on children's learning and success.

Effective leadership in the pre-K–3 continuum sets high expectations, deepening understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) throughout the school, district, and community.

Leaders Listen

Leaders need to be good listeners and know how to articulate the value of early learning and inclusive early education to parents and stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, and support personnel alike need to be able to thoroughly explain the “whys” and “hows” of changes installed in the pre-K–3 continuum.

Coffee County is working to provide the best learning opportunities for our students by building a seamless transition for the pre-K–3 continuum, DAP, and assessments for the youngest learners, advocating on students' behalf and educating stakeholders on how a young child's brain develops, grows, and learns. In the words of Maria Montessori, “Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society.” 

Kelly Cobb is coordinator of Federal Programs/Elementary/Pre-K for Coffee County (Alabama) Schools.



LEARN MORE

An evaluation of the Academy revealed that participants experienced significant growth in each of the six Pre-K–3 leadership competencies. Ninety percent of respondents reported that the academy helped them to “better meet the needs of vulnerable children.” For more information on the Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy, visit www.naesp.org/prek3-leadership.