

NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT INITIATIVE

A NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR THE PRIMARY YEARS OF EDUCATION

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We, as a nation, are doing a very good job of squandering human potential and making life harder for all Americans as a result. This has to stop. If our government, at the local, state and federal level, does not start investing in education systems that reach children before kindergarten, and if it does not get serious about providing children with high-quality instruction in the earliest years of their schooling, it is wasting taxpayer dollars, ignoring decades of research and disregarding the extraordinary potential of millions of children who otherwise have very little chance of succeeding in school. This paper lays out the case for a fundamental rethinking of public policy related to children's primary years, starting at age three and reaching up through the third grade.

The Need for a Next Social Contract for Education

Social and economic shifts affecting our nation—increasing globalization, the aging of our population, and most recently the financial crisis that is reshaping the world economy—demand a rethinking of the American social contract, those institutional arrangements that prompt society to share the risks and responsibilities of our common civic and economic life and provide opportunity and security for our citizens.

The need to rethink existing social contracts and institutions extends to our educational system. Education has always been critical to our social contract. In fact, primary education is one of the few, if not the only, goods and services Americans have decided should be provided to all citizens free of charge. In the 18th century, our nation's

founders realized that an educated citizenry was essential to the success of the experiment in democratic self-government upon which they had embarked. Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison, "Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty."¹ As the franchise for participation in self-government expanded to broader segments of the population, access to education expanded alongside it.

In the 20th century, education also became a foundational piece of our economic social contract. Most Americans reject the notion that a just social contract calls for substantial equality of outcome, but we cherish a belief in equality of opportunity—that each citizen has the opportunity to rise or fall as far as his or her hard work and innate abilities allow. This understanding of equality of

opportunity has come to include a belief that all American youngsters should have access to a system of public education that enables them to develop their innate abilities, as well as develop effective habits of mind and behavior.

Throughout most of the 20th century, our education system served as a critical driver of economic growth and prosperity. Following World War II, universal access to secondary schooling and expanded higher education access through the GI Bill made the American workforce the world's best educated, fueling post-war economic dominance.² And over the course of the 20th century, expanding access to education also became an important policy tool for advancing social justice, expanding economic opportunity, and ensuring global economic competitiveness.

Yet despite these successes, our education system has rarely lived up to the tremendous tasks that we ask it to play in our social contract. For much of our history, large segments of our population—African Americans, English language learners, and children with disabilities—were routinely denied access to education, in practice, when not in law. Even today, despite the civil rights movement's successes in expanding educational access to these populations of children, our educational system too often fails to prepare students to meet the challenges of increased economic competitiveness or informed citizenship—even as it consumes increasing economic resources. And it produces tremendous disparities in educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged and racial or ethnic minority youngsters.

These failures are evident in the disturbingly high rates at which students fail to acquire a high school diploma—the baseline credential required for entry into today's workforce. Research shows that one-quarter of students who enroll in our nation's high schools—and half of African American and Hispanic youth—leave without obtaining a diploma.³ Even among those who have graduated from our high schools, fully 13 percent cannot

read well enough to conduct basic, day-to-day activities, such as reading a newspaper or restaurant menu.⁴ We are effectively squandering the human capital of our young people, denying them the opportunity for meaningful work or participation in our shared civic life, and denying our country the benefits their labor and creativity might otherwise have generated.

Reversing this trend will require real changes to our educational system—a new social contract for education.

Questioning Institutions and Assumptions

A new social contract for education is not simply a matter of yet more education reform as most people have come to know it. The past 25 years have seen numerous iterations of reform at the national, state, and local levels. Some have produced real—if often modest—improvements in educational equity and outcomes. Others have been far less effective. The vast majority of reform efforts have been about making changes within the context of our existing educational institutions, rather than questioning the very institutions themselves, and the assumptions that underlie them. To be sure, a next social contract will require reforms to our existing institutions. But it will also require rethinking of some of the fundamental institutional arrangements our education policy debates too often assume and too rarely question, such as the assumption that public schooling does not begin until age 5, or that local school districts are the only legitimate providers of public education services.

While most of these institutional arrangements came into being for good reason, those reasons reflect the realities of earlier eras, in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, when our educational system was being constructed. Institutions built for a nation in which economic competition was local and agriculture ruled -- in which only a fraction of the population was expected to obtain a high school diploma -- are not well-suited to meet the needs of today's students. Institutions and societal norms that expect

parents to be the sole providers of their children's early learning experiences seem dated in light of new research showing the importance of introducing children at very early ages to vocabulary-rich environments, early math and science concepts, and meaningful conversations about the world around them. Similarly, our educational system has been far less responsive to changes in the labor market, or in communications and information technology, that have implications for how we deliver schooling.

Our Fragmented Education Pipeline

One rarely questioned institutional arrangement is the sharp division we have created between different levels of our educational system. The United States today has not one educational system, but three very separate systems—one for early childhood, one for elementary and secondary schooling, and one for postsecondary education. These systems reflect fundamentally different assumptions about what government and society owes to its youth: parents are expected to pay for their children's early learning opportunities out of their own pocket; government is expected to fully fund K-12 schooling; and a mix of parental income, student income and government loan subsidies are assumed to be enough to cover costs of college tuition. Rarely do these systems coordinate, connect, or even cross paths. Often, completely separate units of state government oversee their work. The degree to which government is involved in delivering, funding, and regulating each system is very different.

Obviously, some of these differences are both natural and necessary, to reflect changes in children's own development. For example, opportunities for young children's learning move increasingly out of the family sphere and into the public sphere as children develop self-care and communication skills and an expanding awareness of the world that surrounds them. By the same token, it is reasonable to expect young people themselves—as opposed to their parents or society at large—to take more personal responsibility for their education as they progress into early adulthood.

But changes in children's development do not justify the sharp—and largely arbitrary—divides in the education system at different ages, or the unevenness of the educational experiences that accompany these divides. Rather, these sharp divides run counter to our knowledge that development is highly varied across individual children, and that it occurs along a continuum of gradual changes rather than clearly defined developmental “stages.” Given what we know about children's development, especially in light of new research on children's capacity for learning⁵, it is entirely arbitrary that having passed one's fifth birthday entitles children to begin a free education in our public schools, while parents of four-year-olds are often left entirely to their own devices when providing for their children's care and education.

The artificial divisions between early childhood, elementary and secondary, and postsecondary systems create gaps and poor coordination in our education pipeline, wasting much of our public investment in human capital. To create a seamless educational pipeline capable of preparing our nation's young people for success in work and life, we must bring these disparate educational systems into greater alignment with one another—creating a more consistent social contract across all levels of the education system, and providing a more consistent educational experience at each of these levels.

The first step in building a more seamless and coherent education pipeline must be the creation of seamless, high-quality early education experiences for our youngest students, from age three through age eight, also known as a PreK-3rd education system.

Why Focus on PreK-3rd?

It may seem strange to propose starting a Next Social Contract for education by rethinking how we educate children who are not even old enough to be part of the current system. Public and policy discussions of the role of education in our economy typically focus on preventing high school dropout and increasing the numbers of students attending and graduating from postsecondary

institutions. For example, in his February 2009 address to the Joint Session of Congress, President Obama set a goal that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”⁶

What about Infants and Toddlers?

The first three years of life are crucially important for children’s development, and our public policies should not ignore children and their families during this critical time. But the needs of very young children and families are more varied and require a different approach than in the preK-3rd years. Public policy should support parents in providing high-quality care for their young children—either at home or in quality child care—while respecting variation in family preferences and recognizing that parents, as children’s first teachers, have primary responsibility for children’s care and development during this period. Publicly funded interventions in the first three years of life should be targeted to the most at-risk youngsters and should include comprehensive services for both children and their families.

But the recent focus on high school reform and policies to expand college access and completion ignores the very strong body of evidence that a student’s chances of college success are often determined long before he or she enrolls in high school. The pathway to college graduation starts not in high school, but in kindergarten or preschool. Because education is a cumulative process—in the words of economist James J. Heckman, “skill begets skill”—each stage in a child’s learning is critical to the eventual outcome, and the earliest years of schooling are particularly important, because they lay the foundation on which all future learning rests.⁷

Children who do not acquire foundational math and literacy skills in the early grades will have difficulty mastering more complex content in the later elementary and middle years and as a result arrive in high school ill-prepared to tackle the rigorous coursework necessary to prepare them for

success in college or the workforce. Yet fully one-third of 4th graders are scoring at “below basic” on national reading tests—in other words, they are reading at such low levels that they cannot complete their schoolwork—and the proportion of minority children in those straits is far higher.⁸ Studies have shown that children who read poorly in third grade will continue to suffer from reading problems through high school.⁹ Children who do not learn to read in their first years of schooling risk becoming adults who face limited workforce options and difficulty participating in the responsibilities of citizenship, and are disproportionately likely to live in poverty and be incarcerated.

If we want to rethink how our educational system prepares youngsters for a changing world, and address the most severe inequities in educational outcomes, we need to work from the bottom up. This does not mean turning the primary grades into college-preparatory machines. Instead, starting early means respecting the cognitive, social and physical needs of young children in a way that is developmentally appropriate, in fact *elevating* those needs to the level they deserve – instead of assuming that they will just magically be met by well-meaning but untrained adults or assuming that children will just absorb knowledge and the ability to read by osmosis.

We need to start earlier, expanding access to high-quality preschool educational opportunities for children before they enter school. But we also need to reform the early elementary school years, to improve student achievement and bring early grades curriculum and pedagogy more in line with children’s development. And we need to connect reforms in preschool and the early elementary years to create a seamless, aligned, high-quality experience that enables all children to read and do math on grade level by the end of third grade.

Expanding Access to High-Quality Pre-K

The first step in building a seamless PreK-3rd system must be the expansion of access to high-quality early learning

opportunities for all preschool-aged children, starting at age three.

Research over the past several decades has demonstrated that children begin learning long before they enter school.¹⁰ The foundations of literacy, math, and other critical skills are already being laid in children's early years, and the way adults interact with children and the environment they provide for them during this time significantly affect this early learning—for good or ill.

Independent studies have shown that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs are effective in improving children's educational achievement and other, longer-term, life outcomes. The evidence of the effectiveness of high-quality pre-K is among the strongest findings in education research. Peer-reviewed, randomized controlled trials in the HighScope Perry Preschool Project and the Chicago Child Parent Centers Program found that high-quality pre-K programs produced both short-term learning gains for participating students and long-term benefits, including reduced rates of grade retention, special education placement, and school dropout; higher educational attainment and adult earnings; and reduced likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system.¹¹ These studies began in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively, and followed children well into adulthood. More recently, studies of large-scale and high-quality state pre-K programs in Oklahoma and New Jersey have found evidence that these pre-K programs also produce significant learning gains for participating children—gains comparable to those found in the Chicago CPC study. From what we know so far, these gains last at least into the early elementary grades.¹²

Given this knowledge, it no longer makes sense to postpone the start of public education until children turn five. This is particularly true for disadvantaged children. Research indicates that as much as one-third to one-half of the gap between the average achievement of black and white students in American schools exists before children start first grade, as a result of tremendous disparities in

children's early learning experiences.¹³ By the time they turn three years old, children from the most disadvantaged families will have heard 3 million fewer words in their lifetimes than children of professional parents.¹⁴ Low-income and minority children are also less likely to be read to regularly by a parent, and watch more TV than their more affluent peers.¹⁵ Even the quality of signage and other opportunities for children to see words in print are lower in high-poverty communities.¹⁶ Just as important, the intent behind the words that children hear tends to be different for disadvantaged and affluent youngsters—with disadvantaged children more likely to hear primarily rebukes and commands from their parents, while more affluent parents tend to engage in more word play and conversations that solicit children's opinions.¹⁷ All of this evidence suggests that efforts to narrow achievement gaps and raise overall student learning outcomes also need to begin before children enter school.

Moreover, the benefits of high-quality early childhood programs are not limited to the most disadvantaged youngsters. Quality pre-K programs also benefit middle-class children—although the benefits for these youngsters are smaller than for disadvantaged youngsters.¹⁸ More telling is that affluent parents demand high-quality pre-K for their own children, often making significant investments in preschool tuition. These parents clearly see value in providing quality pre-K for their children, even though they do not meet typical definitions of children “at-risk” for poor school performance.

Yet despite all this evidence, our education system provides only a small fraction of American children with access to early learning experiences that support and build on their innate desire to learn. The federal government has invested in the Head Start program for 45 years, but it is open only to children with family incomes below or just slightly above the poverty line, and only half of eligible youngsters are served. A growing number of states have also invested in pre-K—again, primarily for disadvantaged youngsters, although a few states offer near universal pre-K access. But federal and state programs combined serve just over one-

third of four-year-olds and half that proportion of three-year-olds.¹⁹ Most parents are left entirely to their own devices to find and pay for early education services for their children. As a result, roughly one-third of children arrive in our public schools with no prior early childhood education, and children from low- to moderate-income families have much less access than those with more affluent parents.²⁰ Because most existing programs are targeted to disadvantaged children, children from “near poor” and moderate income families—those with income up to about \$60,000 annually—are actually the least likely of all children to attend any sort of pre-K programs.²¹

Even when children do have access to preschool education programs, quality is highly varied and often insufficient to support children’s learning.²² Parents, even those with considerable financial resources, are often left in the dark about how to evaluate the programs that are available to them. This is true in both publicly-funded and parent-funded programs. The ad hoc patchwork through which we currently educate young children—including the federal Head Start program, state-funded pre-K, subsidized child care, school-based pre-K programs, and parent-funded preschools—does not provide for consistency in quality standards, early learning experiences, or outcomes for young children. As a result, while research shows that quality pre-K can narrow achievement gaps, current arrangements often wind up exacerbating inequalities, rather than acting to counter them.

Pre-K has long been the poor stepchild of the public education system, with fewer resources, spotty quality standards, and limited attention to children’s learning outcomes. To provide children with a solid foundation for success before they enter school, we need to start treating pre-K as a fundamental component of the education system, not an optional add-on.

First, that means making pre-K universally available to all children whose parents want to enroll them, regardless of family income level or other factors. Americans would never countenance the notion that some children should be

denied access to publicly funded third grade, or high school, based on family income or limitations on available state resources. Nor should we for pre-K. Participation in pre-K programs, unlike in K-12 schooling, should be voluntary, and parents should have the opportunity to choose among multiple pre-K options, in deference to the important role of families as children’s first teachers. But any parent who wants to enroll his or her child in pre-K should have that option.

While providing universal pre-K may appear more costly than targeting pre-K only to low-income youngsters, several facts argue in favor of universal provision. Families with young children often experience considerable fluctuations in income, so eligibility criteria based on family income may lead to disruptions in children’s early learning experiences—undermining public investments in pre-K. Making pre-K universal also addresses the needs of moderate income families, who currently have the greatest difficulty obtaining quality early childhood opportunities for their children. (For example, a family of four with a household income of \$29,000 in 2009 is too wealthy to qualify for Head Start.²³) And it recognizes the reality that a majority of the children who are at-risk for school failure are not actually poor. Perhaps most importantly, providing pre-K universally encourages greater consistency in the early learning experiences children have had before entering school, reducing the tremendous variation that currently exists in the skills of entering kindergarteners and allowing kindergarten and early-grades teachers to align their curricula and teaching practices with children’s pre-K experiences.

It also means ensuring that pre-K programs have the same resources and funding levels as elementary and secondary schools. Most states with publicly funded pre-K programs spend on pre-K only a fraction of what the state’s schools spend on K-12 students. But providing the kind of experience that produces lasting educational benefits requires quality standards—and by extension, funding—comparable to that provided in the elementary and secondary grades. Most importantly, pre-K programs must

be funded at levels that allow them to employ highly skilled teachers who have at least the same credentials—a bachelor’s degree and state teacher licensure—as their colleagues in grades K-12. As research increasingly documents the complexity of children’s early development—not to mention the skills and practices that effective early educators use to support that development—teachers working with young children must have higher education levels that enable them to support that development.

And when a majority of mothers of young children are working outside the home, it’s no longer practical to offer families only a half-day pre-K experience. Pre-K programs should be offered—not mandated, but offered—for a full school day, with opportunities for parents to purchase additional “wrap-around” services as needed to meet their child care needs. In this way, universal pre-K can become an important component of a family-based social contract that recognizes the important sacrifices parents make in rearing children and provides them with supports to support their children’s development to adulthood—while maintaining families’ freedom to make choices that fit their unique values and needs.²⁴

Given the high variation in quality and low level of funding in many pre-K programs, increased resources are in many cases necessary to raise quality levels in pre-K classrooms. But improving pre-K quality is not just about resources. Pre-K programs must also have clearly defined, developmentally appropriate curricula and expectations of children’s learning that are aligned with expectations for elementary and secondary students. Equally important, policymakers must develop systems and infrastructure to monitor the quality of pre-K programs and hold them accountable by tracking comprehensive indicators of child development and long-term effects of pre-K programs on children’s academic performance in school. This is another benefit to universality: In contrast to our current ad hoc system, a universal approach provides an opportunity to bring the entire array of pre-K providers under a common

banner, subject to uniform quality standards and accountability for results.

Ideally, pre-K funds should flow to schools and community-based providers on a per-pupil basis through the same school finance system that funds other elementary and secondary students.²⁵ And systems of data collection, quality monitoring, and accountability for pre-K programs should be integrated into the larger data and accountability systems used for the entire public education system.

This does not mean, though, that pre-K programs should be just an extension of our public schools. America is blessed with a rich and diverse network of community-based early childhood education providers, including child care centers, family home care, and Head Start. In extending public education access to three- and four-year-olds, we must take advantage of the capacity, experience, and unique assets these programs offer. To do that, public policies must help them improve the quality of their services and build linkages between community-based pre-K programs and the public schools that will eventually serve their students. Such an approach recognizes the historic value of civic society institutions in delivering social services. It also provides a way for these ad hoc and voluntary arrangements to be incorporated into a more robust public, citizen-based system, and provides options that may better meet families’ unique needs and values.

Our elementary and secondary education system is already moving in the direction of a more diverse delivery system through the growth of charter schools and other public school choice options. These same policies can be used to incorporate community-based early education providers into a new system that makes high-quality, publicly funded pre-K universally accessible for all three- and four-year-olds.

Redefining the Primary Years

Expanding access to high-quality pre-K education is an important starting point for improving student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps. But it is only a starting point. The same research that shows that

pre-K programs can improve student learning also shows that these benefits can fade or disappear altogether if children move from quality pre-K programs into poor-quality elementary schools that are ill-equipped to sustain pre-K learning gains.²⁶

Unfortunately, far too many of our elementary schools aren't up to the task. In-depth observational research in American elementary school classrooms suggests that only 10 percent of poor children experience high quality instruction consistently throughout the elementary years, and that only 7 percent of all children have consistently high classroom experiences when both emotional *and instructional* climate is taken into account.²⁷ To address this problem, we must ensure that high-quality pre-K programs are closely integrated with vastly improved elementary schooling.

Key Features of PreK-3rd Programs

- Universal access to voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents want pre-K
- Universal full-day kindergarten
- Quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum and standards aligned from pre-K through third grade
- Qualified teachers with both a bachelor's degree and specialized training in how young children learn
- Opportunities for teachers to share data, planning, and professional development within and across grade levels
- Strong leadership committed to providing children with a seamless educational experience
- Opportunities for parent and community engagement

Source: "America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3rd Education" (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2008)

A seamless, integrated program of PreK-3rd early education ensures that all children have a solid foundation in literacy,

math, and social-emotional skills by the end of third grade—that critical transition point in schooling when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn.²⁸ In fourth grade, the curriculum becomes more content-rich and challenging, and children who have not developed a solid foundation in basic skills quickly fall behind. Students who cannot read and do math proficiently by the end of third grade are at high risk for later school failure, dropping out, and a host of other negative life outcomes. Thus, it is essential to focus intensive energy on ensuring students build a strong educational foundation in the PreK-3rd years.²⁹

What types of changes must be made to our elementary schools to ensure that all children are successful by third grade?

First, policymakers, educators, and parents must recognize that the years from pre-K through third grade constitute a unique stage in children's academic and social development, in which they are building critical foundational skills. Although early childhood experts and even some educators and policymakers will agree in principle that the developmental period known as early childhood reaches from birth to age eight, in practice our educational system does not recognize the unique needs of children under age eight as separate from those of older elementary-aged children. Our educational system typically groups children separately in pre-K settings and K-5 elementary schools, rather than in PreK-3rd settings. Many elementary school teachers have relatively little training in early childhood development, and the same credential typically allows teachers to work in any grade K-5, even though the skills required to successfully teach first graders to read are very different than those required to teach fifth graders science and social studies. Elementary school principals often know little about early childhood development. In order to improve the effectiveness of our schools in serving young children, we must ensure that all educators working with young children in this age range have a solid understanding of early childhood development, recognize the importance of the PreK-3rd years in children's

development, and are committed to creating a seamless educational experience in these years—including both school- and community-based pre-K settings.

Second, kindergarten programs should be for a full day. Currently, about 40 percent of American kindergarteners have access only to half-day programs. In addition to better serving the needs of working families, full-day kindergarten would provide greater time for learning and allow teachers to introduce children to a full range of subjects in kindergarten—rather than focusing heavily on language and literacy, as many currently do. A full day would also allow teachers to incorporate more time for child-directed and imaginative play, helping to play a critical role in developing children’s self-regulation and other skills³⁰.

The PreK-3rd years are a particularly important time not just for children’s acquisition of literacy and language skills, but also for their social and emotional development. A growing body of research indicates that social-emotional and “soft” skills—such as the ability to regulate one’s behavior, defer gratification, focus on a task at hand, and appropriately communicate one’s needs and feelings verbally, rather than through other means—are as or more important to individuals’ long-term success in life and the workforce as their academic accomplishments.³¹ These skills are essential as our economy evolves to become more global, knowledge-oriented and service-based. And the PreK-3rd years are when children acquire many of these skills. Unfortunately, many schools, due to a combination of a poor grasp of child development and increased emphasis on early academics, do too little to support the development of social and emotional skills during this period. If our schools are to be effective in preparing our youngest children for success—in school, work, family, and life—they must prioritize social and emotional development in the PreK-3rd years, as well as academics.

To do so, schools must take a much more systematic approach. Standards, curricula, formative assessments, and instructional strategies must be aligned with one another so that all work together to support children’s learning. This

alignment must be both vertical—from grade to grade—and horizontal, so that all elements work together and children in different classrooms have a common learning experience. Standards must be aligned from grade to grade and over the course of the year, so that children’s learning builds in a seamless progression on top of what they already know. Effective elementary schools use clearly articulated curricula that are simultaneously content-rich and developmentally appropriate, and that are aligned with student learning goals articulated in the standards. PreK-3rd educators also use developmentally appropriate assessments and benchmarks to monitor children’s progress in meeting these standards, to identify gaps in children’s knowledge before they fall behind, and to intervene when children are struggling.

Creating alignment requires a fundamental rethinking of the culture of teaching and the work that teachers do. Too many of our public schools today operate on an “egg carton” model, with teachers working in isolation in closed door classrooms, rarely engaging one another or sharing lessons. In PreK-3rd schools, teachers work together constantly—in both grade-level and cross-grade disciplinary teams—analyzing student data, regularly communicating about children’s progress, sharing and refining lesson plans. Teachers have a common language and vocabulary to talk about their goals for students and students’ progress towards those goals. This collaboration builds a sense of community and shared responsibility among teachers and enables them to align instruction and curriculum both within and across grade levels, providing a more seamless and coherent learning experience for students. Teachers also receive support to improve and align instruction, from reading and math coaches, behavioral consultants, and administrators who serve as instructional leaders and understand the importance of the PreK-3rd years.

Models for successful collaboration among teachers can be found in places like Union City, N.J., a district with 93 percent of its population qualifying for federal lunch subsidies and many children arriving without proficiency in English. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the district

created a comprehensive program for intensive literacy instruction from pre-K through the third grade. By 2007, Union City's fourth-grade students were performing close to the state average on reading tests, and exceeding the average in math.³²

PreK-3rd educational systems operate in a culture of shared responsibility and accountability for child outcomes: All the adults involved in children's PreK-3rd experiences—pre-K teachers in both community- and school-based settings, elementary grades teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents—hold themselves collectively responsible for ensuring that students acquire grade-level reading, math, and social-emotional skills by the end of third grade. There are no “your kids” and “my kids,” but a shared focus on equipping “our kids” with the skills and knowledge they need. Educators collect data on a variety of indicators of children's progress throughout the PreK-3rd continuum, and use this data to evaluate their own efforts and inform instruction, but all eyes are clearly fixed on third grade proficiency as the end goalpost. And all educators—and families!—are equal partners in pursuing that goal.

Finally, effective PreK-3rd educational systems do not operate in a vacuum, but actively establish connections with the parents and communities they serve. Parental engagement is important at all levels of the educational system, but it is particularly important in the early years. PreK-3rd programs must also respect and reflect the broader cultures and communities their children come from. Too often, our public school systems are not responsive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children they serve, and impose cultural expectations for parenting, behavior, and other issues that may be at odds with families' own understandings and values, leading them to feel alienated from the school's culture. PreK-3rd educational systems are aware of the culture of the families and communities they serve and view that culture respectfully, as an asset to support children's learning, rather than challenging and alienating families.

Building connections between schools and the community is particularly critical in PreK-3rd systems that use community-based providers to deliver pre-kindergarten; school officials must build close collaborative relationships with community-based pre-K providers. Establishing such relationships can be challenging but highly rewarding for schools, community-based providers, and children, and can also provide a foundation for schools to build deeper connections to the communities they serve.

Finally, schools and community-based providers in PreK-3rd systems must build linkages with other social services in the community to meet the full range of needs—including nutrition, health care, and mental health services—that particularly affect young children's development. Increasingly, schools calling themselves “community schools” are seeking to improve the quality of education by partnering with community organizations to provide resources and services that traditional schools often lack. This strategy for improving the quality of schools has real potential to improve PreK-3rd alignment and early education opportunities for disadvantaged youngsters. Aside from the obvious benefits of co-locating programs like Early Head Start, Head Start, and preschool providers on elementary school campuses, schools that are able to connect children and their families with medical, mental health, and social services can more effectively support the development of the “whole child,” which developmental psychologists consider critical during the preschool and early elementary years. Community schools that offer parenting and adult education classes on site may also be better able to engage parents who would not otherwise have the time or transportation resources (or, for that matter, babysitters) to access several different community programs. And that increased parental education and engagement in turn produces benefits for children.

Geoffrey Canada spearheaded this model when he created the Harlem Children's Zone, a 24-block area in Harlem that provides comprehensive services to kids and families from birth to college, beginning with “Baby College” workshops for parents of kids ages 0-3. The HCZ “pipeline”

includes pre-K, elementary, secondary and high schools; free legal advice and programs for managing asthma are also included in its breadth of programs. The high-quality, comprehensive services that Canada created have produced remarkable results: last spring, for example, 100 percent of students at the HCZ's Promise Academies scored at or above grade level on state math exams. The program has grown to serve 100 city blocks and over 17,000 children.

Today, a similar model is propelling the British government to convert all of its 23,000 public schools into community schools (known as “extended services” in Great Britain) that stay open longer and provide a range of activities and support to their local communities. The United States should follow suit.

Aligned PreK-3rd systems provide a unique form of education that combine the best features of both the early childhood and K-12 systems, offering universal access, qualified teachers, and academic learning in settings that emphasize parent and community connections, choice among diverse providers, developmentally appropriate practice, emotional support, and the growth of the whole child. It's not about making pre-K look like elementary school, or elementary school look like pre-K, but about improving both, together, to produce better outcomes for children.

A Policy Framework for PreK-3rd Reforms

This vision of seamless PreK-3rd early education extends beyond policy into changes in the day-to-day practice of educators, schools, and districts. But those changes will first require a number of changes in our education policies and institutions—changes that should be part of a next social contract for education:

Establish proficiency in reading, math, and social and emotional skills by the end of third grade as a clear and foremost goal of our educational system: High-school graduation and readiness for work or college are widely accepted goals of our public education system. But in order for students to graduate ready for college or work, they

must first acquire solid foundational skills in the early years of schooling. A next social contract for education must establish proficiency in foundational skills by the end of third grade as a key goal of our educational system—on par with high school graduation and college or workforce readiness. It must also allocate resources to support this goal, and establish clear metrics by which to hold schools and early childhood educators accountable for achieving it.

Move the starting point for public education from five years old to three years old: To build a seamless PreK-3rd early education system, we must first expand access to quality pre-kindergarten to all children whose parents want it. This means redefining our understanding of when public education starts. It also means viewing pre-kindergarten and kindergarten not just as add-ons to the educational system, but as core components of it. In too many states and communities, kindergarten, while universally accessible, is still treated as less than a full part of the public education system—as evidenced by the fact that 40 percent of American youngsters still attend pre-kindergarten for only a half day. To provide all our children with a solid early learning foundation, we must expand access to quality pre-K and full-day kindergarten to all youngsters, and better integrate these programs with the early elementary grades.

Integrate pre-kindergarten into a reformed education finance system: Publicly funded pre-K programs are typically funded at levels much lower than those for K-12 public schools, and with entirely separate funding streams. These funding differences undermine the quality of pre-K programs and make it more difficult to integrate pre-K with early elementary schooling. In order for quality pre-K to become the starting point for a seamless early education system, pre-kindergarten must be funded at the same levels as grades K-12, and should be included in the same financing structure. Updating our education system to meet the needs of a Next Social Contract will require broader changes to how we finance public education, to make school funding more transparent, equitable, and student-focused. As part of these broader reforms, equitable per-pupil funding for pre-kindergarten students should be

included in reformed school funding formulas, and funds should follow the child to the publicly accountable school or community-based pre-kindergarten program of his or her parents' choice.

Establish clearly articulated, aligned high-quality national standards for what children should know and be able to do at the end of third grade and at each step in the PreK-3rd continuum leading up to that: To ensure that all of our children are acquiring foundational skills by the end of third grade, we must first have consensus on what those skills are. Currently, the nation has 50 different sets of standards for what children should know and be able to do in third grade, many of which are lacking in rigor and too vague or broad to provide clear guidance to educators. Standards for grades K-3 are an area of particular weakness in existing state standards, and while most states have some type of early learning or pre-kindergarten standards, these standards are often poorly—or not at all—aligned with standards for the early grades. As part of a broader move towards common, national education standards, a next social contract for education must establish clearly articulated standards for what children should know and be able to do in third grade as well as aligned standards for each grade PreK-3rd that build seamlessly towards the goal of third grade proficiency. To enable teachers to implement these standards and align curriculum, assessment, and instruction with them, policymakers must support the development of high-quality, content-rich, and developmentally appropriate curricula, teaching materials, and assessments aligned with standards—including open source curricula and teaching materials that allow teachers to work together in communities of practice to improve and adapt these materials to support quality instruction.

Policies Outside the Education Sphere to Support PreK-3rd

Aside from teachers and educational institutions, do parents and communities have a role to play in the Next Social Contract for education? Absolutely. In fact, they are crucial to ensuring that children are immersed in the language-rich, supportive environments they need to succeed in school. But today's parents can be hard-pressed to find time for the unrushed, high-quality conversations and interactions with their children that may help them in school. As Phillip Longman and David Gray have argued, today's social contract has not recognized the changing nature of families, in which households require two incomes to support themselves and parents feel increasingly harried.³³ Moreover, many parents are on the lower-rung of what Michael Lind has described as the inequitable two-tier job market, in which the second tier includes workers in temporary or part-time jobs with no benefits.³⁴ Meanwhile, community services designed to help low-income families are often disconnected from what happens within the schoolyard gates.

Federal, state and local governments should pursue policies that reduce these hardships and lessen these barriers, providing crucial support to educational reform and families at the same time. These policies should:

- Allow for better work-life balance, so parents are not stretched to a breaking point and can spend time talking with and exploring the world with their children, strengthening the work of teachers.
- Provide more time for professional development for adults, helping to enrich a parent's own language and content knowledge, and providing a new platform of experiences and ideas that parents can introduce to their children.
- Build on and encourage the coordination of services between schools and the larger community, creating an envelope of support that includes health providers, local nonprofits, religious institutions and employers.

Redefine the roles of early childhood and elementary grades teachers and principals: As noted above, creating an aligned PreK-3rd early learning experience for children will require fundamental changes in the way early childhood educators, elementary teachers, and principals, approach their work. These changes should be part of a broader rethinking of the way we understand the work of teachers under this next social contract, and the way we prepare, recruit, and compensate them. But some additional changes are needed to support the development of aligned PreK-3rd systems. In particular, skills, knowledge, and professional preparation requirements should be aligned for all teachers working in PreK-3rd settings. This will require raising standards for pre-K teachers, many of whom do not currently hold a bachelor's degree, which is a requirement for all K-12 teachers. At the same time, we must also ensure that all teachers in grades PreK-3rd have a solid grounding in child development that prepares them to work with young children.

Diversify educational delivery and eliminate the exclusive franchise for school districts in public education: Making pre-K, rather than kindergarten, the starting point for public education requires moving towards a more diverse delivery model of public education that incorporates both public schools and community-based pre-K providers into one common education system. A next social contract for education must reject the long-held assumption that local school districts are the only legitimate providers of public education. Rather, we need to move towards a more open and diverse model that defines public schools based on their public funding, open access for all students, and public accountability for results, and allows for the incorporation of a variety of providers into that system to help achieve common education goals. Such a system has benefits beyond the early childhood years, allowing a variety of educational services—including community-based pre-K and youth development programs, as well as privately-operated schools—to be incorporated into a seamless public system, where they will be able to serve a wider range of students in return for public accountability for their outcomes. It is particularly critical to allow community-

based pre-K providers and other community services for young children and their families to be incorporated into a seamless PreK-3rd public education system.

Conclusion

It is well beyond time to reverse the most devastating failures of our educational system and ensure that all children start out with a solid foundation for learning and acquiring knowledge. The answer is to create a seamless PreK-3rd system that starts at age 3, involves community-based providers in the earliest years, frees teachers to collaborate more broadly and across grades, and equips all children with essential literacy, math, and social-emotional skills by the end of third grade. In redefining the first stage of children's educational experience, we also lay a foundation for more aggressive rethinking of our educational institutions from preschool to college. Without this strong beginning, that pipeline will forever be weak. But fortified with a solid start in the PreK-3rd years, our educational system can finally fulfill its mission of providing the knowledge and skills to provide all Americans, no matter their background, with an equal opportunity to thrive.

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