



EAB

Effective Practices for Aligning Pre-K Through Third Grade

District Leadership Forum

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1) Executive Overview | 4 |
| Key Observations | 4 |
| 2) Aligning Standards and Curricula | 5 |
| Standards..... | 5 |
| Curricula | 6 |
| 3) Implementing Developmentally-Appropriate Instruction in P-3..... | 9 |
| Student Behaviors | 9 |
| Purposeful Play | 11 |
| Academic Rigor | 13 |
| Movement | 18 |
| 4) Facilitating Transitions Between Grades | 20 |
| Pre-K to Kindergarten | 20 |
| Kindergarten Through Third Grade..... | 20 |
| Engaging Families..... | 21 |
| 5) Research Methodology | 23 |
| Project Challenges | 23 |
| Project Sources | 23 |
| Research Parameters | 24 |
| 6) Appendix A..... | 26 |
| 7) Appendix B..... | 30 |
| 8) Appendix C..... | 32 |

1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Align curricula to research-informed early learning standards to ensure instructional practices both reflect and motivate children’s development.

Contacts at all profiled districts report that effective early learning standards improve pre-K through third-grade (P-3) alignment by defining the limits—both upper and lower—of student achievement in P-3 classrooms. Teachers can then differentiate instruction to students based on where they land within the limits. Standards should also clearly define the links between academic progress and children’s cognitive, physical, and social emotional development. To encourage a close alignment to standards, **District A** publishes a breakdown of how each instructional unit in each grade corresponds to specific skills laid out in the state’s early learning standards.

Administer standardized tests, curricula-embedded assessments, and teacher surveys to evaluate level of academic rigor at each grade level.

Contacts at all profiled districts administer standardized tests to evaluate student performance against research-backed benchmarks. Teachers at **District B** share the data from these tests with one another to determine the effectiveness of rigorous teaching practices. At **District C** and **District D**, teachers and administrators use curricula-embedded assessments from [Teaching Strategies Gold](#) to evaluate how students respond to varying levels of rigor on a day-to-day basis. At **District A**, administrators use grade-aligned benchmark documents to survey teachers about the level of rigor their students receive.

To prepare students for future grades, develop a play-based instructional model for P-3 that gradually and creatively incorporates increasingly structured learning time.

As students progress through P-3 at all profiled districts, purposeful play remains an integral part of their learning experience. However, contacts at all profiled districts emphasize that teachers and administrators must find creative ways to combine purposeful play with increasingly structured learning time. This prepares students for the “desk learning” model of older grades, while ensuring that they still receive developmentally appropriate instruction. **District C**, for example, implements a “plan-do-review” model in every grade, where students spend time planning an activity, doing the activity, and reflecting on what they learned. As students progress through P-3, they spend less time verbally discussing their plans, and more time writing about them. The activities themselves remain play-based and hands-on.

Use teacher meetings, teacher observations, and acclimation periods to facilitate transitions between grades.

Administrators at **District B** facilitate meetings between teachers at different grade levels to discuss students’ performance on assessments. These meetings allow teachers to target support in the correct areas and to adjust their pedagogical approaches accordingly. At **District C**, teachers and administrators conduct instructional rounds between grade levels, sharing instructional practices through direct classroom observation and the building of professional relationships. To maximize kindergarten readiness, teachers and administrators at **District D** developed a “soft start to kindergarten” program. For the first six weeks of kindergarten, teachers entirely focus on slowly acclimating students to the school environment through a curriculum that stresses social emotional learning, community-building, and routine-setting.

2) Aligning Standards and Curricula

Standards

Use Standards that Reflect Child Development and Span the Pre-K Through Third-Grade Continuum to Design Learning Objectives for Each Grade

Standards help teachers and administrators implement successful, age-appropriate instructional practices in pre-K through third grade (P-3) by setting academic benchmarks that align to research on child development. This allows teachers and administrators to structure P-3 as a continuum—a sequential, continuous learning experience with instruction that reflects children’s developmental needs. Teachers and administrators should use standardized academic and developmental benchmarks to set learning objectives for each grade level along the P-3 continuum (e.g., reading by the end of third grade). This motivates teachers and administrators to articulate exactly what they expect students to know and to do at each grade level. When developing a P-3 continuum, align instruction with early learning standards that reflect recommendations from the National P-3 Center.¹

Standards Recommendations from *The National P-3 Center*

Standards should:



Include elements of cognitive, literacy/language/communication, math, social-emotional, and physical development.



Align along a developmental continuum, birth through age 8 (grade 3).

At all profiled districts, administrators use state standards to calibrate instruction in their early learning programs, since their state standards meet the above recommendations. Administrators at **District E** aligned their pre-K program to [Washington’s Early Learning and Development Guidelines](#). For K-3, teachers deliver instruction aligned to the [Washington State Learning Standards](#). The state’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) designed both of these sets of standards to align with one another and ensure continuity between grade levels. Washington’s early learning standards follow the Common Core state standards for literacy and math instruction. For science instruction, they follow the [Next Generation Science Standards](#). Special committees at OSPI set standards for all other content areas.

For grades P-3, administrators at both **District D** and **District B** prioritize [Oregon’s Early Learning and Kindergarten Guidelines](#). These guidelines expand upon the state’s Common Core standards in five domains:

- Approaches to learning
- Social-emotional development
- Language and communication
- Literacy
- Mathematics

1) Kristie Kauerz and Julia Coffman, “Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches,” *National P-3 Center*, <https://nationalp-3center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/P-3-Framework.pdf>, 2019, pg. 14.

Implement Common, Grade-Level Curricula at All Schools to Ensure District-Wide, P-3 Continuity

To align instruction across the district, district administrators should require that all same-grade classrooms use the same curricula at all schools (e.g., all first grade classrooms in a district should use the same curricula).² Curricula should align closely to state standards. District leaders should encourage teachers to help in the curricular selection/creation process, as well as in the construction of a district-wide implementation and evaluation framework for the curricula. To ensure that district curricula improve P-3 alignment, they should meet several requirements.

Curricula Recommendations from *The National P-3 Center*

Curricula should:



Reflect developmental and pedagogical research.



Align to state early learning standards.



Emphasize the importance of child development and learning progressions.



Guide both the process and content of teaching.



Reflect the lived experiences of children in the classroom, school/program, or district.

District A provides a grade-by-grade breakdown of how each section of the curricula aligns to state standards.

Administrators should annually review curricula—refining, replacing, or retiring them if needed. District leaders must also ensure that every school receives the necessary materials and equipment to effectively administer selected curricula. Research suggests that a lack of adequate resources may produce or widen achievement gaps.³ This ultimately hinders P-3 alignment by reducing students' ability to achieve standardized benchmarks that indicate grade-readiness.

Finally, to facilitate the effective administration of selected curricula, district administrators must hire well-trained teachers. Research indicates that successful P-3 teachers have completed training in the science of child development, as well as in strategies to conduct age-appropriate lessons through play.⁴ To that end, district administrators may wish to consult state regulations on licensure requirements for teachers and school principals.

2) Kauerz and Coffman, "Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches," *National P-3 Center*, <https://nationalp-3center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/P-3-Framework.pdf>, 2019, pg. 14.

3) "Birth to Grade 3 Indicator Framework: Opportunities to Integrate Early Childhood in ESSA Toolkit," *Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes*, pg. 23, September 2017, <https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Birth%20to%20Grade%20Indicator%20Framework.pdf>

4) "K-3 Policymakers' Guide to Action: Making the Early Years Count," pgs. 6-7, November 2016, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED570989.pdf>



Regularly Discuss Curricula with Teachers to Ensure Continuous Alignment to Standards

Administrators at **District B** regularly schedule meetings between pre-K teachers and administrators to ensure that the district’s early learning curriculum aligns to state standards.

Consider Publishing Recommended Instructional Minutes and Target Skills to Indicate How Teachers Should Adapt Curricula to Each Grade Level

Administrators should not expect teachers to follow instructional minute recommendations exactly. Teachers may adjust their daily schedules to differentiate instruction.

Contacts at **District A** report that articulating a recommended breakdown of instructional minutes for kindergarten through third grade can improve alignment by defining common, subject-specific goals for every school that uses the curricula. Administrators at **District A** publish recommended (or “expected”) minutes for each subject area at each grade level. This allows teachers to adapt the district’s curricula to each grade level. It also allows district administrators to articulate the expected level of rigor at each grade level, as shown through the change in expected minutes and the introduction of increasingly complex activities (e.g., “Text Talk” replaces “Read Aloud”). District leaders at **District A** recommend that these minutes remain consistent throughout each grade level. No contacts reported that the number of instructional minutes vary from the beginning to the end of each grade level—rather, all profiled districts implement daily schedules that remain largely consistent from the beginning to the end of each year.

Comparison of *District A’s* Recommended Minutes for Kindergarten and Second Grade

Kindergarten

| Vocabulary | Read Aloud | Centers | Writing | Foundational Literacy | Storytelling/Acting |
|------------|------------|--|------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 5 min/day | 20 min/day | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intro to Centers (10 min/day) Centers (50-60 min/day) Thinking & Feedback (10 min/day) | 30 min/day | 30 min/day | 10 min/day |

Second Grade

| Text Talk | Foundational Literacy | Stations | Science & Engineering | Studios | Writing | Storytelling/Acting |
|------------|-----------------------|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|---|
| 45 min/day | 30 min/day | 45 min/day | 30 min/day, twice per week | 30 min/day, three times per week | 30 min/day | 10 min/day, twice per week. Also embedded into lessons. |

Only administrators at **District A** recommend instructional minutes for subject areas in pre-K. At all other profiled districts, administrators instead define a set of foundational skills (aligned to state standards) that teachers emphasize in fluid, interdisciplinary sessions in pre-K to prepare students for kindergarten.

Foundational Skills to Emphasize in Pre-K at *District E*



Communication and language
(what students say and how they understand others)



Fine and gross motor
(coloring, cutting, balance, throwing, etc.)



Cognition (problem-solving skills, concepts such as colors, shapes, letters, numbers, etc.)



Social interaction (how students develop and maintain relationships with classmates, teachers, other adults, etc.)



Adaptive/self-help (eating, dressing, following directions, paying attention, etc.)

Implement Single SEL Curriculum with Consistency to Align SEL Instruction from P-3

Teachers and administrators at all profiled districts integrate SEL instruction throughout the school day at each grade level. At **District B** and **District E**, teachers partner with school counselors to implement the [Second Step](#) curriculum during and between classes. Contacts at **District B** report that Second Step improves their P-3 alignment practices by giving students continuous SEL instruction that builds year after year.


3) Implementing Developmentally-Appropriate Instruction in P-3

Student Behaviors

Encourage Target Student Behaviors in Three Areas to Build the Foundation for Academic Success

Research on early childhood development has identified three core competencies (“EPPIC” skills) that indicate school readiness by linking students’ academic performance to their physical, cognitive, and social emotional development. “EPPIC” skills refer to engagement, planning and problem-solving, and initiative and creativity. Research indicates that achieving mastery of these skills in P-3 leads to higher academic outcomes in math and reading, as well as to the development of a “growth mindset.”⁵ Therefore, teachers and administrators should encourage them in every classroom from P-3. Educators can measure and evaluate the presence of EPPIC skills by matching each skill with a set of leading indicators.

EPPIC Skills: Definitions and Indicators⁶

| Skill | Definition | Indicators |
|---|--|---|
|  Engagement | <p>Behavioral engagement: Participation in the schooling process. Presence of positive conduct (attending school, completing assigned work, adhering to classroom norms) and the absence of negative conduct (missing school, engaging in disruptive behaviors).</p> <p>Emotional engagement: Positive affective school relationships with teachers, classmates, academic subjects, and the school itself.</p> <p>Cognitive engagement: Students’ investment in learning. A student exhibiting cognitive engagement will expend the necessary energy to tackle difficult tasks.⁷</p> | <p>Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Become involved in a variety of classroom activities.• Sustain attention despite distractions.• Persist in activities. |

5) Marilou Hyson, “Approaches to Learning: kindergarten to Grade 3 Guide,” *New Jersey Department of Education*, <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/rttt/k3/guide.pdf> pg. 6.
6) Hyson, “Approaches to Learning,” <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/rttt/k3/guide.pdf>.
7) Jennifer A. Fredricks and Wendy McColskey, “The Measurement of Student Engagement: A Comparative Analysis of Various Methods and Student Self-report Instruments,” *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*, 2012, <https://www.jcsc.org/cms/lib/MN01001004/Centricity/Domain/108/The%20Measurement%20of%20Student%20Engagement-%20A%20Comparative%20Analysis%20of%20Various%20Methods.pdf> See also: Committee on Developing Indicators of Educational Equity, *Monitoring Educational Equity*, 2019, <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25389/monitoring-educational-equity>



Planning & Problem-Solving

The process of learning through discovery and invention. Supported by research that suggests students understand best what they make themselves.⁸

- Students:
- Plan work to accomplish learning tasks.
 - Use varied, flexible strategies to deal with problems.
 - Show appropriate self-regulation and resilience in the face of challenges.



Initiative & Creativity

The willingness and desire to pursue “divergent thinking,”⁹ which includes:

- Breaking up old ideas
- Generating new ideas
- Forming connections between those ideas

- Students:
- Challenge themselves by trying out a variety of learning experiences.
 - Try to broaden and deepen their own learning.
 - Find new connections across different ideas and learning tasks.

Researchers recommend a number of strategies teachers should use to encourage the development of these skills across all subject areas and learning environments.

Selected Teacher Strategies to Develop EPPIC Skills¹⁰

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Emphasize frequent, small group activities | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Verbally acknowledge effort and persistence |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Encourage children’s agency | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Remodel lessons as needed |

Academic Rigor, Purposeful Play, and Physical Movement Deployed to Elicit EPPIC Skills Form the Pillars of Developmentally-Appropriate Practice in P-3




Contacts at all profiled districts stress the importance of grounding all aspects of P-3 instruction in developmentally-appropriate practice. In grades P-3, “developmentally-appropriate practice” often refers to the methods that teachers and administrators use to encourage EPPIC skills. Successful P-3 continuums primarily promote these skills—and thus implement developmentally-appropriate practice—through play-based, academically rigorous instructional practices that include designated periods of physical movement.

8) Joan Britz, “Problem Solving in Early Childhood Classrooms,” *ERIC Digests*, 1993, <https://www.ericdigests.org/1993/early.htm#:~:text=Problem%20solving%20is%20the%20foundation%20of%20a%20young%20child's%20learning.&text=By%20observing%20the%20child%20closely,the%20lifelong%20process%20of%20learning>. See also: Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*, 1963, https://www.pitt.edu/~strauss/origins_r.pdf.

9) Alice Sterling Honig, “Children’s Creative Development,” *Scholastic Early Childhood Today*, accessed January 15th, 2021, <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/how-promote-creative-thinking/>. See also: Creative Education Foundation, “Divergent Thinking,” <https://www.creativeeducationfoundation.org/creative-problem-solving/divergent-thinking/>, accessed January 19th, 2021.

10) Hyson, “Approaches to Learning,” <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/rttt/k3/guide.pdf>.

Pillars of Developmentally-Appropriate Practice

| Target Student Behaviors: Engagement, Planning & Problem Solving, Initiative & Creativity <i>Elicited via the implementation of the three pillars below.</i> | | |
|---|---|---|
| Purposeful Play  | Academic Rigor  | Movement  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful exploration of topics through experiential and context-based learning.¹¹ • Integration of teacher-guided, child-directed learning across all content areas.¹² | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement of academic goals and standards.¹³ • The process of challenging students' minds by connecting learning to real-world contexts.¹⁴ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-appropriate physical activity that improves student engagement. • Combination of guided and free movement. |

Notably, the common definition of academic rigor in early childhood research (above) does not entirely align with the definition of academic rigor at profiled districts. Contacts at most profiled districts describe academic rigor as the process of challenging students to do their best, with the goal of mastery of standards—but with the understanding that some students may not achieve that goal.

Purposeful Play

Begin Teaching Inquiry Play in Pre-K to Promote Deeper Learning Through Purposeful Play in Future Grades

Contacts at all profiled districts report that combining free play (play with no explicitly-defined learning objectives) with guided inquiry play (play with clear learning objectives) leads to successful pre-K instruction. Moreover, they report that this lays the foundation for more successful purposeful play in later years. At **District B**, administrators highlight the need to clearly articulate learning objectives at the beginning of pre-K lessons. For example, pre-K teachers in **District B** begin a “house building” activity by telling the students to make a specific pattern in their houses. Students choose their own materials and how to organize their time to construct the pattern. This combination of guidance and choice helps acclimate pre-K students to the more complex play-based instruction that occurs in later grades.

11) Preschool Learning through “Purposeful Play,” <https://www.schoolbag.edu.sg/story/pre-school-learning-through-‘purposeful-play’/>, November 2012.

12) Adapted from District D’s definition of purposeful play, accessed January 29th, 2021.

13) Barbara R. Blackburn, *Rigor Is NOT a Four-Letter Word*, 2012.

14) Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski, “What Do You Mean by Rigor?” *Educational Leadership*, <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec06/vol64/num04/What-Do-You-Mean-by-Rigor%C2%A2.aspx>, 2006/2007.



Design Lessons Around Students' Abilities

Administrators at **District C** caution that inquiry play in pre-K classrooms must reflect students' abilities. To accommodate their physical and emotional stamina, **District C's** pre-K students receive guided play lessons in short intervals dispersed fluidly throughout the school day. This focus on developmentally-appropriate instruction extends to classroom materials: Pre-K students in **District C** use cardboard instead of wooden blocks and write with thinner markers to develop fine motor skills.







Implement Increasingly Rigorous Play via Interdisciplinary Centers to Align Instruction with Research-Backed Frameworks

Research suggests that children learn best from lessons that combine multiple ideas and subjects.¹⁵ As a result, P-3 teachers should construct interdisciplinary centers (e.g., a section of the classroom devoted to art would also contain elements of literacy, writing, and math) at every grade level. Moreover, the combination of teacher-guided, child-directed play introduced in pre-K should extend from K-3. Contacts at all profiled districts report that this structure forms the foundation of developmentally-appropriate instruction in P-3 and promotes the development of EPPIC skills.

Every center period at **District A** begins with an "introduction" to centers, where the teacher lays out the objective for each center and invites the children to choose (first and second choice) where they want to learn.¹⁶ If needed, teachers refer back to each center objective throughout the lesson. Teachers also sometimes begin a lesson by sharing an example of a student's work from the previous day. Lessons become more complex and project-based as students progress through **District A's** early learning curriculum. Contacts at **District A** also stress the importance of crafting lessons that reflect the children's communities.

¹⁵) [District A's Early Learning Program]", *District A*, accessed January 29th, 2021.
¹⁶) *Ibid.*

Lesson Trajectory at *District A*¹⁷

| Grade | Lesson |
|---|--|
| Kindergarten  | Kindergarteners collaborate as a class to construct a "Community Helping Building" out of art supplies.  |
| First Grade  | First graders learn about consumerism by using specific words to describe a scene from a nearby farmer's market.  |
| Second Grade  | Second graders study erosion by visiting a nearby national park. They then build a "river" in their own classroom using sand and water.  |

Academic Rigor

Combine Increasingly Structured Learning Time with Purposeful Play to Prepare Students for Future Grades

As students progress through P-3 at each profiled district, purposeful play remains an integral part of their learning experience. However, contacts at **District C** emphasize that teachers and administrators must find creative ways to combine purposeful play with increasingly structured learning time. This prepares students for the "desk learning" model of older grades, while ensuring that they still receive developmentally-appropriate instruction.

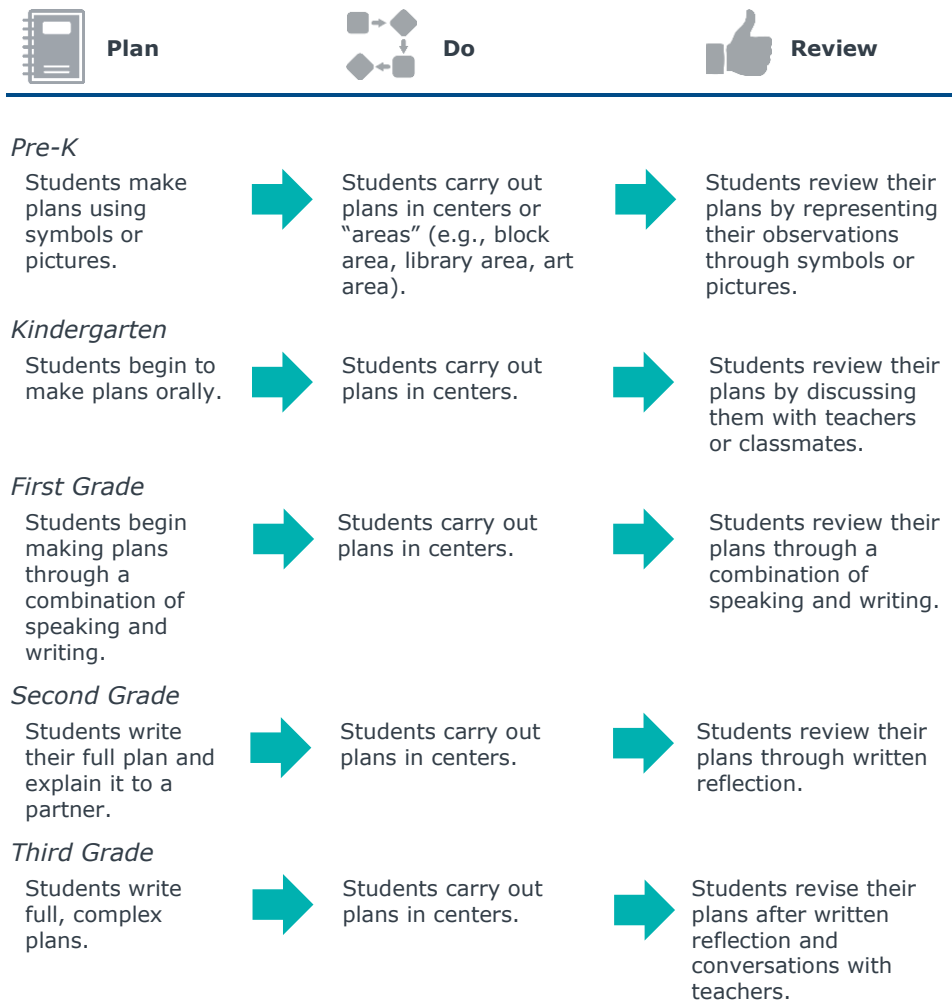
While still fundamentally play-based, teachers gradually introduce increased complexity and structure into instruction to prepare students for later grades. Teachers can slow down or accelerate these transitions based on the developmental needs of any given student.

For example, teachers at **District C** implement a "plan-do-review" instructional model at every grade level from P-3. Students spend time planning a task, doing the task (i.e., engaging in purposeful play), and reflecting on the results. As students progress along the P-3 continuum, their planning and reviewing periods become increasingly complex and structured.

¹⁷)Ibid.

“Plan-Do-Review” Model at *District C*

During the “Do” stage, students engage in purposeful play.



Consider Implementing Group Discussions, Aligned Phonetics Training, and Referential Instruction to Progressively Increase the Rigor of Literacy Lessons

At both **District A** and **School F** (part of Beaverton School District in Oregon), literacy instruction increases in complexity with each grade but relies on the same foundational practices across the P-3 continuum. Contacts at **District A** report that rigorous literacy instruction forms the core of their curriculum and motivates the development of hard and soft skills.

Skills Developed Through Aligned Literacy Instruction

- “Reading to learn” by the end of third grade
- Awareness of culture and identity
- Verbal and written communication skills
- Interpersonal skills

EAB does not endorse any specific phonics curricula. To construct a successful literacy program, administrators must first ensure that teachers receive training in the [science of reading](#).

To achieve these benchmarks, teachers at **District A** present increasingly complex texts in increasingly student-driven contexts. For example, teachers read aloud texts to pre-K and kindergarten students, while first and second grade students discuss books with one another during “Text Talk” sessions. **District A** also uses Wilson Language Training’s [Foundations](#) curriculum to teach phonetics in K-3. Contacts at **District A** report that Foundations aligns to state standards and serves as a prevention program, working to reduce failure and learning loss in literacy.

To align rigorous, play-based literacy instruction from P-3, **School F** adopted an instructional approach in which literacy instruction each year refers back to literacy instruction from the previous year and builds upon it. Children learn how to fundamentally engage with a text in pre-K. They then build on those fundamentals by completing increasingly complex tasks related to the same text as they move from grade to grade.

Referential Literacy Instruction at *School F*

Pre-K and Kindergarten

Teachers read aloud **two stories** and ask students to compare and contrast them. Teachers invite students to demonstrate the differences they observed by using art and other materials scattered throughout the classroom.



First and Second Grade

Students represent differences between **the same two stories** by combining written descriptions with graphic representations produced in centers.



Third Grade

Students create their own characters and discuss how they would fit into **the same story**.

Contacts at **School F** report that this instructional approach gives children a more complex understanding of the texts. Making choices about how they process and represent information helps students build upon the understanding gained in earlier years.

Through Standardized Assessments, Check Student Achievement of Benchmarks to Adjust Level of Rigor as Needed

This process—by which teachers challenge each student according to their level of ability—reflects the working definition of academic rigor at most profiled districts referenced on [page 11](#).

Contacts at all profiled districts administer standardized assessments at each grade level from K-3. These assessments use established benchmarks to evaluate student performance. If students consistently do not achieve benchmarks, teachers differentiate to remediate skills gaps (see [page 16](#)). Teachers and administrators at **District A** also set formative and summative goals for each student within grade-specific rubrics and report cards, both of which align to standards. Teachers and administrators want students to reach the “Established” or “Going Beyond” sections of their report cards by the end of each academic year.

Examples of Standardized Assessments Administered at *District A*

| | PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening) | LAP (Learning Accomplishment Profile) | EVT (Expressive Vocabulary Test) | NWEA MAP |
|-----------------|--|--|---|---|
| Age/Grade Level | P-3 | Pre-K and kindergarten | P-3 | K-3 |
| Target Skill(s) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literacy fundamentals Skills predictive of future reading success | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gross motor Fine motor Language Cognition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressive vocabulary acquisition/performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early literacy skills (fluency, growth) Math and science proficiency |

Reference *District A's* Grade-Aligned Benchmark Documents to Determine Appropriate Level of Rigor at Each Grade Level

Administrators at **District A** created a document that states which academic/cognitive skills teachers should teach in each grade P-2 (see **Appendix A**). Administrators at **District A** use this document to gauge whether teachers believe those skills to be appropriately rigorous for their grade level. Other districts could reference this document to determine the appropriate level rigor at each grade level, since administrators at **District A** used developmental science to inform the documents.

Differentiate Instruction to Meet Students' Developmental Needs and Ensure Content Mastery

Administrators should use standards to define the limits—both upper and lower—of student success in each lesson. Contacts at **District B** explain that across any given grade level from P-3, students display an average of a two-year range in development. This leads to significant variation in student achievement relative to standards, as measured through standardized assessments. As a result, contacts at all profiled districts stress the need to differentiate instruction as needed. This ensures that students receive the particular form of attention they need to master foundational and subject-specific skills.

Research recommends that teachers differentiate instruction based on student readiness (i.e., a student's capacity to perform a task—which may exceed their demonstrated ability), student interest (i.e., engagement with content stemming from a student's personality or experiences), and student learning profile (i.e., the most efficient and effective way to promote an individual student's understanding). Teachers should cluster, or group, students based on one or more of the above three criteria.¹⁸ To create clusters of students within the classroom (e.g., a group of students with a similar readiness level or a group of students with similar interests), research recommends that teachers should consistently and frequently assess students. The following table contains suggested assessment categories adapted from research on differentiated instruction,¹⁹ as well as from the National P-3 Center.

18) Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya R. Moon, "Differentiation: An Overview," ASCD, accessed February 5th, 2021. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108028/chapters/Differentiation@-An-Overview.aspx>.

19) Carol Ann Tomlinson and Tonya R. Moon, "Assessment and Student Success in a Differentiated Classroom," ASCD, 2015, 17.

Assessment Categories to Promote Differentiated Instruction

| Diagnostic (pre-assessments) | Formative | Summative |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Definition and Purpose</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessments that identify where a student currently lands on the P-3 developmental and academic continuum. Designed to determine initial student mastery of unit learning goals (KUDs) and to evaluate important prerequisite knowledge for the unit. Gives the teacher a sense of the range of individual student needs in the class relative to KUDs, before the teacher begins instruction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum-embedded assessments designed to evaluate students' mastery of subject material and engagement in all aspects of learning. To ensure alignment, formative assessments should reflect state standards and curricula. Tightly aligned with KUDs, with particular emphasis on KUDs for the most recent lesson(s). Helps the teacher understand student progression in each KUD so the teacher can clearly plan next steps for the class as a whole, for small groups of students, and for individuals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> End-of-unit assessments that evaluate student progress against established developmental and academic benchmarks. These assessments should align most closely to standards. |
| <i>Timeline</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administered before a unit begins (or shortly into the unit if the content is likely to be new to students). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administered multiple times throughout a unit. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administered at the end of the unit and/or at the end of the year. |
| <i>Format</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tightly aligned with unit KUDs. Samples key KUDs; not intended to be lengthy or exhaustive. Can use a variety of formats, including writing prompts, graphic organizers, etc. Not graded. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can use a variety of formats such as exit cards, journal entries, and systematic teacher conversations with individual students. Rarely graded, but can provide clear, important feedback that helps a student determine next steps in learning. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardized or teacher-designed tests that reflect standards. Graded. |

Administrators at **District C** and **District D** use [Teaching Strategies Gold](#) (TSG) to guide their formative assessments. TSG provides teachers with curricula-embedded assessment strategies that help them evaluate how each student responds to varying levels of instructional rigor. It also helps teachers differentiate instruction if needed. TSG aligns to each state's early learning guidelines.



Combine Child-Directed Centers with Small Group Instruction to Successfully Differentiate Instruction in P-3 Classrooms

At **District E**, teachers use learning center time to deliver targeted instruction to small groups of students who require extra support. Teachers deliver small group instruction to students performing within the lower limits set by standards, while students performing within the upper limits engage in self-directed, purposeful play centers. This fluid approach accommodates the high degree of variation in student achievement throughout P-3.

Create a Multi-Tiered Data-Sharing Structure to Share Assessment Results and Ease Transitions Between Grades

As students progress through a district's P-3 continuum, teachers and administrators should have continuous access to their performance data. This ensures students receive the support they need as they transition between grades and between schools. As a result, administrators must create and maintain a robust, district-wide data-sharing structure. Schools should continuously report disaggregated assessment data at the classroom, age, grade, and schoolwide levels. School principals should then collaborate with district leaders to ensure that teachers, families, and stakeholders all receive access to this data. A robust data-sharing structure helps ensure that assessments remain equitable and transparent across the entire district.²⁰

To improve P-3 alignment at the school level, administrators at **District B** facilitate assessment meetings between teachers at all points during the school year. Teachers discuss student performance on assessments and any concerns they have. This also allows teachers to evaluate their own instructional practices: If their students consistently perform below average on assessments administered at the next grade level, they can discuss possible solutions with the teacher who administered the exams.

Movement

Integrate Physical Movement Throughout the Day to Improve Student Learning and Engagement

Research on early childhood development has identified increasingly strong links between academic learning and physical movement.²¹ Studies have found positive correlations between movement and memory,²² as well as a direct connection between mathematical thinking and physical mechanics.²³ As a result, P-3 education must include integrated periods of physical movement throughout the school day. Teachers at **District D** and **District E** incorporate movement through classroom transitions and strategically-placed recess periods. At **School F**, teachers use a database of videos to organize movement breaks.

20) Kauerz and Coffman, "Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches"

21) Katrina Schwartz, "Why Kids Need to Move, Touch and Experience to Learn," KQED, <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/39684/why-kids-need-to-move-touch-and-experience-to-learn>, March 26th, 2015.

22) Christopher Madan and Anthony Singhal, "Using Actions to Enhance Memory: Effects of Enactment, Gestures, and Exercise on Human Memory," *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3536268/>, 2012.

23) Schwartz, "Why Kids Need to Move, Touch and Experience to Learn."

Teachers at **District D** build songs and dances into class transitions. Many of them also allow flexible seating at all grade levels from P-3, encouraging children to sit, lie, or stand where they choose during lessons.

Pre-K students at **District E** physically engage with their environment through center work, dramatic play centers, and physical activity—both in the gym and outside. Administrators schedule frequent movement breaks for K-3 students, providing them with 15 minutes of recess at the beginning of the day, 30 minutes in the middle of the day, and 15 minutes in the afternoon. Teachers at **District E** also use the [MindUp](#) curriculum's Focused Awareness practice to prepare students for learning after movement breaks.

Create a Repository of Movement Videos to Aid Teachers

School F uses a database of movement videos published and maintained by the school district. District administrators select PE teachers that work with P-3 students to create movements backed by cognitive research. PE teachers then train classroom teachers and counselors to make the videos. Teachers use the videos during, after, or between classes to promote active learning.

4) Facilitating Transitions Between Grades

Pre-K to Kindergarten

Create a Checklist to Assess Students' Kindergarten Readiness

Administrators at **District E** and **District D** use checklists to evaluate pre-K students before they enter kindergarten (**Appendix B** and **Appendix C**). At **District E**, administrators facilitate transition meetings between pre-K and kindergarten teachers. During these meetings, teachers discuss individual students' performances against the readiness checklist (see **Appendix B**). Administrators also circulate the checklist to families of pre-K students. **District E's** checklist contains primarily foundational skills assessments, with a short section on academic skills at the end.

At **District D**, administrators distribute a "Child-Centered Plan" to each pre-K family (see **Appendix C**). This plan contains questions about the child's hobbies, interests, and learning styles. They also provide space for parents and guardians to notify teachers of any academic or developmental challenges their children face. Administrators at **District D** recommend that pre-K families discuss the Child-Centered Plan with their child's kindergarten teacher before the start of the school year.

Designate a Period of "Soft" Instruction to Acclimate Children to Kindergarten

District A also implements a soft start to pre-K. Teachers dedicate the first three weeks of the school year to acclimating students to pre-K.

At **District D**, the beginning of every kindergarten school year begins with a six week "soft start." Teachers avoid giving assessments for the designated period of time and instead focus on acclimating students to the school environment. The soft start curriculum centers around SEL instruction, community-building, and routine-setting. During the six weeks, kindergarten teachers and administrators actively reach out to families to set up one-on-one meetings, making continual reference to the Child-Centered Plan. Contacts at **District D** report that the building of relationships between kindergarten families, teachers, and administrators helps ease the transition from pre-K to kindergarten.

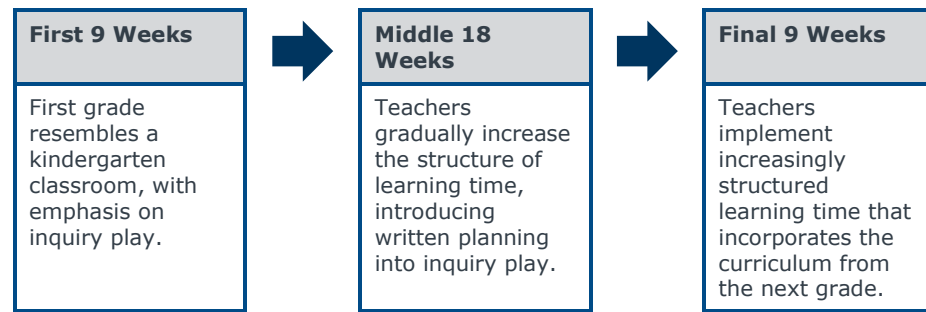
Kindergarten Through Third Grade

Create a Grade-to-Grade Transition Plan that Prioritizes Acclimation Periods

Administrators at **District C** created a "9-18-9" scheduling model that improves P-3 alignment by smoothing transitions between grades. In this model, the first nine weeks of any given grade resemble the previous grade: Teachers use the same furniture, materials, schedule, and curriculum as the previous grade to create an environment that reflects it as accurately as possible. During the middle 18 weeks, teachers transition to developmentally-appropriate instruction that aligns to the standards and curricula set for that specific grade. For the final nine weeks, teachers incorporate the furniture, materials, schedule, and curriculum of the following grade.

District C's 9-18-9 Model: First Grade

This model currently only occurs in kindergarten and first grade. However, administrators at **District C** are planning to implement it in second and third grade.



Organize Teacher and Administrator Classroom Observations Across Grade Levels to Improve Transparency and Share Insights

At **District C**, teachers and administrators observe colleagues' classrooms at several points during the school year. These lessons serve three purposes.

Purposes of Classroom Observations at *District C*

- 1 Teachers visit lower grades to learn about the students they will teach next year.
- 2 Teachers visit higher grades to gather insights about the classrooms their students will enter the following year.
- 3 Teachers share successful instructional practices with one another through direct classroom observation and the development of professional relationships.

Contacts at **District C** also emphasize that early learning alignment requires support from school principals. To secure buy-in from principals, administrators at **District C** built a principal cohort program into their instructional rounds. Principals visit classrooms alongside early learning practitioners (P-3 teachers and administrators). The practitioners point out successful indicators and best practices in each classroom to articulate goals and educate the principals.

Engaging Families

Develop Strong Relationships with Pre-K Families to Improve Kindergarten Readiness

To help prepare students for kindergarten, administrators at **District E** conduct home visits for pre-K families. One coordinator and two parent educators organize these home visits twice per week, using the [ParentChild+](#) program to guide their work. This program offers a series of games, puzzles, activities, and books designed to improve kindergarten readiness. **District E** also runs a "Play and Learn" program for pre-K families. School administrators open classrooms for one and a half hours every Friday, inviting Pre-K families to participate in activities designed to improve their children's kindergarten readiness. These activities align with the [Strengthening Families Program](#), a research-backed framework aimed at supporting familial

relationships. **District E** designates a Family Engagement Coordinator to run these programs with the help of the Home Visit Coordinator.

Schedule Family Engagement Conferences at Every Grade Level to Ensure Culturally-Relevant Instruction

Administrators at **District C** and **District E** organize family engagement conferences to boost familial involvement in their early learning programs. At **District C**, teachers and administrators conduct family engagement conferences every fall at each grade level. Teachers discuss students' performance relative to the [WaKIDS](#) developmental continuum. Contacts at **District C** stress that families should lead these conferences. This raises families' level of comfort and ensures that teachers receive important information about students' lives outside of school.

Contacts at **District E** report that family engagement conferences allow teachers to better deliver culturally-responsive instruction and personalized learning experiences. To guide these conversations, teachers use a questionnaire adapted from the [WaKIDS Family Connection Booklet](#). The survey allows teachers and administrators to learn about students' families, social tendencies, and learning styles. **District E** uses adapted versions of the questionnaire at every grade level to ensure that individual instructional approaches reflect students' lived experiences.

5) Research Methodology

Project Challenges

Leadership at a partner district approached the forum with the following questions:

- How do contact districts structure the weekly schedule for each grade in terms of instructional minutes, particularly with respect to math, literacy, and social-emotional learning (SEL)?
 - Do these schedules remain consistent during each grade? If not, for grades with inconsistent schedules, how do they change as the year progresses?
- How do contact districts determine the appropriate level of academic rigor at each age/grade level?
- How do the emphases on academic rigor in the following subject areas change as students progress through contact districts' early childhood continuums (i.e., both between and within grades)?
 - Math
 - Literacy
- Do contact districts implement any kind of programming to facilitate the transition between grades (e.g. summer programs, beginning/end of year programs, etc.)?
- How do contact districts change their approach to purposeful play as students progress through the early childhood continuum (i.e., does purposeful play transition to self-directed learning (PBL, etc.) in later years)?
- How do contact districts incorporate movement into their P-3 curricula?

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Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed district administrators at districts with P-3 learning continuums and/or efforts to optimize these continuums. The Forum also interviewed an elementary school currently piloting an initiative from the Children's Institute.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

| Institution | Location | Enrollment |
|--------------------|-------------------|--|
| District A | Northeast | 50,000-60,000 |
| District C | Pacific Northwest | 10,000-20,000 |
| District B | Pacific Northwest | 5,000-10,000 |
| District D | Pacific Northwest | 40,000-50,000 |
| District E | Pacific Northwest | 5,000-10,000 |
| School F | Pacific Northwest | 500-1,000 (school); 40,000-50,000 (district) |

6) Appendix A

See below for an adapted version of the grade-aligned teacher surveys that administrators at **District A** use to evaluate academic rigor in P-2 math and literacy instruction.

Teacher Survey: Math Instruction

| Were students in your classroom taught the following numeracy skills this year? | Grade |
|---|-------|
| Recognizing amount when briefly shown a set up to 4 (i.e., subitizing) | PK |
| Matching small sets (up to 5 objects) with the corresponding numerals | PK |
| Correspondence between number and quantity up to 10 | K |
| "Counting on" from a number without starting from 1 (for example, count "7, 8, 9, 10") | K |
| Composing and decomposing numbers from 11 to 19 to understand that these numbers are composed of ten ones and one, two, three, etc. ones. | K |
| Counting to 120, starting at any number less than 120 | 1 |
| Identifying the numbers that represent the tens and ones places in a two-digit number | 1 |
| Determining if both sides of an equation are equal or not equal using subtraction or addition (for example, $7=8-1$; $5+2=2+5$) | 1 |
| Describing relative quantity when comparing two-digit numbers, using the symbols $>$, $=$, and $<$ | 1 |
| Comparing three-digit numbers using the symbols $>$, $=$, and $<$ | 2 |
| Multiplying one-digit whole numbers by 10 | 2 |
| Solving word problems by adding or subtracting numbers equal to 100 or less | 2 |
| Counting accurately to 20 | PK |

| Were students in your classroom taught the following operations and algebraic thinking skills this year? | Grade |
|---|-------|
| Subtracting single-digit numbers | PK/K |
| Solving addition and part-whole problems by indirect modeling, counting all, and using objects | PK/K |
| Making, copying, or extending simple patterns | K |
| Composing and decomposing numbers up to 10 (for example, 3 and 2 combine to make 5, and 5 can be separated into a group of 3 and 2) | K |
| Skip-counting by 5s, 10s, and 100s (within 1000) | 2 |
| Solving word problems by adding three numbers whose sum is 20 or less | 1/2 |
| Fluently adding and subtracting within 20 using mental strategies | 2 |
| Explain how a math problem is solved | 1/2 |
| Provide multiple solution methods for a single problem | 1/2 |

| Were students in your classroom taught the following measurement and data skills this year? | Grade |
|---|-------|
| Physically comparing objects to identify which one is longer or if they are the same length | PK |

| | |
|--|----|
| Sorting, categorizing, and classifying objects by more than one attribute. | PK |
| Describing several measurable attributes (for example, length, weight, volume) of a single object. | K |
| Comparing the lengths of two objects indirectly by using a third object | 1 |
| Telling time in hours and half hours | 1 |
| Measuring the length of an object in standard units, using tools such as rulers, yardsticks, meter sticks, and/or measuring tapes | 2 |
| Measuring to determine how much longer one object is than another, expressing the length difference in terms of a standard length unit | 2 |
| Performing simple data collection and graphing | 2 |
| Solving word problems involving quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies | 2 |
| Working with rulers, measuring cups, spoons or other measuring instruments | K |
| Using measuring instruments accurately | 1 |
| Ordering objects by size or other properties | PK |

| Were students in your classroom taught the following geometry skills this year? | Grade |
|--|--------------|
| Sorting objects into subgroups according to a rule | PK |
| Recognizing and naming simple geometric shapes (for example, square, circle, triangle) | PK |
| Correctly naming shapes regardless of their orientations or overall size | PK |
| Identifying shapes as two-dimensional (lying in a plane, "flat") or three-dimensional ("solid") | K |
| Identifying shapes based on their defining attributes (for example, triangles are three-sided) or using defining attributes to classify or name shapes | K |
| Putting two-dimensional or three-dimensional shapes together to create a composite shape | 1 |
| Partitioning circles and rectangles into two, three, or four equal shares, and describing the shares using the words halves, thirds, half of, a third of, etc. | 1 |
| Drawing shapes when given specified attributes (for example, the number of angles or the number of sides) | 2 |
| Recognize non-typical squares and triangles (like a triangle with two long sides and one very short side) | K |
| Measuring areas by counting unit squares (square centimeters, square inches, etc.) | K |

Teacher Survey: Language Instruction

| Were students in your classroom taught the following language and comprehension skills this year? | Grade |
|--|--------------|
| Building vocabulary using multiple methods, including active sensory experiences | PK |
| Drawing connections between a story and children's lives | ALL |
| Describing characters, settings, and major events in a story | 1 |
| Making predictions about what might happen in a story | PK |
| Describing the overall structure of a story, for example how the beginning introduces the story or how the ending concludes the action | 2 |
| Communicating complete ideas orally | K |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Identifying differences in the points of view of characters in a story | 2 |
| Applying vocabulary knowledge to develop a concept or explain a phenomenon/process | ALL |
| Knowing common prepositions such as over and under, up and down | K |
| Retelling stories, including main ideas and details such as characters, settings, and major events | 1 |
| Describing similarities and differences between two reading selections | 1 |
| Describing how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges | 2 |
| Using sentence-level context to gain meaning of word or phrase | 1 |
| Making inferences in reading a story about characters' motivations and feelings | ALL |
| Asking and/or answering questions to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text | 2 |
| Identifying the main topic of a paragraph of informational text | 2 |
| Identifying word relationships (antonym, synonym, homonym) | ALL |
| Understanding and using question words (interrogatives) (e.g., who, what, where, when, why, how) | 1 |
| Using text features such as glossaries and other references to learn word meanings | 2 |

| Were students in your classroom taught the following reading skills this year? | Grade |
|--|--------------|
| Understanding conventions of print (left to right orientation, book holding) | PK |
| Identifying letters, words, sentences, and ending punctuation | 1 |
| Reading aloud fluently | K |
| Matching letters to sounds | K |
| Distinguishing long and short vowels in one-syllable words | 2 |
| Blending separate sounds of a word to say the word (e.g., "/c/ /a/ /t/ -cat") | K |
| Following text by pointing to each word as it is read, including multi-syllable words | K |
| Reading irregularly spelled words | 1 |
| Reading accurately and fluently to support comprehension | 2 |
| Segmenting words into phonemes | 1 |
| Decoding regularly spelled two-syllable words | 2 |
| With prompting and support, recalling important facts about a text after hearing it read aloud | 1 |
| With prompting and support, describing the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text | 2 |

| Were students in your classroom taught the following writing skills this year? | Grade |
|---|--------------|
| Drawing pictures and using letters or phonetic spelling to write about them | PK |
| Using conventional spelling | K |
| Writing first name independently | PK |
| Composing and writing complete sentences | K |
| Using capitalization and punctuation | K |
| Writing a narrative with two or more appropriately sequenced events | 1 |
| Recognizing and naming some uppercase letters of the alphabet and the lowercase letters in one's own name | K |

| | |
|--|---|
| Using a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, talking about the events in the order in which they occurred, and providing a reaction to what happened | K |
| Using singular and plural nouns with matching verbs in basic sentences (e.g., He hops; We hop) | K |
| Writing an informational piece that contains a clear topic with supporting details | 1 |
| Using linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons | 1 |

7) Appendix B

See below for an adapted version of **District E's** Kindergarten Readiness Checklist.

Kindergarten Readiness Checklist: District E

Find critical skills in **bold print**.

Social Skills:

- **Demonstrates cooperation and friendship skills**
- Has basic coping skills (e.g., not easily frustrated and seldom cries)
- **Enjoys learning**
- Likes doing a kindergarten-type activity independently
- Does not require constant adult attention
- Responds positively to adult direction
- Is courteous and polite to other students and adults (e.g., does not interrupt while others are speaking)
- **Is able to wait for a turn**

Self-Help:

- Knows how to dress self (e.g., tie/buckle/fasten shoes; knows how to zip/button coat)
- Shows respect for school and others property
- **Takes care of personal belongings**
- Follows safety rules indoors and outdoors
- **Tries to solve problems independently**
- Independent with bathroom skills

Oral Communication

- Engages in conversation about daily routine and activities
- **Uses language to express thoughts and needs**
- **Appropriate, developmental talk/language** (excluding baby talk)
- Name common objects
- Stays on the subject line during conversation
- **Responds appropriately to questions**
- Understandable articulation (can speak so someone outside of the home can understand their words)

Memory/Attention Span/Listening

- **Should be able to name themselves and other people in their household (e.g., names, age or grade level)**
- **Should be able to attend 10 minutes on a single activity (excluding tv or video/computer games)**
- Should be able to follow a routine
- Able to follow a 1-2 step direction

Gross Motor:

- Major control over one's body movements (can get from point A to B walking, go safely up and down stairs, keeps hands and feet to oneself)
- Demonstrates keeping a rhythm (clapping, tapping, stomping)
- Can jump, run, hop and catch a ball

Fine Motor/Visual Motor/Positive Indicators of Readiness

- Natural finger grip on writing/coloring tools
- Firm/confident pencil/crayon strokes
- Eye/hand co-ordination (can draw lines and basic shapes)
- Draws a recognizable person
- Has had experience cutting paper with scissors

***Recommended Academic Skills**

- Is able to count from 0-20
- Can identify numbers, 0-10
- Can write numerals, 0-10
- Is able to recite the alphabet and identify letters in child's own name
- Works puzzles with up to 10 pieces
- Is able to write his/her name
- Can identify basic shapes (circle, square, triangle, rectangle, and oval) and knows colors
- Can join-in and make-up songs, chants, rhymes, and rhythm games
- Listens attentively and responds to story telling

*Note: Some students may not be developmentally ready for these academic skills by the time they enter kindergarten.

8) Appendix C

See below for an adapted version of **District D'** Child-Centered Plan.

Child-Centered Plan: District D

Child's Name:

Birthdate:

Head Start / pre-K Teacher:

Teacher's Email:

Head Start / pre-K Site:

kindergarten School:

My child did not attend Head Start, pre-K, or Preschool

1. I am proud that my child knows:
2. My child's interest and hobbies are:
3. My teacher can help my child feel successful by (e.g., transitional warnings, visual/sensory supports, schedules):
4. Things that may make it challenging (e.g., tired, time of day, types of directions, environments, challenges at home)
5. I am excited for my child to learn:
6. I would like to be involved in my child's education in these ways:

Parent/guardian:

Date:

A copy of this form will be kept in your child's education file. We also encourage you to share this form when you meet your child's kindergarten teacher for the first time. This will assist them in learning about your child and help you all have a great kindergarten year.