



## Issue Brief

# Building a Solid Foundation

*How States and School Districts Can Use Federal Stimulus Funds to Support Proficiency by Third Grade*

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In April, the states and school districts began receiving the first installment of more than \$48 billion in federal economic stimulus funds for education and child care appropriated under the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). This unprecedented federal investment in education—from early childhood through college—is a tremendous opportunity for state and local investments to improve our nation's schools. The danger is that states and school districts may squander these funds on ill-conceived projects or use them simply to maintain the status quo. It is critical that the states and school districts make wise decisions about how to spend the stimulus funds, using them not only to maintain educational services and jobs during the current economic downturn but also to institute lasting reforms that will yield ongoing gains in student learning and help fuel America's long-term economic growth.



One of the most important ways that the states and districts can do this is by investing stimulus funds in PreK-3rd reforms to ensure that all students establish a solid foundation of math, literacy, and social/emotional skills by the end of third grade. Research shows that third grade marks a critical turning point in children's education: children who cannot read or do math on grade level by third grade are unlikely ever to achieve proficiency. In order to ensure that all students achieve proficiency in math and reading, and develop appropriate social skills by the end of third grade, states and school districts need to build robust PreK-3rd systems to provide children with a high-quality aligned early educational experience.

This issue brief explains why states and school districts must make PreK-3rd reforms a priority in the spending of stimulus funds and offers examples of how states and school districts can use these funds to advance a PreK-3rd reform agenda.

## What Is PreK-3rd and Why Does It Matter?

PreK-3rd is a comprehensive reform strategy that seeks to improve young children's access to high-quality pre-K programs and strengthen the capacity of elementary schools to sustain student learning gains in the early elementary school years, and to integrate these two efforts so that all children receive a seamless, high-quality early learning experience that enables them to be proficient in reading and math, and to develop the social and emotional skills that support academic success by the end of third grade.

Why focus on proficiency by third grade? Third grade marks a critical turning point in children's education, when they shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."<sup>[1]</sup> Children who cannot read proficiently by the third grade, or who lack solid math and social skills, will struggle to master more demanding academic content in later grades, falling further and further behind. Achievement in third grade is a strong predictor of children's later academic and life outcomes. For this reason, PreK-3rd reforms that seek to ensure that all children achieve proficiency by third grade must be the foundation of every state's and school district's long-term strategy to raise student achievement.<sup>[2]</sup>

Key components of a PreK-3rd system include:

- High-quality, full-day pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds;
- Full-day kindergarten;
- Standards, curriculum, assessments, and instructional methods that are aligned both horizontally (within grades) and vertically (from grade to grade);
- Qualified teachers at all grade levels;

- Appropriate resources and interventions for struggling students and those at risk of failing to achieve proficiency by third grade;
- Structures, policies, and practices that support collaboration and alignment within and across grade levels (the exact nature of the structures, policies, and practices will vary with district and community needs); and
- Shared responsibility-between public schools, early childhood providers, families, and communities-for children's achievement outcomes at the third-grade level.

While it is important for state and school district policymakers to recognize the value of the components of a quality PreK-3rd system, it is equally important for them to understand what PreK-3rd is not. It is not an effort to push the elementary school curriculum and instructional practices down into preschool programs, nor to move 3- and 4-year-olds out of community-based early childhood education settings and into the public school system. Rather, effective PreK-3rd reforms combine the best of both the early childhood and K-12 education systems—the diversity, "whole child" emphasis, and focus on parent engagement that characterize early childhood programs, and the universal access, teacher quality standards, and accountability that exist in public schools—to provide young children with a seamless, high-quality early education experience that extends from pre-K through early elementary school. This experience can begin in either school-based pre-K settings or in community-based pre-K programs that work closely with and are supported by the local public schools.

## **The Stimulus Provides a Unique Opportunity for PreK-3rd Reforms**

Over the past decade, the states have dramatically expanded their investments in early childhood education programs. Since 2002, state investments in pre-K programs have more than doubled, from \$2.1 billion to \$5.2 billion, and the number of children enrolled in state-funded pre-K programs has grown by 50 percent, reaching more than 1.1 million 3- and 4-year-olds. The states have also improved the quality of their pre-K and other early education programs.[3]

The current economic downturn threatens this progress. Nearly every state in the country faces a budget shortfall requiring either tax increases or painful cuts in funding for state services, or some combination of the two. Five states have made or are considering cuts in funding for state pre-K programs, and others have tabled plans for expansion or quality improvements.[4] Because most stimulus funds for education are being distributed directly to school districts under preexisting funding formulas, most states will be unable to use those funds to shore up funding for state pre-K programs. And it is unlikely that states will be able to sustain the past decade's pattern of increased investment in their pre-K programs.

Therefore, school districts, which will receive the bulk of ARRA education funding, must take a leadership role in improving the quality of and expanding access to pre-K programs. This is a substantial shift from recent trends, and some early childhood advocates fear that school districts may be unwilling to invest in pre-K programs, or that those who do invest in them may not work collaboratively with existing community-based pre-K providers. These are valid concerns. Policymakers and advocates must educate and support school district officials to help them understand the value of investing in quality pre-K and in working effectively with community-based providers to maximize the impact of limited resources.

The fact that school districts must now play a central role in efforts to expand pre-K access also creates the opportunity to move beyond the past decade's narrow focus on pre-K expansion to a broader focus on building PreK-3rd systems that not only prepare children for learning but also sustain those gains through the early elementary school years. Because school districts already serve students in kindergarten through third grade, they are ideally positioned to align new pre-K investments with K-3rd programs, and to ensure that investments in school readiness are accompanied by reforms that will ensure that elementary schools are ready to serve pre-K graduates effectively. But in order to take advantage of this opportunity, policymakers at the state and district levels must first understand what high-quality PreK-3rd early education is, and why it is important.

## **Why PreK-3rd Must Be Part of State and School District Stimulus Strategies**

Much of the public conversation about the stimulus has focused on the need to maintain existing services and prevent layoffs of teachers and other essential staff during the current recession. But restoring our economic growth will require us to use ARRA funds to do more than simply maintain the educational status quo. Because a skilled workforce will be critical to future economic growth, the federal government, the states, and school districts must ensure that ARRA funding is used to underwrite lasting educational reforms that generate real and sustained

improvements in educational attainment. High-quality, aligned systems of PreK-3rd early education are the foundation on which future improvements in student learning and educational attainment will rest.

The Obama administration's guidance regarding the use of stimulus funds underscores the importance of PreK-3rd in state and school district strategies. States accepting stimulus money must commit to the following four essential areas of reform:

- Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensuring an equitable distribution of qualified teachers;
- Making progress toward establishing college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning;
- Improving achievement in low-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions; and
- Improving student learning, teacher performance, and college and career readiness with the aid of enhanced PreK-college data collecting and tracking systems.[5]

While all states need to commit to these four principles, they are particularly important for states seeking to compete for a share of the \$5 billion in Race to the Top funds that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will award to states that use the opportunities provided by ARRA to make significant progress on education reform. Each of these four principles carries implications for PreK-3rd reforms.

***Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensuring that all schools have highly qualified teachers.***

In many states, teachers working in pre-K classrooms are subject to lower standards for professional training and education and receive less pay than teachers working in early elementary classrooms. Only 27 states require lead teachers in state pre-K programs to hold a bachelor's degree.[6] While all states require elementary school teachers to have a bachelor's degree and certification, many teachers in the early elementary grades hold only a general credential to teach in all elementary grades and are not required to be trained in developmentally appropriate practice and the needs of young children. These disparities in teacher qualifications and compensation undermine quality and alignment in early education programs. Efforts to improve teacher effectiveness and ensure that all teachers are highly qualified must include uniform, high-quality standards for all teachers across the PreK-3rd continuum.

***Making progress toward college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning.***

Much of the debate on raising the quality of educational standards has focused on making high school standards more rigorous to better align them with college entry requirements. But the road to college and career readiness begins in pre-K. While most states have early-learning standards for what children should know and be able to do in pre-K programs, those standards often are not well integrated with K-12 learning standards. Moreover, analysis of existing state academic standards indicates that the early elementary years are actually one of the areas of greatest weakness in state standards. K-3 academic standards are often repetitive and too vague to provide teachers with clear guidance on what students should know and be able to do at specific ages. Several states have no standards at all for grades K-2.[7] And some states' elementary standards are not aligned with their middle school and high school standards, so that children who appear to be proficient in the elementary grades are not necessarily on the path to proficiency at higher grade levels.[8] Therefore, any effort to establish college- and career-ready high school standards must also address these shortcomings in PreK-3rd standards and ensure that early learning standards are aligned with early elementary standards, which must in turn be aligned across grade levels, leading seamlessly to college and career readiness by the end of twelfth grade.

***Improving achievement in low-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions.***

The No Child Left Behind Act provides a menu of "restructuring" options intended to dramatically overhaul schools that persistently have failed to improve student learning. But school districts only rarely implement any of these strategies in chronically low-performing schools. Moreover, there is little evidence that many of the options on this menu are effective.[9] Turning around low-performing schools will require interventions that have been proven effective and that school districts are likely to implement. PreK-3rd reforms that combine high-quality pre-K with an emphasis in the early elementary grades on ensuring that all students achieve proficiency in math and reading by the third grade, is one such strategy. Broad Acres Elementary School, a high-poverty school serving predominantly English-language-learner students in Montgomery County, Maryland, provides an example of how this approach can work. In 2000, Broad Acres was one of the county's lowest performers, with only 12 percent of third graders proficient in reading, and only 5 percent proficient in math. After implementing reforms that expanded access to early learning opportunities and focused on improving language and literacy in the early grades, more

than 60 percent of Broad Acres' students now perform at grade level, and the school is making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

**Improving student learning, teacher performance, and college and career readiness with the aid of enhanced PreK-college data collecting and tracking systems.** ARRA encourages states to establish longitudinal data systems to track student learning gains over time. Such systems provide a valuable opportunity for states and school districts to track the long-term outcomes of their investments in pre-K and other early childhood programs. High-quality data systems can also provide information that pre-K and early elementary school teachers can use to tailor instruction and interventions to most effectively improve student learning. To take advantage of these benefits, state officials must ensure that such systems include data from Head Start, state pre-K, and district-operated early childhood programs; that state longitudinal databases for PreK-12 interface with other state data systems for early childhood education, such as child care Quality Rating and Improvement Systems or child care subsidy databases; and that teachers working in pre-K and early elementary classrooms have access to technologies and professional development that will enable them to access and effectively use data to improve instruction.

<b>Major ARRA Funding Streams That May Be Used for Early Education</b>	
<b>Program</b>	<b>ARRA Funding</b>
<b>Title I</b>	<b>\$13 billion</b>
Local Education Agencies	\$10 billion
School Improvement	\$3 billion
<b>IDEA</b>	<b>\$12.2 billion</b>
Part B Special Ed. Grants to States	\$11.3 billion
Part B Preschool	\$400 million
Infants and Families	\$500 million
<b>Head Start</b>	<b>\$2.1 billion</b>
COLA	\$122 million
Quality Improvement	\$354 million
Head Start Expansion	\$200 million
Early Head Start Expansion	\$1.6 billion
State Early Childhood Advisory councils	\$100 million
<b>Child Care and Development Block Grant</b>	<b>\$2 billion</b>
Set-Aside for Quality	\$255 million
Set-Aside for Infants and Toddlers*	\$94 million
<b>State Fiscal Stabilization</b>	<b>\$53.7 billion</b>
Education Stabilization Fund	\$39.8 billion
Government Services Fund	\$8.9 billion
"Race to the Top" and Innovation Fund	\$5 billion
*Set-Aside for Infants and Toddlers is within the \$255 million set-aside for quality.	

Federal officials understand the importance of early childhood education for achieving ARRA's educational reform and student achievement goals. The Department of Education's guidance specifically encourages districts to use Title I funds provided under the stimulus legislation to support quality early childhood education and strengthen PreK-3rd alignment. The funds are meant to strengthen and expand early childhood education by providing resources to align a district-wide Title I pre-K program with state early learning standards and state content standards for grades K-3 and, if there is a plan for sustainability beyond 2010-11, expanding high-quality Title I pre-K programs to larger numbers of young children.

In separate communications, the Department of Education has encouraged school districts to think about including space for early childhood programs, including community-based providers, in any plans for new construction or facilities modernization using ARRA funds.

## **How States and School Districts Can Use ARRA Funds to Support PreK-3rd Reforms**

There are many ways in which the states, school districts, and the federal government can use ARRA funds to leverage PreK-3rd reforms at the state, district, and local level. But it is important to keep two caveats in mind: First, although ARRA provides a substantial infusion of federal funds for education, many districts will not see substantial increases in the funding available to them. In fact, in most states Education Stabilization Funds will barely compensate for state budget cuts and reduced local revenues as a result of the recession, and in some states federal funds will not be enough to compensate for these cuts.[10] This doesn't mean that districts can't use these funds to invest in PreK-3rd reforms, particularly if they repurpose funds from other, less effective activities to support early education. But it does mean that districts need to be realistic about what they can do and plan carefully so as to maximize the impact of federal funds. Many school districts are receiving substantial new infusions of Title I funds, above what they would normally receive, so Title I funds may be the most promising source of funding for new early education investment.

Second, because ARRA funds are temporary, and will not be sustained after 2010, districts need to beware of this funding "cliff." Districts should use ARRA funds to make investments that require long-term funding commitments only if they have a clear strategy for continuing to pay for these commitments after the increased federal funding disappears in 2011. This means districts need to prioritize one-time investments that can deliver long-term savings or payoffs over long-term commitments. The Obama administration has indicated that they intend to provide additional resources in the future to help districts that make pre-k investments today sustain those investments after ARRA funds are gone. Districts should strongly consider using ARRA Title I funds for pre-k, but they should also be aware that there is no guarantee additional resources will materialize to sustain these programs, and should think carefully about alternative strategies for funding them in the future.

### **State Strategies**

Here are a few ways that the states can take advantage of the opportunity provided by ARRA to make investments that will improve access, quality, and alignment in PreK-3rd early education over the next two years and beyond.

***Ensure that State Early Learning Advisory Councils support PreK-3rd alignment.*** ARRA provides \$100 million in funding for states to establish Early Learning Advisory Councils mandated under the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization to coordinate state-funded pre-K, Head Start, child care, and other state and locally funded early education programs for children from birth through age 5. States should use these councils as a tool to help support PreK-3rd alignment at the state and local levels by broadening their mission from birth to age 5 to birth through age 8; by charging them to advance vertical, as well as horizontal, alignment across the birth to 8 continuum; and by ensuring that school districts and elementary school educators are represented on the councils.

***Strengthen state standards in PreK-3rd.*** As states move toward college- and career-ready standards at the high school level, they must also ensure that standards in the grades leading to high school are aligned with college- and career-ready standards, in order to create a seamless pathway from early learning standards through college and career readiness by the end of twelfth grade. In particular, states should carefully reevaluate both the quality and alignment of their early-learning and K-3 standards. They should establish separate standards in reading and math for each grade from kindergarten through third grade, and ensure that these standards are aligned across grade levels, with standards for later grades, and with early-learning standards for pre-K students. States should also consider extending some of the comprehensive early-learning standards regarding social and emotional development, or approaches to learning, into the elementary grades to ensure that children continue to build critical skills in elementary school.

***Adjust state school funding formulas to incorporate pre-K.*** Education Stabilization Funds are distributed to local educational agencies under the state school funding formula, limiting the states' ability to use them to sustain current pre-K investments. States could solve this problem and shore up pre-K programs by incorporating pre-K funding into the state school funding formula. Eleven states (Colorado, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia already use state school funding formulas for pre-K, because this approach provides a more efficient and stable funding stream for pre-K than funding pre-K out of a separate pot of money.[11] States that use this funding approach can facilitate continued participation of community-based pre-K providers by establishing set-asides and requiring LEAs to collaborate with

community-based providers to deliver pre-K, or by using state charter school laws to enable community-based providers to become pre-K charter schools and receive funding directly through the state school funding formula.[12]

**Allow the creation of pre-K charter schools.** States should support the creation of pre-K charter schools by permitting high-performing elementary charter schools to operate pre-K programs and allowing community-based pre-K providers to become pre-K charter schools. Chartering can be an effective strategy for incorporating community-based pre-K providers into a state's educational system, ensuring quality across diverse providers and allowing community-based providers to gain access to pre-K funding under the state school finance formula. Several states, including Louisiana, and the District of Columbia currently allow the creation of pre-K charter schools, and these programs have helped expand disadvantaged youngsters' access to quality pre-K. State policymakers can facilitate this strategy by ensuring that state laws permit charter schools to offer pre-K, providing charter schools with equitable access to pre-K funding, and exempting pre-K charters from caps on the number of new charter schools that can be created.[13]

**Integrate early education data into state longitudinal student data systems.** States that receive ARRA funds for education must commit to establishing longitudinal student data systems capable of tracking individual students' performance and educational experiences over time. States should ensure that these systems include information about children's pre-K experiences, including any publicly funded Pre-K or Head Start programs the child participated in, the provider who served the child, and results of developmentally appropriate assessments and screenings administered in Pre-K. The same individual student identifier should follow children from Pre-K through twelfth grade and beyond. Pre-K providers and pre-K teachers should also have unique individual identifiers linked to student records. Incorporating information on children's pre-K experiences into state longitudinal data systems will allow policymakers to track the long-term effects of investments in early childhood programs. Ideally, the state longitudinal student data system should also interface with other early childhood data systems, such as information on state child care subsidies and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.

**Provide incentives for districts that maintain pre-K funding or use ARRA funds to support PreK-3rd reforms.** School districts are receiving significantly increased Title I funds that can be used to support pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and other PreK-3rd reforms. States should create incentives for school districts to invest these new funds in Pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs. New Jersey governor Jon Corzine has proposed creating a \$25 million Preschool Incentive Aid initiative, which would reward districts that commit new ARRA Title I funds to pre-K. The Obama administration's fiscal year 2010 budget proposal also includes funding for matching grants to districts that use Title I funds for pre-K. By encouraging districts to invest stimulus dollars in pre-K, states can use their own funds to leverage federal investments in order to maintain and expand children's access to quality pre-K programs.

## School District Strategies

Here are a few ways that school districts can take advantage of the opportunity provided by ARRA to make investments that will improve access, quality, and alignment in PreK-3rd early education over the next two years and beyond.

**Sustain current investments in pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and supports for teaching and learning in the early grades.** In recent years, many school districts have invested in pre-K and full-day kindergarten as strategies for improving student achievement. But state budget cuts and declines in local property tax revenues threaten some of these investments, particularly where school boards view these programs as an "add-on" rather than part of their core educational program. Districts should use Education Stabilization and Title I funds received under ARRA to sustain these investments through the current downturn.

**Use new Title I funds to expand access to quality pre-K.** Many districts will receive significant infusions of new Title I funding as a result of the stimulus. Under federal law, districts may use Title I funds to provide quality pre-K and other early education services to children from birth through school entry. Districts should consider ways to use new Title I funds to expand access to high-quality pre-K, especially for children at risk of not achieving proficiency in reading and math by third grade. Although the influx of new Title I funds is temporary, districts have the option to spread these funds out over as many as five years, which should be sufficient to carry them over until state and local financial conditions improve and new sources of funding become available to sustain pre-K investments. The Obama administration has proposed creating a new program to provide federal matching funds for districts that use new Title I funds for pre-K, so districts that prioritize pre-K for new Title I funds may have the opportunity to receive additional federal funds that multiply the impact of these investments.

**Align standards, curriculum, and instructional strategies to provide a seamless early learning experience for children from pre-K through third grade.** Research documents the importance of providing children with a seamless, aligned early education program, in which the knowledge and skills children learn one year build

seamlessly on those they acquired the year before.[14] Unfortunately, however, many elementary schools do not offer a coherent, aligned approach to curriculum and instruction in the early grades. One-time Title I funds received under ARRA provide districts an opportunity to make the investments needed to ensure that their standards, curriculum, assessments, and instructional approaches are aligned both within and across grades pre-K through third. Districts could use Title I funds to support a variety of activities to strengthen PreK-3rd alignment, including 1) conducting an audit of curriculum, assessments, and instructional approaches used in pre-K and the early grades, in order to identify and correct areas of misalignment; 2) implementing a new curriculum that is aligned with state standards and across grade levels from pre-K through third grade; 3) implementing formative assessments aligned with the PreK-3rd curriculum that will help teachers track student growth and use data to tailor instruction; and 4) providing professional development to help teachers align curriculum and instruction within and across grade levels.

***Establish common, aligned standards and expectations across all pre-K programs in a community.*** In addition to using Title I funds to align their own PreK-3rd programs, school districts can use Title I funds to better align standards and expectations between district-operated pre-K programs and those offered by other community providers. Districts can use Title I funds to help community-based pre-K providers implement a research-based curriculum aligned with the curriculum used in the district's elementary grades. Districts can use Title I funds to provide all pre-K teachers in the district-including those working in district-run programs, Head Start, and community-based pre-K providers-with common professional development opportunities. They can use Title I funds to pay the salaries of master teachers who help teachers in both district-operated and community-based programs improve the quality of their teaching. By using these approaches, school districts can help improve the quality of pre-K programs offered by community-based providers, expand children's access to high-quality pre-K options, and align expectations for children and teachers across a wide array of programs, so that all children begin kindergarten on an equal footing regardless of where they went to pre-K.

***Reconstitute chronically low-performing elementary schools as PreK-3rd Early Learning Academies.*** Under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools that fail to achieve adequate yearly progress, a measure of student achievement, for several consecutive years are subject to increasing interventions and ultimately reconstitution. Unfortunately, many of the strategies NCLB outlines to turn around low-performing schools have not been shown to be effective, and school districts have been reluctant to use them.[15] ARRA requires states and school districts to work more aggressively to turn around these low-performing schools, and provides \$3 billion in funding for states and districts to do so. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has indicated that state efforts to turn around chronically low-performing schools will be an important factor in awarding \$5 billion in competitive Race to the Top funds to states. States and districts should use ARRA funds to convert low-performing elementary schools into PreK-3rd Early Education Academies that offer quality pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and a vertically aligned PreK-3rd curriculum emphasizing early literacy, language, and social/emotional development. These academies represent a research-based approach to turning around low-performing schools that focuses on ensuring that all children have a solid foundation of basic skills by the end of third grade. Reforms based on this strategy have been effective in turning around low-performing schools in Montgomery County and Baltimore County, Maryland, as well as in several of New Jersey's high-poverty Abbott school districts.[16]

***Rethink the school day to allow common planning time.*** In order to provide children with a high-quality PreK-3rd experience that is aligned both vertically and horizontally, teachers working in pre-K through third grade need common planning time that allows them to share information about students and instructional strategies and to work together to plan lessons. Providing teachers with this common planning time will require significant changes in the way that many schools operate. Districts can use Title I funds provided under the ARRA to cover some of the costs of transitioning to a schedule that includes common planning time.

***Build or refurbish facilities for use by pre-K and PreK-3rd programs.*** Lack of access to appropriate facilities can be a major obstacle to expanding pre-K access. Because Education Stabilization Funds may be used for facility repair, renovation, and construction, school districts can use these funds to build or refurbish appropriate spaces for pre-K programs. Districts can use these facilities to house their own pre-K programs or rent them to high-quality community-based pre-K and Head Start programs at a reduced cost, increasing the number of students that these programs can serve and strengthening linkages and alignment between community-based pre-K and the K-12 system.

## Conclusion

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is a valuable opportunity for the states and school districts to make one-time investments that can yield long-term returns in increased student achievement by building high-quality aligned systems of PreK-3rd early education. By prioritizing PreK-3rd reform and making smart investments to improve quality, access, and alignment in early education, states and school districts can use ARRA funds to build a solid foundation for future educational performance and improvement.

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