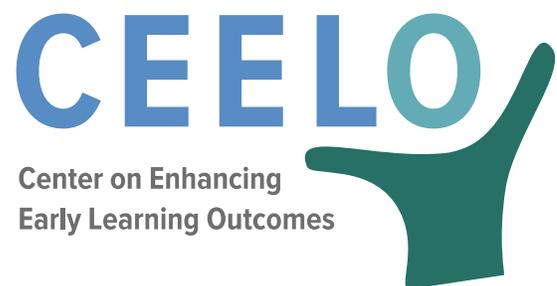


August 2018

# PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Systems: Lessons Learned from New York School Districts

Diane Schilder



# Executive Summary

## What We Found

The New York State Department of Education (NYSED) has been supporting selected districts in the planning and implementation of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade systems. NYSED is supporting the use of the [Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches](#) developed by Kauerz and Coffman (2013). Recognizing the ultimate goal of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade systems is to improve child outcomes and close achievement gaps, the districts have selected a range of priorities. The priorities and approaches reflect the unique district context, initiatives, priorities, and stakeholder perspectives. Each district has made progress in the implementation of their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans.

Analysis of information collected from the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams reveals cross-cutting lessons learned. PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams engaged in planning and implementing a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework could review these lessons learned and associated questions to guide their planning and implementation.

- **Select team members carefully.** Successful planning and implementation requires including all key stakeholders and decision-makers in the process. The successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams included representatives from the superintendent's office, principals, teachers representing the grades that were the initial focus, and, in some instances, parents.
- **Build on existing strengths, priorities and efforts.** Successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation builds on existing district strengths, priorities and activities. Instead of introducing the topic as a new initiative, districts that reported success built on existing strengths, priorities and efforts in their districts.
- **Recognize where the district is on the path of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation.** Rather than trying to implement the entire framework, successful districts focused on building on their existing systems and tailored their approaches to best meet the district contexts. For example, some districts new to Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning with strong professional development systems applied a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach to professional development. Other districts that had been planning and implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches for a period of time, chose to focus their efforts more broadly on strengthening governance across all preschools and schools.
- **Focus on early success in a few areas and then build on that success.** By building on these early successes, the district can then garner ongoing support. Some districts have implemented a narrow set of activities and others have implemented broad PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches. Regardless, each district reported that they began with a manageable set of activities that would lead to early success.

- **Engage champions in the effort.** State PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams noted that it is important to engage champions across the district, rather than a single champion, to succeed in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade implementation. All of the successful districts report that champions helped to secure successful implementation of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans.
- **Phase in activities and learn from early implementation.** Multiple districts reported that to be successful, they began with small pilots or by phasing in their activities rather than trying to adopt district-wide approaches. These districts systematically examined what was working and what barriers existed and then used this information to modify their approaches.
- **Develop a communication strategy.** Districts reported that it is important to communicate to all key stakeholders about district plans for implementing a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework. Some reported that they regularly communicate with administrative leaders, some reported that they have systems in place to engage and communicate with teachers, and others reported that they engage with families and the community broadly.

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
What We Found.....	2
Introduction.....	5
The Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches.....	5
New York State Education Department Work with Districts.....	7
New York District Prek-3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Lessons Learned.....	8
District Cases.....	11
District 1: Watertown. Leveraging Support from Leaders, Teachers, and NYED to Change Instruction ....	11
<i>Ingredients of Success</i> .....	11
District 2: Newburgh. Building on Pre-Existing Activities to Focus on Alignment and Transitions.....	13
<i>Ingredients of Success</i> .....	13
District 3: Uniondale. Engaging Families and Teachers through Joint Professional Development.....	14
<i>Ingredients of Success</i> .....	15
District 4: Port Chester. Focus on Increasing Collaboration and Smooth Transitions.....	16
<i>Ingredients of Success</i> .....	16
Reflections and Conclusion.....	18
Acknowledgements and Contacts.....	20
About CEELO.....	21

# Introduction

In recent years, the New York State Education (NYSED) has been supporting school districts in the implementation of Preschool through Third Grade (PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade) systems. The vision for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches is to improve the quality and coherence of children's learning opportunities, from the experiences children have before entering the K-12 system through elementary school. Ultimately, comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches hold the potential to improve child outcomes and to prevent or close achievement gaps.<sup>1</sup>

## The Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Approaches

New York has supported the use of the [Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Approaches](#) framework developed by Kauerz and Coffman (2013) to support district efforts to develop and implement comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade activities. NYSED recognized the ultimate goal of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches is to improve child outcomes and close achievement gaps. Therefore, NYSED encouraged districts to review the Kauerz and Coffman framework, and then focus on priority areas that best suited the district context. The framework lists priority areas and provides questions that district PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams can address in considering whether the topic is appropriate for the district. The priority areas and associated questions are presented below.

**A. Professional Learning Communities.** Do professional learning communities exist in the districts that could be leveraged to support the PreK- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade activities? How can the PreK to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade team and leaders foster teamwork among individuals, especially teachers, at all levels within the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade work? What can the team do to support teacher participation in regular professional learning communities with other teachers at their age or grade levels? What can the team do to support participation in regular professional learning communities with teachers in other age or grade levels?

**B. Family Engagement.** What efforts are underway in the district to engage families? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team support teachers, administrators, and all staff in schools and programs in understanding the importance of, and employ strategies for, engaging families? What is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kauerz, K. & Coffman, J. (2013). Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Approaches. From [https://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd\\_Framework\\_Legal%20paper.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd_Framework_Legal%20paper.pdf)  
Note: In recent years, the term P3 has been used to refer to prenatal through third grade. New York focuses on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade and therefore, the focus of this report is PreK to grade three.

team doing to use data to inform family engagement activities and data from families to inform PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade activities more broadly?

**C. Transitions.** What transition policies and practices exist in the district? Are there pockets of opportunity that could be leveraged? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> team best support the establishment or refinement of an efficient format for transitions of student files and information throughout the grades beginning with PreK students?

**D. Learning Environments.** How similar or different are the learning environments for early childhood services and the early elementary grades? Are there specific assessments being used among preschool and early elementary school teachers to assess the quality of the learning environments? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team take steps to ensure the learning environments are welcoming and support the community of children and their families, home communities, cultures, and language?

**E. Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Instruction.** What are the current instructional approaches being employed in preschool and the early elementary grades? Are the teachers employing developmentally appropriate practices? What opportunities exist for the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team to ensure that teachers demonstrate common and cohesive instructional practices (across classrooms) that are both developmentally appropriate and differentiated to meet the needs of all children?

**F. Assessments.** What formative and summative child assessments are being used by preschool and early elementary school teachers? What opportunities exist for the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team to support similar high-quality assessments? How can the team support teachers in selecting, using and sharing common and cohesive assessments that are aligned, developmentally appropriate and differentiated?

**G. Quality Leaders.** How is the team engaging existing leaders in the district to support the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team use, establish and support a collaborative (cross-organizational and cross-sector) board or committee that formalizes decision-making roles and responsibilities among partners and prioritizes PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> efforts? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team leverage leadership to support the alignment work? How can the team use or establish a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> leadership group that includes both school- and community-based teachers and is responsible for building teamwork across age, grade levels?

**H. Quality Teachers.** What existing professional development opportunities exist for preschool and early elementary school teachers? How can the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team support similar professional education and development across preschool and early elementary school teachers that is aligned across domains? What opportunities exist to focus on specific content such as supporting children's language and early reading, math, social, and emotional development? What steps can the team take to ensure teachers are differentiating instruction for all young learners?

## New York State Education Department Work with Districts

Between 2016 and 2018, NYSED has supported selected districts in the development and implementation of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches. Districts that received federal Preschool Development and Expansion (PDG) grants as well as volunteer districts have been engaged in these efforts. Using the Kauerz and Coffman framework (2013), NYSED provided guidance to school districts to help them consider the mechanisms, resources and structures they would need to reach a shared vision, collaborative relationship and mutual accountabilities between early childhood programs and early elementary schools.

At a meeting in May 2017, NYSED convened teams of representatives of the early childhood and early elementary school systems from PDG and volunteer districts. NYSED began the meeting with a presentation about the elements of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework, noting the importance of focusing on child outcomes as front-and-center in planning, implementing, and evaluating PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts. In addition, several district teams that had been engaged in planning and early implementation of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches shared suggestions based on lessons they had learned.

Through facilitation and follow-up technical assistance from NYSED, districts reviewed the existing framework, existing data and activities, and decided whether they would focus on a few priority areas or attend more broadly to their efforts by focusing on multiple domains. Through facilitated discussions, district team members explored what a comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach might include, what the word alignment actually means within each district's context, who would need to be engaged in the planning and implementation efforts, and what responsibilities might be shared among early childhood and school-based programs.

Over the subsequent months, NYSED worked in partnership with participating districts to support: a) alignment with a clear path to embrace PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade work; b) connections to the system; and c) collaboration to develop and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans. District teams met to refine their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans, begin to implement the plans, and to make refinements. Teams selected different approaches to PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation to reflect district contexts. Approaches and lessons learned from four districts are described briefly below.

# New York District PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Lessons Learned

Four of the districts working with NYSED volunteered to engage in telephone conversations and share documents in order to share the approaches they employed in selecting priority topics of focus that guided their planning efforts and to share lessons learned in the implementation of their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans. Although the districts selected different areas of priority focus, all have documented achievements in the implementation of their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans during the 2017-2018 academic year.

## Cross-Cutting Lessons Learned

Analysis of information collected from the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams reveals cross-cutting lessons learned. PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams engaged in the process of planning and implementing a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework could review these lessons learned and associated questions to guide their planning and implementation.

- **Select team members carefully.** Successful planning and implementation requires the inclusion of all of the key stakeholders and decision-makers in the decision-making process. The successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams included representatives from the superintendent's office, principals, teachers representing the grades that were the initial focus, and in some instances, parents. As PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams consider membership, it is important to consider the following questions: 1) Is there a representative from the superintendent's office who can approve decisions made by the team? 2) Does the team include representatives of each grade level that will be affected by the plan? 3) Does the team represent the key activities that are included? Does the composition of the team need to be modified over time based on shifting priorities? Is a transition plan in place if one team member leaves?
- **Build on existing strengths, priorities and efforts.** Successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation builds on existing district strengths, priorities and activities. In some cases, a district might have begun to work on vertical or horizontal alignment in the absence of specific state support and will build on this work. In other instances, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation is new. Instead of introducing the topic as a new initiative, districts that reported success built on existing strengths, priorities and efforts in their districts. The following questions can guide consideration of the priority focus: 1) Are there any existing activities in the district that focus on any aspect of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade

framework? 2) Are there existing teams that have been working on priority topics that could be persuaded to shift focus to a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade focus? 3) Are there strengths in the district that could be built on to focus specifically on PreK to grade three? 4) Are there priorities articulated by the superintendent or other district stakeholders that could be leveraged? Is the district engaged in the implementation of innovations that could be leveraged to support PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade implementation such as standards implementation, planning for Every Student Success Act (ESSA), etc.?

- **Recognize where the district is on the path of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation.** Several district leaders and teachers, as well as state stakeholders, reported that planning and implementation of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework can be daunting. Those who have achieved success report spending time reflecting on the unique characteristics of the district (such as the demographics of the student population, transportation needs, school budgets, existing initiatives, etc.) as well as the existing systems in place in the district (such as the number and configuration of preschool programs, the number of schools, the professional development systems, etc.). Rather than trying to implement the entire framework, successful districts focused on building on their existing systems and tailored their approaches to best meet the district contexts. For example, some districts new to Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning that had strong professional development systems applied a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach to professional development. Other districts that had been planning and implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches for a period of time, chose to focus their efforts more broadly on strengthening governance across all preschools and schools. Questions to consider include: 1) What are the unique contextual features of the district and the students served? 2) What systems are in place that are strong and could be aligned better to support a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach? 3) What initiatives are in place, such as standards implementation, that could support a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach?
- **Focus on early success in a few areas and then build on that success.** Some districts focus broadly on planning and implementing a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework and others focus more narrowly but all of the successful districts focus on a few key priority areas early to guide early implementation. Several stakeholders reported they learned early on that their initial scope was beyond what could be reasonably accomplished. Rather than trying to engage in multiple activities at one, districts advised that it is important to carefully focus early efforts so that early success can be achieved. By building on these early successes, the district can then garner ongoing support. Some districts have implemented a narrow set of activities and others have implemented broad PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches. Regardless, each district reported that they began with a manageable set of activities that would lead to early success. Questions to consider include: 1) What activities will lead to early, documented successes? 2) What priority areas are most aligned with the priorities of team members and district stakeholders? 3) Are there opportunities to begin with one set of activities that could then leverage support and momentum? (For example, can the team begin by focusing on improving instruction and assessment and use the momentum to focus

also on family engagement?) 4) Is there a system in place to regularly track progress and refocus on priorities based on data?

- **Engage champions in the effort.** All successful districts report that champions helped secure implementation of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans. In some instances, an administrator, such as an assistant superintendent or assistant principal, championed the efforts; but in other cases, teams of PreK, kindergarten, and early elementary school teachers voiced their support. State PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams noted it is important to engage champions across the district, rather than a single champion, to succeed in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade implementation. Questions to consider include: 1) Has the team identified individuals whose support is necessary for successful implementation? 2) Has the team engaged those who are respected by their peers in voicing support for the effort? 3) Has the team considered how to meet potential champions on their own terms rather than imposing conditions regarding their participation? (For example, has the team engaged the teachers in their school buildings and then documented their success to share more broadly across the district? Or, has the team developed strategies to engage families in ways that are most accessible to families?)
- **Phase in activities and learn from early implementation.** Multiple districts reported that to be successful, they began with small pilots or by phasing in their activities rather than trying to adopt district-wide approaches. These districts reported they systematically examined what was working and what barriers existed and then used this information to modify their approaches. Districts that reported success noted that they began implementation with those most willing to engage. These districts recommend that others develop a strategy for phasing in changes over time. Questions to consider include: 1) Has the team developed a strategy to phase in the activities over time? 2) Does the strategy include a pilot where the district can learn from early adopters what is working and what problems arise from the strategy? 3) Does the team use data to inform implementation and refinements? 4) Has the team engaged champions during the period of phasing in?
- **Develop a communication strategy.** Districts reported that it is important to communicate to all key stakeholders about their district's plans for implementation a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework. Some reported they regularly communicate with administrative leaders, some reported they have systems in place to engage and communicate with teachers, and others reported they engage with families and the community broadly. Successful districts reported that in addition to engaging in traditional school-based communication approaches, such as disseminating information through newsletters, they have also engaged the media and used social media. These district team members report that by regularly communicating with all key stakeholders, they have been able to successfully implement, and believe they will sustain, their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts. Questions to consider include: 1) Has the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team developed a strategy for communicating about the planning process and implementation? 2) Does the strategy engage all key stakeholders (administrative leaders, teachers, family members, members of the community, etc.? 3) Does the strategy employ multiple means of communication such as newsletters, email, forums, as well as the media and social media? 4) Does the strategy reflect opportunities to share information about the success of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts more broadly?

# District Cases

Details from each case are presented below. A review of the district cases reveals that each district determined priorities based on district context. As such, the ingredients of success differ. Below we present a profile of each district that summarizes the district context, area of focus, and lessons learned. The profiles do not present a comprehensive assessment of all of the accomplishments of each district. Rather, the profiles highlight unique ingredients of success for each district.

## District 1: Watertown. Leveraging Support from Leaders, Teachers, and NYED to Change Instruction

Located in a small city in northern New York, Watertown serves nearly 4,000 students, of which about 1,400 children attend preschool through third grade. Nearly two-thirds of the students in the district live in low-income families. The district serves over 400 students through half-day and full-day preschool.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the district developed and implemented a plan to support PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment. With the support of the assistant superintendent, the team designed and implemented a play-based approach to curriculum in preschool, kindergarten and the early elementary grades.

### Ingredients of Success

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team achieved success by engaging in the following strategies:

- **Using data to determine priorities.** The team selected priority areas that were based on a review of the district's early learning inventory data. The team identified a focus on socio-emotional well-being as the data demonstrated this area was lower than others on the inventory. The team shared the information with all key stakeholders to garner support for a shift in curriculum from worksheets to a play-based approach. The team was aware that Creative Curriculum was being used in some preschool classrooms and early reports demonstrated its success in supporting socio-emotional development. The team decided to leverage this early success to support more wide-scale implementation of creative curriculum.
- **Leveraging support from NYSED.** The district team members contacted the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to see if they could learn from other districts' efforts. NYSED connected the team with a district that had been supporting play-based curriculum.

The team learned from them what had worked and also what to avoid. The district informed them that they had paused their testing when they began to shift their focus. They also secured support from their school board that has now issued guidance to ensure that all kindergarten classrooms devote two hours to play-based curriculum daily.

- **Engaging teachers who are eager to be early adopters.** The team decided to focus on adoption and successful implementation of play-based curriculum after considering how to best support children’s socio-emotional development. The team worked with one building where the teachers were eager to adopt Creative Curriculum®. As one team member stated, “We started by thinking about how to bring purposeful play back into the classroom. One building was interested and is now totally on board with a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade focus. In this school, the first 40 minutes are focused on play-based activities.” The team reported that not all teachers are on board, but by using teachers as ambassadors and cheerleaders for the effort, many teachers are now enthusiastic about the changes.
- **Garnering and leveraging support from the superintendent’s office.** The team engaged the new assistant superintendent to bring resources and attention to the identified priority. The assistant superintendent had identified a priority topic of focusing on play-based curriculum adoption after she had observed a change from PreK to kindergarten classrooms that were administering a mathematics test. The assistant superintendent asked the kindergarten teacher, a former PreK teacher, how it was going and she responded, “This is not working. They have already done five worksheets today. It is October and they don’t even know one another’s names.” The Assistant Superintendent became an important leader in the district and with her support, schools and classrooms signed on. Her voice and support have been important in allaying fears that moving away from worksheets might be viewed as a shift away from learning. The team noted many myths exist that if children are having fun and are engaged, they aren’t learning. With the assistant superintendent’s support, it was easier to dispel these myths for some principals, parents and teachers.
- **Documenting successful outcomes.** The district team has observed improvements in socio-emotional well-being and attendance since the adoption of the play-based curriculum. One district leader reported, “I just observed a kindergarten classroom for 90 minutes this morning. . . I was blown away by how their day started, how respectful they were, the whole thing was a game-changer. They were so engaged in what they were doing. The respect they had for each other. There was no fighting or yelling. There was a commitment to learning and sharing. I saw so much learning going on in this classroom.”
- **Publicizing success.** The district has included information about the success of the new curriculum in the district newsletter, has received attention from the local press, and has been featured in social media. The district actively disseminates information about its work to parents and the community. Moreover, through regular communication with NYSED, the team has shared its success with other districts both within New York and across the country. By communicating their success to the community and beyond, the team is hopeful the early success will lead to sustained support.

## District 2: Newburgh. Building on Pre-Existing Activities to Focus on Alignment and Transitions

Located in the Hudson River Valley, Newburgh currently serves students from four neighboring municipalities. One PreK center in a single school building serves the district and nine elementary schools serve young students. About one quarter of the student population is African American/Black and about half is Hispanic. The district serves more than 11,000 students, about 4,000 of whom attend PreK through grade three classrooms. Approximately 70 percent of the students are living in low-income families.

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team has engaged in regular meetings to plan and implement the district's PreK to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade activities. To date, the district has aligned existing curriculum and assessments and has adopted new transition policies.

### Ingredients of Success

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade team achieved success by engaging in the following strategies:

- **Engaging a pre-existing team to focus on P-3.** The team who launched the P-3 planning and implementation had been working together prior to engaging in the new initiative. The district had a curriculum planning team in place with strong relationships among team members. When the district was invited to attend the NYSED meeting, the existing team was invited. That team consists of PreK through second grade teachers with representation across all grades except kindergarten.
- **Meeting regularly to maintain momentum and focus.** The team convened three times prior to attending the NYSED meeting and continued to come together throughout the schoolyear. Team members noted that maintaining momentum can be difficult, especially with a district engaged in multiple initiatives. The team set up both in-person and virtual (telephone) meetings to ensure regular progress in implementing their plan.
- **Focusing on “vertical” as well as “horizontal” alignment.** Prior to planning to implement a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach, the district had been focusing on vertical alignment among all grades. In other words, the district had been working to align the curriculum from kindergarten through fifth grade. The team decided to begin its PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning efforts by focusing on curriculum and assessment alignment from preschool through second grade. As the team met, they recognized with the new early learning standards, there was also a need to ensure horizontal alignment—that is, consistency of curriculum within a grade level.
- **Using information from district’s curricula and assessment review.** Through conversations the team learned those engaged in overseeing and implementing the state’s universal preschool had reviewed existing curriculum and assessment tools and begun to consider what could be used to assess learning environments. The team considered what

had been learned from those efforts and learned that although preschool classrooms had begun to align curriculum and assessments, the same curriculum and assessments were not yet being used at the kindergarten level.

- **Phasing in changes across the district.** Rather than requiring all schools within the district to phase-in the new approaches, the district selected a few volunteer schools to pilot the process. One team member stated, “We prioritized schools that were offering PreK so we could implement on a smaller scale by focusing first on PreK to kindergarten and then in those buildings we could focus on the older grades. Four schools were offering PreK so there was a natural opportunity to engage teachers and principals in the process.”
- **Using professional learning communities to support the work.** Some schools had pre-existing professional learning communities and others had regular meetings among teachers but no formal professional learning communities. Across the four participating schools the team encouraged PreK and kindergarten teachers to come together to learn how they were teaching and assessing students. Teachers addressed questions such as: Why does our PreK classroom look like it does? What curriculum are we using? What kind of information do we use to help understand our students? What information would help kindergarten teachers better understand what the students know and are able to do? The teams worked at the school building level to consider how to better align curriculum and assessment and create better transition plans.
- **Providing examples and resources to building teams.** The district has used information from the professional learning communities to provide solid examples to teachers at other grade levels and to other school buildings. The team noted that some parents and teachers could not immediately see what children are learning through play-based curriculum. By providing examples of curriculum and the associated learning goals, the team is better able to communicate the value of the aligned curriculum.

## District 3: Uniondale. Engaging Families and Teachers through Joint Professional Development

Outside New York City, Uniondale serves over 7,000 students, three-quarters of whom are living in low-income families. The district serves over 2,000 students in preschool through grade three. About 40 percent of the student body is African American/ Black and nearly 60 percent of the population is Hispanic.

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team includes an assistant superintendent, two district directors, the preschool principal, an elementary assistant principal, and teachers representing PreK, kindergarten, first and a second grades. The team decided early in the planning process to focus on joint professional development as the focus for the 2017-2018 academic year, but then recognized the importance of focusing on professional development as well.

## Ingredients of Success

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team achieved success by engaging in the following strategies:

- **Forming a team of champions to engage support from district leaders.** The district PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning team was initially comprised of the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, district directors of English Language Arts and Mathematics, an assistant principal from an elementary school, the PreK principal, a representative from the district office of grants management and district teachers. The team began by considering data as well as perspectives of team representatives and district leadership. The PreK principal agreed to lead the team and regularly engaged team members and district leadership in conversations to ensure regular progress on the plan and subsequent implementation.
- **Ensuring the priorities align with those of district leadership.** Understanding the importance of securing support from the superintendent's office, the team reviewed the priorities of the assistant superintendent charged with overseeing the work. They engaged the assistant superintendent in conversations to hear her priorities. She was especially interested in creating administrative systems so that student portfolio records could be more easily shared between preschool and early elementary school teachers. By initially focusing on this priority, the team was able to engage teachers in activities that would create efficiencies and also help with school transitions.
- **Assessing strengths and opportunities throughout the district.** The team noted that many professional development opportunities were scheduled throughout the district and considered using the opportunities to focus on issues of transition and alignment. The team noted that prior to implementation, substantial variation existed across administrative procedures, learning environments, curriculum and desired student outcomes. To support the successful adoption of a new portfolio-based assessment system, the team decided to use existing professional development days to focus on shared messages, provide training on the new system and focus on common curriculum and assessment.
- **Bringing teachers together from throughout the district.** The team began implementation by bringing together all pre-k teachers and then kindergarten and first-grade teachers. The professional development gave all teachers training and opportunities to hear shared messages regarding the importance of consistency across the district. One district administrator reported, "We are trying to establish similar practices in all elementary school buildings. What happens now is not the same building to building."
- **Focusing on learning outcomes and uniform assessments.** The professional development focused on specific learning outcomes and uniform portfolio assessments. By focusing on learning outcomes as a common thread, teachers reflected on how their current practice supports students in learning desired content. During the 2017-2018 academic year, professional development focused on using uniform assessments across the district and provided examples of student writing that could be used in portfolios.

- **Engaging families.** Recognizing the importance of families in supporting students' school success, the PreK team has also actively engaged families. The team reached out to families to hear what they need to best engage with their child's education. Because the district has a high percentage of Hispanic families, information was translated and was made accessible through social media. One team member reported, "We make sure everything is translated and we have parents sign up for an App so they can receive translated information. We have monthly activities, offered during the day and in the evening." In addition, the district is working with community-based organizations to engage families. A team member reported, "My hopes and wishes are that parents have a solid foundation of what it means to be an active member of the school community and then we are hoping that this work will continue beyond PreK." During the 2017-2018 academic year, the family engagement work focused on preschool with the aim of scaling these efforts in early elementary grades in the future.
- **Celebrating success to obtain additional buy-in and support.** The team documented success and regularly shared the information with district leaders. Team members report that regular communication has been critical to their progress.

## District 4: Port Chester. Focus on Increasing Collaboration and Smooth Transitions

Sandwiched between affluent neighboring communities, Port Chester serves about 4,500 students, 78 percent of whom are Hispanic and a third of whom are Dual Language Learners, and 75 percent of whom are living in low-income families. The district serves about 1,700 students in preschool through third grade.

The PreK to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade team set two goals. First, to offer district kindergarten teachers and PreK teachers the opportunity to collaborate through joint professional development. The aim of this work has been to support collaboration among teachers in setting goals and expectations for students to ensure a seamless transition for students moving from PreK to kindergarten. Second, to provide opportunities to parents of PreK and elementary students to strengthen family engagement and smooth transitions.

### Ingredients of Success

The PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team achieved success by engaging in the following strategies:

- **Identifying priorities that are aligned with district priorities.** When the team first met, members engaged in brainstorming after reviewing the framework. Because the district had a goal of strengthening the connection between preschool and kindergarten, the team decided to focus on this. By building on existing priorities, team members felt they would be better positioned to achieve early success.
- **Prioritizing activities based on ease of adoption and early implementation.** After conversation, the team decided to begin its planning and implementation efforts by focusing

on priorities that were manageable and would lead to early success. One team member reported, “What our team focused on was what we could handle almost immediately that wouldn’t give us a lot of push back. We had to think about what we could do that we would get support from others in the district.” The team decided to focus on two key priority areas – joint professional development and family engagement as ways to support their larger goal of addressing transition issues.

- **Providing opportunities for PreK and kindergarten teachers to come together.** Over the course of the year, District 4 offered forums where district kindergarten teachers and PreK teachers could collaborate around setting goals and expectations for students throughout the school year. Teachers discussed the best ways to create structures and systems so transitions would be more seamless from PreK to kindergarten. During the meetings, PreK and kindergarten teachers had a chance to switch teaching roles and discuss what they learned and give one another feedback. Teachers used the opportunity to visit and shadow a classroom teacher.
- **Offering families opportunities throughout the district.** The team recognized the importance of engaging families and wanted to address existing barriers to family engagement. In order to be inclusive, the team decided to offer multiple opportunities across schools and buildings in the district to offer community style meetings inclusive of all PreK and elementary parents. The team recognized it would be easier for the district to offer forums for families in a single location but realized such a strategy would leave some parents without opportunities. Instead, the team decided to rotate meetings from each elementary building and inform parents of district events that apply to all students in schools.
- **Recognizing the importance of focusing on a few strategies rather than spreading too thin.** The team recognized that because the district had not previously engaged in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning, it was important to focus on a few strategies. The team had initially selected three priority areas (joint professional development, family engagement and transition planning). The team successfully implemented joint professional development and family engagement and decided to focus on transition of school records in subsequent years.
- **Celebrate success.** Acknowledging that PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation is one of several initiatives in the district, the team recognized the importance of celebrating success. Over the course of the past year, the team successfully developed a plan and implemented activities that supported greater alignment between early childhood programs in the district and the elementary schools. By celebrating success, the team has been able to maintain momentum for the important work.

# Reflections and Conclusion

PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teams from throughout New York state reflected on the experiences and lessons learned shared by Watertown, Newburgh, Uniondale and Port Chester. These teams came together at a *PreK to 3rd Grade Summer Institute* sponsored by NYSED and the [Northeast Comprehensive Center](#) (funded by the U.S. Department of Education). During the institute, teams had a chance to learn from Harvard University and Bank Street College of Education leaders, hear from case study team members and members of other districts engaged in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning, review a draft of this report, and reflect on the application to their own districts. NYSED, Northeast Comprehensive Center and CEELo engaged PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team members in a conversation to consider how the lessons from the case study states could inform district planning and implementation efforts.

Summer institute participants reflected on potential pitfalls to PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts and shared their ideas about effective strategies to overcome these challenges (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1. Potential Pitfalls and Solutions**

Potential Pitfalls	Solutions
Identifying priorities can be difficult	Build on existing initiatives Use data
Scope, boundaries, roles and tasks are not clear	Articulate scope, roles and tasks each time you meet
A few louds voices create resistance	Rely on champions Engage leaders Focus first on those most interested and build on their success
Myths exist that developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment lack rigor	Use data and research to make the case Show how the curriculum and assessments align to standards
Change in leadership and team member representation can create challenges	Build a team that includes key representatives and develop transition plans Ask those who are transitioning out of their roles to nominate a successor
Scheduling time for planning can be a challenge	Set up regular meetings and celebrate early successes

Participants also described actions they found to be particularly helpful in their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation efforts. These are summarized below.

- Align PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade plans with other changes that are being implemented.**  
 Changes resulting from the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, and district implementation

- of new standards that include focus on socio-emotional well-being as well as implementation of Next Generation Science Standards provide opportunities for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation. Yet, introducing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning as a separate, new initiative can undermine support. Several summer institute participants reported that they adding a new initiative to their too-full plates would be overwhelming. However, they said that by aligning Pre-K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade with existing priorities would help garner support.
- **Use language that aligns with district initiatives rather than introducing language that might be confusing.** Several leaders noted that they use language that aligns with their district priorities and initiatives rather than using “P3 jargon.” Several noted that using language that aligns with the language used in the new standards can enhance buy-in. Others noted that using the word “rigor” to describe a guided-play based curricular approach or a new assessment system gave them a chance to convey how they were aligning their approaches from PreK through grade three.
  - **Provide concrete examples of how standards are addressed.** Two summer institute participants reported that to convey the learning that occurs through guided-play in PreK and kindergarten, they literally write the standards next to student work that they post or share. One noted that she posts student work on the walls—ranging from drawings to early writing—and lists the standards that are being addressed on post-it notes. She stated that in this way anyone entering her classroom will see the learning goals she aims to support. Another reported that she carefully considers the standards when she is planning curriculum units. Providing this information to administrators and parents conveys the learning that teachers are supporting.
  - **Use resources and experiences of districts engaged in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade is enormously helpful.** A number of summer institute participants reported that the PreK to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade framework can feel quite conceptual but hearing from district and school personnel engaged in this work “made P3 real.” Several noted that they found value in seeing videos, curriculum materials, descriptions of assessment systems, and in hearing first-hand from district personnel and leaders. Showing team members concrete examples of what districts are doing, by showing sample lesson plans or assessments was also valued. Moreover, several summer institute participants reported that they would benefit from reaching out to districts that have engaged in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation activities.

We encourage those engaged in the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation efforts to use information from this report and resources developed by the case study districts to inform their planning and implementation efforts.

# Acknowledgements and Contacts

CEELO thanks staff from the [New York State Education Department, Office of Early Learning](#), the [Northeast Regional Comprehensive Center](#), and teams from Watertown, Newburgh, Uniondale and Port Chester who contributed their experiences and expertise to this report. We would especially like to thank

- Watertown, Newburgh, Uniondale, and Port Chester PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade team members who shared their insights and wisdom based on their experiences with PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation.
- The New York State Preschool Development Grant team who contributed their leadership, expertise and guidance who shared their knowledge of NYSED PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts, helped connect CEELO staff with district teams, reviewed the draft report and reflected on the implications for the state
- The Office of Early Learning leaders and staff who have been leading New York's early learning initiatives with the aim of improving outcomes for young children and families throughout the state
- Sarah Hughes from the New York Comprehensive Center who shared her wisdom regarding PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation, reviewed early drafts of the report, and provided recommendations and insights
- Participants and presenters at the *PreK to 3rd Grade Summer Institute* who shared their reflections, challenges and solutions that informed the conclusion of this report

We are especially grateful to the following individuals who are the point of contact for the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade planning and implementation activities in the case study districts who generously gave their time to share their insights and who are willing to answer questions posed by those interested in their experiences.

## **Watertown**

Peg Drappo  
Full Day Pre-Kindergarten Administrator  
532 South Massey Street  
Watertown, NY 13601  
315-786-5071  
[PDrappto@watertowncsd.org](mailto:PDrappto@watertowncsd.org)

## **Uniondale**

Elaine DeBono  
Uniondale Pre-K Principal  
835 DeMott Ave.  
Baldwin, NY 11550  
(516) 405-8300  
[edebono@uniondaleschools.org](mailto:edebono@uniondaleschools.org)

## **Newburgh**

Principal/District UPK Administrator  
Pre-K Center at Gidney Avenue Memorial  
School  
300 Gidney Avenue  
Newburgh, NY 12550  
845-568-6730  
[tmarschall@necsd.net](mailto:tmarschall@necsd.net)

## **Port Chester**

Elsy Gonzalez  
Pre K Administrator  
Head Start@ Spring Street  
Children's Place@ Carver Center  
914-934-8041  
[egonzalez1@portchesterschools.org](mailto:egonzalez1@portchesterschools.org)  
[egonzalez1@pcschools.lhric.org](mailto:egonzalez1@pcschools.lhric.org)

## CEELO P3 Resources

Below are resources produced or curated by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes that can support P3 efforts. These resources are organized by date.

[P3 Overview and Panel Discussion](#) This presentation reviewed the findings of the recent report [PreK-3rd Grade Systems: Lessons Learned from New York School Districts](#). Delivered at the New York State Department of Education Summer Institute (July 2018).

[A Powerful Convergence: Community Schools and Early Childhood Education](#) This article highlights a new approach to raising achievement for low-income children that combines Prenatal through Grade 3 (P-3) quality and alignment initiatives, family engagement, and child and family support services. Examples in Cincinnati, Omaha, and Multnomah County demonstrate effective, results-oriented partnerships among elementary schools, community-based preschools, and other early childhood organizations. (February 2018)

[Building Capacity to Enact Change for Classroom Quality Improvement in New Jersey](#) State Education Agencies (SEAs) across the country are working to directly impact early childhood teaching and learning in local education agencies (LEAs). To do this, the SEA must rely on local change agents to increase classroom quality across a state. The work presented in this paper set out to build the capacity of educators, teachers and leaders in New Jersey to spearhead change in LEAs with the support of the SEA. (January 2018)

[Effective Components of Successful Early Learning-to-Kindergarten Transitions](#) This webinar features CEELO's Shannon Riley-Ayers who presented on three components that support a child's successful transition to school: leadership, effective instruction, and family and community engagement. She was joined by a principal and a superintendent from Oregon who shared successful family engagement and school readiness efforts and how to increase the readiness of entering kindergartners. (October 2016)

[Building State P-3 Systems](#) This webinar focuses on the SEA role in supporting P-3 system building at the state and local levels, drawing on a [recent study](#) of three states that have devoted significant attention and resources to P-3 efforts: Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Each of these states has developed state-wide P-3 policy initiatives regarding standards, assessments, and instruction as well as targeted programs to support local P-3 community partnerships. After providing an overview of each state's P-3 work, the webinar discusses nine recommendations that emerged from the case studies. (September 2016)

[Building State P-3 Systems: Learning from Leading States](#) This policy report focuses on the state education agency (SEA) role in supporting P-3 system building at the state and

local levels. Included in the report are case studies of three states that have devoted significant attention and resources to P-3 efforts: Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Each of these states has developed statewide P-3 policy initiatives regarding standards, assessments, and instruction as well as targeted programs to support local P-3 community partnerships. The paper presents a number of themes and patterns that emerged from the comparison of the three states and concludes with 9 recommendations to help guide P-3 system-building. (August 2016)

### [A P-3 Approach and its Effectiveness in Closing Achievement Gaps: Hawaii's P-3](#)

[Initiative](#) This presentation describes implementation of the Hawaii P-3 Initiative, along with findings from a five-year RAND evaluation of the Initiative which showed a statistically significant improvement in third grade reading scores in the five communities, narrowing the achievement gap. (July 2016)

### [Planning for the New Early Learning Model: Harnessing Potential in the Next School](#)

[Improvement Grant Cycle](#) This webinar, hosted by CEELO and the [Center on School Turnaround](#) (CST), reviews the eight components of the new model and discusses key requirements, including school leadership and expanding high quality prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten. Indiana's Director of Early Learning and Intervention in the Office of Early Learning and Intervention shares what the new early learning model means for the state of Indiana and examples of how Indiana's work to support districts. (April 2015)

[Kindergarten as a Critical Link](#) This presentation focuses on ways that school districts can develop kindergarten policies to both support alignment across the early grades and ensure effective transitions for children and families into elementary school. The session highlights [ten policies](#) that support, promote, and enhance the learning and joy of learning for all kindergarten children, leading to positive child outcomes for all. Panelists share how districts and school are enacting and implementing these policies, with a discussion of strategies, approaches, and outcomes at the Ounce of Prevention's [Excellence in the Early Grades District Leadership Summit](#) . (March 2015)

### [Supporting Principal Leadership for Pre-K through Third Grade Learning](#)

[Communities](#) This webinar addresses ways to enhance State Education Agency and Local Education Agency leadership capacity for building P -3 communities, cultivate standards of effective practice for P-3 principals and related leaders, develop practical implementation strategies as described by an elementary school principal and state education leaders, and consider implications for state and local policymakers, technical assistance and professional developmental providers, and higher education. The webinar was co-sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (March 2015)

**Early Childhood Indistar® Indicators** This webinar introduces the audience to new Early Childhood Indistar® Indicators developed by CEELO in collaboration with the **Center on Innovations (CIL)** in Learning. **Indistar®** is a web-based system for use with district and/or school improvement teams to inform, coach, sustain, track, and report improvement activities. The new early childhood indicators provide an opportunity for stakeholders to use indicators and the associated research to align early childhood education with school improvement efforts. (August 2014)

**Supporting State Education Agencies Implementing a Birth Through Third Grade Approach** This webinar focuses on recent developments in birth through third grad approaches with an emphasis on the state education agency's role and technical assistance support. CEELO held this webinar for state early childhood education specialists and regional comprehensive center staff. (August 2014)

**Preparing Principals to Support Early Childhood Teachers** This document summarizes what is known about principal licensing requirements and professional development in early childhood pedagogy and best practice, and provides selected state examples of professional development models for principals. (July 2014)

**What Do We Know About Principal Preparation, Licensure Requirements, and Professional Development for School Leaders?** This policy report describes findings from a CEELO review of data on 21 states' principal licensure requirements, interviews with experts on principal preparation and professional development in seven states, and interviews with staff at the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Institute for School Leadership. (July 2014)

**State Early Learning Standards: Lessons from Applying Implementation Research** This webinar provides an overview of New England and Islands Regional Education Laboratory (NEI-REL) and CEELO, highlights national trends and issues for consideration for implementation, shares best practices related to implementing statewide initiatives, and discusses implementing early learning and development standards in Connecticut. (April 2013)

The information below presents special projects that support P3 sponsored by CEELO.

In partnership with the **Education Commission of the States** (ECS), CEELO provides expertise and technical assistance to multiple states, assisting them to identify priorities and actions for improving the P-3 continuum of policy and practice, as outlined in a State's ESSA plan and other strategic plans and priorities of the state education agency. Targeted and individual state TA focuses on the principles and recommendations of **ECS's K-3 Policymaker's Guide to Action**. The guide assists state education

leaders in the development of policies that strengthen principal leadership, licensure and endorsements in K-3, assessments in K-2, third grade reading laws, full day kindergarten, developmentally appropriate curriculum, and other domains in these critical years.

The [BUILD-CEELO Learning Table on Teaching and Learning](#) was designed to identify and bolster the *consistent supports and sensible accountability systems* needed to drive teaching quality and the “powerful and few” core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children birth through third grade. After three cohorts of work, [A Learning Table to Improve State Early Childhood Teaching and Learning Policy: Reflections and Recommendations After Three Years of Implementation](#) summarizes the activities, processes and outcomes resulting from this intensive technical assistance project.

The [BUILD-CEELO Learning Table on Teaching and Learning](#) was designed to identify and bolster the *consistent supports and sensible accountability systems* needed to drive teaching quality and the “powerful and few” core state policies that improve teaching quality and result in significant outcomes for children birth through third grade. After three cohorts of work, [A Learning Table to Improve State Early Childhood Teaching and Learning Policy: Reflections and Recommendations After Three Years of Implementation](#) summarizes the activities, processes and outcomes resulting from this intensive technical assistance project.

## About CEELO

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) strengthens the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO works in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability. For other *CEELO Policy Reports*, *Policy Briefs*, and *FastFacts*, go to <http://ceelo.org/ceelo-products>.

The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) is a partnership of the following organizations:



Permission is granted to reprint this material if you acknowledge CEELO and the authors of the item. For more information, call the communications contact at (732) 993-8051 or visit CEELO at [CEELO.org](http://CEELO.org).

**Suggested citation: Schilder, D. (2018). PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Systems: Lessons Learned from New York School Districts (Report). New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes.**

---

*This policy brief was produced by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under cooperative agreement number S283B120054. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government.*

---