Improving the Early Years of Education in Massachusetts: The P-3 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Project

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Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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Improving the Early Years of Education in Massachusetts: The P-3 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Project

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December 20, 2011

This report was written by Cambridge Education, LLC for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. It documents the P-3 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment grant program and the efforts of districts across Massachusetts to improve student learning experiences from preschool through grade 3.
Executive Summary

Beginning in January of 2009, the Office of Elementary School Services at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education began making small grants to districts to improve curriculum, assessment, and instruction from pre-K through grade 3 with a special focus on students with disabilities. This report is a study of the projects carried out by the districts that received this grant. The goal of this study is to learn from these districts’ experiences and inform future early grades improvement efforts. Specifically, this study investigates the needs the districts identified, the types of projects they designed to address these needs, how these projects were implemented, the challenges and obstacles they faced, and the implications for future P-3 efforts in Massachusetts and other states.

These grants were called the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Alignment Project and were funded through the Office of Special Education Planning and Policy using federal funds. They are referred to as the P-3 CIA or simply P-3 grants in the remainder of this report. 28 districts were funded in 2009 that were eligible for up to two additional years of funding. Another cohort of 16 districts was funded in 2010 that were eligible for one additional year of funding.

The grant stipulated that participating districts convene vertical study teams that included both special and general educators who serve students from pre-kindergarten to third grade. These teams were charged with studying and discussing a common set of readings, assessing their district’s P-3 continuum, identifying a few strategies to address their district’s needs, and implementing these strategies (beginning in year 2). The districts were provided with a variety of resources and invited to attend workshops with guest speakers and networking events.

This grant took place in a context in which P-3 (or “PreK-3rd”) improvement efforts were gaining attention and building momentum both nationally and in Massachusetts. Fueling the P-3 movement are research findings that demonstrate that high-quality early learning interventions for low-income students can raise student learning outcomes, especially reading proficiency and social-emotional skills, by grade three, and that doing so is critical to future success in school. An underlying premise of the P-3 movement is that raising grade 3 learning outcomes requires improving and aligning the often fragmented array of services that impact the educational experiences of young children at home, in pre-schools, and in grades K-3 of elementary schools.

Nationally, the Foundation for Child Development, the New America Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation and a related multi-funder Campaign for Reading Proficiency are all promoting P-3 efforts, and the U.S. Department of Education has recently announced a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant competition that will support the improvement at the preschool level.
In Massachusetts, P-3 efforts build on numerous programs focused on improving early literacy as well as programs that target students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Related developments include a working group at the Executive Office of Education on P-3 education, the introduction to the Massachusetts Legislature of An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading, the establishment by the Department of Early Education and Care of a Quality Rating Improvement System, the selection of third grade reading proficiency as a priority goal by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the publication of a widely-read report by Harvard literacy expert, Nonie Lesaux, entitled, “Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success.”

The P-3 CIA grant presents an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the participating districts and inform Massachusetts’ continuing efforts to improve early years education for all students, including those with disabilities and other sub-groups.

Summary of Findings

1. Targeted state grants can effect district change. Most districts embraced the opportunity to work on improving P-3 education in their schools. Overall, the grant-funded vertical teams were characterized by high degrees of enthusiasm and motivation. Most completed projects closely related to improving core instruction, and many of these projects were quite significant in scope relative to the size of the grants. Participants reported that the grant targeted an identified need (i.e., early years alignment and inclusion). The research consensus and national and state attention on P-3 helped to create a supportive climate in districts, and the broad design of the grant program allowed participants to choose a strategy they felt would meet local needs.

2. There is an ongoing need to address the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the early grades, and cross-departmental, vertical teams that include prekindergarten educators are effective structures for doing this work. Participants explain the success of their projects primarily as a function of pent-up demand and the utility of the cross-departmental, vertical team structure: they identified significant needs and opportunities to improve the P-3 continuum and found the vertical teams effective structures for doing so. Among the issues they identified were gaps in expectations between prekindergarten and kindergarten and/or between kindergarten and first grade and misaligned and/or inadequate curricula and formative assessments. District teams also identified the need to:

- Increase the use of inclusion practices and provide additional support for integrated classrooms.
- Deepen the focus on oral language, vocabulary, and social-emotional skills development.
- Develop consistent instructional approaches throughout the early grades.
- Improve transitions between grades and expand family engagement practices.
3. **Improving teaching and learning in the early grades requires multi-dimensional efforts.** The grant program was designed to encourage two types of projects related to students with disabilities: 1) systemic improvements that would support all learners and especially students with disabilities and other students who may experience learning challenges, or 2) projects more narrowly focused on improving the inclusion of students with disabilities. Districts implemented a variety of projects to address the needs they identified, clustered around eight categories of activity:

- Aligning standards, curriculum, and assessments
- Developing instructional tools and related professional development
- Adopting P-3 (or P-5) instructional approaches
- Supporting social-emotional skill development
- Collaborating with private preschool providers
- Improving transitions
- Designing inclusion structures
- Engaging families

These project clusters, including examples of each, are described further in the body of this report.

4. **Projects secured buy-in and bridged organizational boundaries, yet significant organizational challenges remain and warrant ongoing attention and capacity-building support.** In addition to completing specific projects, through their work many P-3 teams secured significant leadership and teacher buy-in for both early years education and inclusion practices. Many projects reported that new or more intensive forms of collaboration developed in their districts—not only across grades, but also across departments (e.g., Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education, Early Childhood, and English Language Learners), across schools, and between the district and private providers. Yet in addition to familiar challenges such as leadership transitions, competing priorities and initiatives, and ingrained classroom teaching practices, rigid school schedules and organizational divisions continue as significant obstacles to improving teaching and learning throughout district classrooms. Projects and support that encourage cross-grade and cross-departmental collaboration can increase district capacity to raise student achievement.

5. **Thus far, most districts have assessed their work informally using as measures projects completed, products created, processes improved, organizational reforms implemented, cultural change, and informal classroom observations.** Many teams developed products that have the potential to impact teaching and learning in classrooms, including new curriculum maps, new literacy programs, new assessment tools and schedules, and the adoption of new approaches to instruction. Additionally, in some cases the work of the project teams was institutionalized in district improvement plans, literacy plans, program reviews, and response-to-intervention systems. Given the small size of the P-3 grants, the relative novelty of the early grades vertical team opportunity, and the design of the program, most were understandably not yet integrated into district planning
The P-3 grant showed both the need for and the efficacy of vertical, cross-departmental teams in the early years. It also illustrated the range of district needs to address and suggests potential solutions.

Effective, sustained collaboration between districts and private preschool providers is perhaps the most formidable challenge.

The MA ESE is currently supporting district improvement planning and plan implementation practices that are more focused and coherent than traditional school improvement plans and that use interim benchmarks to monitor, assess, and adjust plan implementation.

processes. Most projects have not yet formally assessed the impact of their work on classroom practice and student learning. Moving forward, districts can build on the work on the P-3 teams by integrating P-3 initiatives into district planning processes and assessing their impact using interim outcome benchmarks, including the results of instructional learning walks and other classroom observations.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

1. **Support Cross-grade, Cross-departmental Collaboration on Improving Teaching and Learning from Prekindergarten to Third Grade (and beyond).** District efforts to improve teaching and learning are hampered by organizational barriers. The P-3 grant showed both the need for and the efficacy of vertical, cross-departmental teams in the early years. It also illustrated the range of district needs to address and suggests potential solutions through the examples described in the body of this report. Districts can support continued cross-grade and cross-departmental work around P-3 improvement by establishing permanent vertical team structures; states can support these efforts through similar grant designs and networking and capacity-building support.

2. **Build District and State Support for District/Private Provider Collaboration.** Some districts across Massachusetts have begun building effective partnerships with private preschools in their communities. Yet of the P-3 component areas, effective, sustained collaboration between districts and private preschool providers is perhaps the most formidable challenge, and districts consistently report the need for support in this domain. Significant progress in aligning and improving P-3 education in Massachusetts will require capacity-building and coordination across districts, private providers, ESE, and EEC (the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care).

3. **Employ Effective School and District Improvement Planning and Implementation Practices.** Districts can build on the work of their P-3 teams by integrating them into district improvement and literacy plans. The MA ESE is currently supporting—for example, through its new superintendent induction program and through its support for underperforming districts—district improvement planning and plan implementation practices that are more focused and coherent than traditional school improvement plans and that use interim benchmarks to monitor, assess, and adjust plan implementation. These planning processes would benefit future P-3 improvement efforts. By regularly assessing the impact of their early years efforts on classroom practice and student learning, districts can inform mid-course adjustments and maximize the impact of P-3 initiatives while providing evidence of success in order to build support for ongoing work.
By regularly assessing the impact of their early years efforts on classroom practice and student learning, districts can inform mid-course adjustments and maximize the impact of P-3 initiatives while providing evidence of success in order to build support for ongoing work.

4. **Continue Providing State-wide P-3 Capacity-Building and Networking Opportunities.** There was a broad consensus across districts that the networking opportunities the ESE provided were helpful. Districts requested continued workshops on important P-3 topics and for webinars and workshops in which districts can learn from each other.

5. **Deepen ESE, EEC, and District Collaboration.** Districts report a need for greater collaboration between ESE and EEC on early years initiatives. Improved coordination between the two agencies and between the agencies and districts could help in streamlining and aligning district policies, procedures, and initiatives.
1. Introduction

Beginning in January of 2009, the Office of Elementary School Services at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education began making small grants to districts to support the coordination and alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instruction from pre-K through grade 3 with a special focus on students with disabilities. These grants were called the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) Alignment Project and were funded through the Office of Special Education Planning and Policy using federal funds. This grant program funded two cohorts of districts: 28 districts that began in 2009 with the possibility of continued funding in 2010 and 2011. An additional 16 districts began in 2010 and had the possibility of continued funding in 2011. In the first year of the grant districts received $10,000. In the second year they received $15,000, and in the third year the amount ranged from $7,000-$26,000. District eligibility for the grant program was determined by several factors, including experience with P-3 strategies, designation as a Commissioner’s District, and diversity considerations (i.e., ensuring a diverse range of special education service delivery models and a mix of districts in terms of geography, size, demographics, and urban/suburban characteristics).

This report is a study of the projects carried out by the districts that received this grant. The goal of this study is to learn from these districts’ experiences attempting to improve student learning from pre-kindergarten through third grade. Specifically, this study investigates the needs the districts identified, the types of projects they designed to address these needs, how these projects were implemented, the challenges and obstacles they faced, and the implications for future P-3 efforts in Massachusetts and other states.

Data sources used in developing this report include site visits, phone interviews, analysis of project documents, participation in project networking activities, and analysis of a final report designed specifically to inform this study. Participants answered the following questions for the final report:

1. What were the main activities supported by the P-3 Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction Alignment project this year (2010-2011)?
2. How did the P-3 project fit in with and support other improvement activities in your district?
3. What outcomes did the project lead to in your district? What do you regard as the project’s main successes?
4. How has this project affected the education of students with disabilities in your district? How has it affected other sub-groups (e.g., English language learners)?
5. What obstacles and challenges to improving PreK to 3rd education did you encounter over the course of this project?
6. What lessons has your district (or school or team) learned through this project and related work on education for children in preschool through
grade 3? Please be as specific as possible.

7. Thinking of your P-3 plans for the future, how could EEC and ESE best support this work? Please include both financial and non-financial supports in your response.

The P-3 grant presents an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the participating districts and inform Massachusetts’ continuing efforts to improve early years education for all students.
2. **Context: The P-3 Movement**

The P-3 CIA grant program took place in a context in which there was growing interest and momentum around P-3 efforts to improve student learning in the early years both nationally and in Massachusetts. The P-3 (or “PreK-3rd”) “movement,” as so described in a recent *Education Week* article, is based on two ideas. First, that improving student learning throughout the early years and by grade 3 is critically important to future student success. Second, that doing so requires both improving and aligning the often fragmented array of services that impact the educational experiences of young children at home, in pre-schools, and in grades K-3 of elementary schools.

Interest in P-3 has been fueled by two intersecting streams of research findings, longstanding concerns about the disjuncture between preschool and K-12 education, and a number of success stories that have received public attention. The first stream of research focuses on rigorous studies of the impact of early childhood education. Research clearly shows that students characterized by low socio-economic status enter schools with sizable achievement gaps in both cognitive and social emotional skills. Current data show these gaps stay predictably consistent from age 5 through age 18. Addressing these gaps through preschool and full-day kindergarten has proven to be possible, yet challenging.

Numerous studies of Pre-K programs have shown short-term cognitive gains that "fade out" in the early elementary years. The fade out phenomenon has led to great interest in transition programs from prekindergarten to the K-12 system. While the research literature shows some positive benefits to these programs, overall the results have been disappointing. In some cases, programs to improve transitions have turned out to be relatively weak one-year interventions, and there have been numerous methodological problems surrounding the studies of these programs. Nonetheless, the history of innovative transition programs and academic research on early childhood transitions serve as additional resources motivating current P-3 efforts.

In contrast to the “fade-out” findings, however, rigorous studies of high quality, intensive preschools for low income minority students – notably the Perry and Abecedarian preschool programs – have shown lasting impacts for participants in comparison to control groups, including higher scores on achievement tests, higher educational attainment, less need for special education services, higher

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when you plan and design a coordinated intervention from preschool to third grade, those transition experiences – they can create – synergies that give you a larger effect ultimately."

Strong research findings demonstrate first that high quality, relatively intensive early childhood interventions have reduced achievement gaps and lead to lasting benefits. Wages, and lower incarceration rates. Evaluations have even found increases in IQ scores that persisted into adulthood for participants in the Abecedarian program, in which students began participation earlier and services were more intensive. Further, recent studies of large-scale, high quality preschool programs in Oklahoma and New Jersey have found significant achievement impacts that thus far have lasted into the early elementary years. These evaluations have all found that the improved outcomes are a result not only of the development of cognitive abilities, but also, critically, the development of social-emotional and executive function skills.

Of particular relevance to the P-3 movement are studies of the Chicago Child Parent Centers led by Arthur Reynolds. The Child Parent Centers provide high-quality early childhood education and comprehensive family services from preschool to third grade. Reynolds and his colleagues have followed CPC students for over two decades and have found a robust set of impacts, again in comparison to a control group, including higher graduation rates, higher socioeconomic status, lower rates of drug use, and lower incarceration rates. Further, those participants who participated for four to six years (beginning in preschool) had significantly better results than those who participated fewer than four years, suggesting that the continuity of high quality services has significant payoffs. As Reynolds concludes, "When you plan and design a coordinated intervention from preschool to third grade, those transition experiences – they can create – synergies that give you a larger effect ultimately."

A second stream of research that has provided powerful motivation for P-3 efforts are findings that students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade continue to struggle with reading throughout high school. A recent study by Fernandez found that students who are behind grade level in reading in third grade are four times less likely to graduate by age 19. For students who are poor readers and have lived in poverty, they are 13 times less likely to graduate (Hernandez). Studies of early intervention programs have shown that struggling readers can acquire the reading skills they need to be successful readers by third grade, yet these interventions and the associated evaluation studies have typically been small-scale in nature.

Thus, strong research findings demonstrate first that high quality, relatively intensive early childhood interventions have reduced achievement gaps and lead to lasting benefits. Second, achieving proficiency in both reading and social-emotional skills by third grade is critical to future success – and feasible for the

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7 Heckman (2008); Morrison (2005).
The vast majority of children when addressed through early intervention. In addition to these research findings, the P-3 movement has found inspiration in a number of exemplary education systems and programs. These P-3 systems and programs are portrayed as sites where promising practices are advancing P-3 collaborative efforts and represent steps forward both in terms of program design and compelling initial results. Notable exemplars include the following:

- The Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) is a nonprofit initiative led by Geoffrey Canada that has frequently been featured in the media. HCZ attempts to provide a seamless series of educational programs, family supports, and enrichment activities that start during pregnancy and continue throughout high school. These programs include Baby College, childcare, preschool, and charter elementary, middle, and high schools.  

- Under the leadership of superintendent Jerry Weast for over a decade, Montgomery County, MD implemented a range of systemic improvements, including many focused on the P-3 years, that have sharply reduced achievement gaps between low-income students and their more affluent peers. These improvements include the use of ambitious college readiness goals, aligned grade-level expectations and curricula, increased learning time for the most vulnerable children, expanded Head Start, district prekindergarten, and comprehensive neighborhood-based early learning programs, partnerships with families, teacher professional development and professional learning communities, a teacher growth and accountability system, and extensive use of data and technology.

- The New Jersey Department of Education implemented an intensive early literacy program in the so-called Abbott districts, districts that received supplemental court-ordered funding, that led to significant gains in reading scores, especially in “high-implementation” districts.

All three exemplars share an intensive focus on aligned early years curricula and core instruction. Both HCZ and Montgomery County developed and implemented comprehensive, multi-faceted plans that include academic, social, and community engagement components using rigorous goals, performance data, and regular progress monitoring. And in both Montgomery County and the New Jersey Abbott districts it was the district and senior district leadership that functioned as the drivers of changed relationships, processes, and systems (with state support in New Jersey’s case).

Nationally, the Foundation for Child Development, the New America Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation and a related multi-funder Campaign for Reading Proficiency are all promoting P-3 efforts, and the U.S. Department of Education has recently announced a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge.

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grant competition that will support the improvement at the preschool level.

The Foundation for Child Development has outlined the “components” of P-3 as follows below. The MA ESE drew extensively on this framework in determining the components of activity it recommended to the P-3 grantees.

Alignment
- Standards, curricula, and assessments are connected across grades from PreK through Third Grade.
- Standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment focus on both social competence and self-discipline as well as academic skills.

School Organization
- Voluntary full-school-day PreKindergarten is provided for all three- and four-year-old children.
- Full-school-day Kindergarten that builds on PreK experiences is required for all children.
- School districts provide principals and teachers with on-going professional development and planning time to ensure alignment.
- Principals foster teamwork among P-3 teachers that strengthens alignment.
- Principals connect elementary schools with families and all early childhood programs in their communities.

Qualified Teachers
- All teachers have at least a Bachelor's Degree with relevant specialized training.
- Preparation and certification enable teachers to teach at any grade level from PreK to Third Grade.
- Teachers are capable of assessing students' achievement and assisting each student to make progress based on regular assessments that inform instruction.

Classrooms as Learning Environments
- Instruction balances child-centered approaches with teacher-directed approaches.
- Classes are staffed by a well-qualified teacher and assistant teacher.
- Student-teacher ratios allow each child to receive individual attention and foster strong relationships with adults in the school.

Accountability to Parents and Communities
- Teachers and families work to set educational goals for children.
- Schools are responsible for reporting students' progress to families, communities, the school district, and the state.\(^{14}\)

In Massachusetts, P-3 efforts build on numerous programs focused on improving early literacy as well as programs that target students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Related developments include a working group at the Executive Office of Education on P-3 Education, the introduction to the

Massachusetts Legislature of *An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading*, the establishment by the Department of Early Education and Care of a Quality Rating Improvement System, the selection of third grade reading proficiency as a priority goal by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the publication of a widely-read report by Harvard literacy expert, Nonie Lesaux, entitled, “*Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success.*”

The P-3 grant presents an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the participating districts and inform Massachusetts’ continuing efforts to improve early years education for all students, including those with disabilities and other sub-groups of children.

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15 Lesaux (2010).
3. The P-3 CIA Grant Program

Program Design

The design of the grant program was informed by an advisory team organized by the Office of Elementary School Services that met in February and March of 2008. The team included public school representatives from Leicester, Medford, Holyoke, Shirley, Brockton, Lynn, and Old Rochester. At these meetings the team agreed on the general goal of supporting districts in creating a coordinated and aligned Pre-K through grade 3 continuum of curriculum, assessment, and instruction that would benefit all children and especially students with disabilities. The team members agreed that the grant would support district vertical teams that would research best practices, identify district strengths and areas in need of improvement, and develop action plans. The advisory team felt that these grants, while small, had the potential to help districts maintain an appropriate level of focus on P-3 education while supporting teachers and administrators in developing high-quality learning environments.

Incorporating the work of the advisory team, the Office of Elementary School Services designed a grant program intended to improve teaching and learning in the early years. The explicit goal of the grant was to “identify and support strategies and resources that increase districts’ capacities to improve the quality of education and inclusion of children with disabilities through the alignment and coordination of curriculum, instruction, and assessment from pre-K to grade 3.” This focus on district capacity building is consistent with the broader policy of the MA ESE to work with districts and build district capacity in order to effect change in schools and classrooms and thereby improve student learning. The mechanism or strategy that ESS chose to carry out this work would be vertical teams that begin as “study teams.” These vertical teams would include both general education and special education teachers that serve students from pre-K through third grade. It made sense for the teams to be vertical given the cross-grade nature of the work. In addition, the team-based design of the project was intended to build the knowledge and expertise of the participants, support collaboration between general education and special education teachers and across the grades, cultivate district buy-in, and develop teacher and administrator leadership focused on P-3 (Cohort 1 kick-off meeting, Feb. 2, 2009 and Cohort 2 kick-off meeting, January 14, 2010).

These P-3 vertical teams were given considerable latitude to address the specific issues they determined would be most helpful in their districts. Their charge in their first year of funding was in fact to function as “study teams.” They were to conduct research, largely by reading and discussing a common set of articles and books, on best practices in improving P-3 teaching and learning. The ESS drew on lists of the component elements drafted by the Foundation of Child Development and by Harvard’s Pre-K to Third Initiative in developing its own list of eight pre-K to third components:

This focus on district capacity building is consistent with the broader policy of the MA ESE to work with districts and build district capacity in order to effect change in schools and classrooms and thereby improve student learning.
Study teams were to choose area(s) of focus from among these components and identify strengths and areas in need of improvement. Based on this analysis teams would create a brief action plan to improve strengths and address areas of need. The work of year two, and if applicable, year three of the grant program would then be to choose one or two of the strategies in these action plans, refine them, and implement them.

**Guidance and Support**

The ESE provided guidance and support to the participating districts through a short set of study team guidelines, occasional networking meetings, and informal direct communication with members of the Office of Elementary School Services staff. Study teams were to be organized as small groups of six to eight educators representing special education and general education as well as a mix of pre-K to third grade teachers. Teams would meet regularly for 75 to 90 minutes and at least seven times during each grant. Districts could choose to rotate team leaders or designate an ongoing leader or co-leaders. A project coordinator in each district was responsible to serve as the liaison with the ESE. The study team guidelines outlined the work priorities the teams were supposed to carry out, established a common set of P-3 definitions, and beginning in year two, listed a variety of resources on P-3 topics. The five priorities for each team to carry out were described as follows:

1. Attend professional development opportunities arranged for grantees;
2. Review current research and available training modules for context on the pre-K to grade 3 continuum;
3. Use this information to assess the school district's areas of strength and weakness/need;
4. Based on the assessment, develop an action plan to extend areas of strength and address areas of need to improve inclusion and the education of young learners; and
5. Work with the Office of Elementary School Services to synthesize effective strategies and resources that may be disseminated statewide. (Study Team Guidelines).

The ESE also provided each participating district with three books:

- *Blended Curriculum in the Inclusive K-3 Classroom: Teaching ALL Young*
These three texts reflected the grant program’s conceptual emphasis on alignment, inclusion, developmentally appropriate practice, and the use of other instructional best practices, including differentiation. Beginning in year two, the guidelines listed a range of helpful articles, reports, blogs, newsletters, and books organized by topic: general P-3 principles and frameworks, alignment of standards and curriculum, inclusion practices, developmentally appropriate practice, and differentiation practices. Like the books, these resources also suggest the grant program priorities.

The ESE also supported the grant recipients through a series of networking meetings. Members of Early Elementary Services made a presentation introducing the P-3 concept at a Full Day Kindergarten meeting in May of 2008 before the CIA grants were made. This meeting was an opportunity to reach many of the early childhood coordinators that would be the likely point people on the grant. The presentation was entitled, “Building a P-3 System,” and it emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of school readiness and the benefits of establishing continuity of learning expectations across grade levels. The presentation outlined the idea of a P-3 system using the Foundation for Child Development’s five P-3 system components: alignment, school organization, qualified teachers, classrooms as learning environments, and accountability to parents and communities.

During the course of the grant program, the ESE held five networking meetings for participants (as well as two conference calls). Grant recipients had opportunities during these meetings to meet in small groups to share ideas and strategies and discuss challenges. At the first meeting, Jason Sachs, the Director of Early Childhood from the Boston Public Schools, presented an overview of Boston’s early childhood work, and later on a team from Worcester provided a tour of a website resource on inclusion practices that they developed as part of the grant. Kristie Kauerz of Harvard’s PreK-3rd Program made several presentations over the course of the grant program on the Harvard PreK-3rd framework and her experience working with states and districts on P-3 issues. Other presentations addressed inclusion practices, developing integrated data systems, the FirstSchool model (a North Carolina P-3 initiative), and curriculum mapping (by the author of this report). As will be discussed further below, district representatives consistently emphasized the value of these meetings for their ongoing work.

**Launch: Study, Assess, and Select Focus**

Many of the grant recipients reported that the initial study group stage of the project proved to be very helpful. In most districts the participants had not had
extensive opportunity to work across grades or cross the general education/special education divide. Reading and discussing the common set of readings – typically the books the ESE provided and or books and articles that after year one were collected and shared on the project resource list – allowed the team members to update their knowledge of different aspects of the PreK – third continuum, develop a common language, and engage in what in many cases became intense conversation on topics such as developmentally appropriate practice (e.g., Northampton), the importance of oral language and vocabulary development to literacy learning (e.g., Watertown), and inclusive practices (e.g., Pioneer Valley).

This initial period of study during the first year of the grant and the broad scope that the ESE provided for the project (i.e., align and improve the PreK – 3rd continuum choosing from among eight broad categories) were distinctive features of the P-3 grant. It is impossible to assess the relative impact of the broad focus on the P-3 grant recipients were provided as in this case there is no comparison group of districts. However, many districts reported that the intense conversations during the first year played a significant role in their development as effective vertical teams. Further, the opportunity to choose a focus that the group felt best met the needs of the district – while challenging for some districts—served as a strong motivator and in many cases eventually resulted in increased buy-in and high levels of enthusiasm on the part of the members of the vertical teams.

For some districts choosing a focus area for the grant happened relatively quickly. Often districts had already identified important needs to be addressed, sometimes in the context of other ESE grants such as an early literacy grant, or they were in the process of embarking on the adoption of a new approach and the grant supported a vertical team that could guide the adoption. Other districts spent much of the first year discussing readings and the needs of their districts, developing as groups, and then ultimately choosing their area of focus. Some districts ended up choosing a particular approach or strategy that they would work on during the entire course of the grant: Response-to-Intervention (e.g., Leicester, Middleborough, and Winchendon), Tools of the Mind (e.g., Amherst and Gill Montague), Six Traits writing (Shirley), Writing Workshop (Northampton), and creating new inclusive kindergarten and first grade classrooms (Lynn). Other districts identified a specific issue to work on and then proceeded over the course of the years of the grant to implement a variety of strategies to address the broad issue they identified. Watertown worked on the alignment of expectations and curriculum and literacy with an emphasis on oral language and vocabulary. Brookline identified developing a more comprehensive district-wide approach to transitions across the PreK – 3rd continuum as their multi-year focus. After much discussion and consultation with teachers and administrators throughout the district, Lowell chose student behavior and in particular the development of social emotional skills as its project focus and ended up deploying three different teams to address different dimensions of the development of social-emotional skills (discussed further below).

A third set of districts began by working on one issue, tackled it successfully, and then developed significant momentum and moved on to tackle a number of
additional projects. Worcester began by developing an online resource of inclusive practices that all its P-3 teachers could access. Through this first project the team gelled, and in particular a strong partnership developed between two leaders on the team the director of early childhood and an assistant director of special education. The team went on to develop an annual four day professional development workshop held every August for both Worcester P-3 teachers as well as teachers from community private providers, a consistent set of rubrics and expectations that would guide the transition from kindergarten to first grade, and an accommodations/modifications document that would supplement the districts literacy program. Likewise, Holyoke began by developing courses for paraprofessionals on inclusive practices, intervention, and early literacy. As was the case in Worcester, the Holyoke team developed momentum, and went on to work on transitions, a motor skills guide, the P-3 science curriculum, a social skills curriculum, and a literacy plan that streamlined and sequenced the literacy assessments students would experience from kindergarten through third grade.

“Small in Money, But Big in Vision”

As some of the cases cited above suggest, perhaps an unusual feature of the P3 CIA grant was the extent to which it generated enthusiasm and buy-in among the vertical team members and led to sustained work on concrete projects. The P-3 grants were small (between $10,000 and $26,000 per year). The primary use of the funding was for stipends for the vertical team participants. Districts also used the funds to purchase curriculum and supplementary materials. Certainly, a few districts dropped out of the project, and there were several where the teams encountered significant challenges in their districts (e.g., lack of leadership support) that limited their impact. These cases and the challenges some districts faced will be discussed further below. Some of the district teams tackled larger projects than others, and there are projects at one end of the continuum that are perhaps relatively weak interventions in terms of their likely impact on student learning. Yet the predominant experience of the vertical teams – as evidenced by the participation in networking meetings, the responses found in project reports, the projects the districts completed, and the findings of site visits and telephone calls with recipients – was enthusiasm for the P-3 vertical structure and the collaboration it enabled. In many cases the grant led to a surprising amount of work. To quote a project liaison in Lynn, the P-3 grant was, “Small in money, but big in vision.”

Several factors account for the momentum the grant led to in many districts. Team leaders frequently cited the importance of the ESE stamp of approval. Early childhood coordinators felt that the grant signaled the state’s endorsement and supported them in making the case in their respective districts for the importance of the early years in a context in which the testing grades necessarily receive much attention.

The broader national and state context of the PreK – 3rd movement also had the effect, in conjunction with the ESE stamp of approval, of strengthening the P-3 teams’ political position within their districts. Reading about the PreK to 3rd
movement and especially about the more recent research consensus on the importance of early literacy and social-emotional skills validated the work in the minds of the vertical team members. Further, however, these research findings also bolstered the teams’ case about the importance of allocating attention, time, and resources to improving early years learning. For instance, a number of sites noted that Nonie Lesaux’s report, *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*,\(^ {16} \) helped draw attention to the importance of early literacy.

Discussions with team members and project liaisons gave the distinct impression that educators in the early grades have had few or no opportunities to work together across grades and with their general education or special education counterparts in the way that they did on the P-3 vertical teams. The way that the participants described the experience suggested that there was a kind of "pent-up demand" to improve aspects of the early learning continuum. Further, a dynamic unfolded in many districts in which team members perceived their district’s project as critically important and highly likely to improve teaching and learning in their grades – projects, for instance, intended to improve the implementation of inclusion strategies, literacy strategies, Response-to-Intervention, Tools of the Mind, transitions, etc. Over the course of the grant, it was perhaps this factor that most accounted for those districts in which the initiative developed the most forward momentum.

Underlying the sense of efficacy and the high levels of commitment in a number of districts was that at least for the duration of the grant, the P-3 project in effect created a new structural arrangement: a new grouping of educators was established, and participants found this new arrangement to be beneficial in terms of the kind of work they could accomplish. In many of the districts horizontal grade level teams meet regularly, and some districts had of course vertical teams for different purposes. Yet establishing vertical teams with a focus on the early grades, alignment, and inclusion and explicitly including pre-kindergarten was for most districts new.

Participants reported four types of collaboration that they found beneficial. Most important of these was the vertical team, the opportunity to work across the PreK to 3rd grade continuum. In Watertown, described further below, the P-3 group began by identifying the need to strengthen the oral language and vocabulary components of their curriculum, which in turn led to establishing aligned end-of-grade expectations first for these dimensions of literacy and then for the district literacy program more broadly as the district adopted two new curricula in order to strengthen the teaching of oral language and vocabulary. One teacher in Watertown referred to the vertical team experience as the, “best initiative I’ve ever participated in.” Likewise, in Gill Montague, also described further below, as the project team worked to align the *Tools of the Mind* curriculum that was used in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten with Responsive Classroom and the first through third grade literacy curriculum, the pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and

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\(^ {16} \) Lesaux makes five overall recommendations in this report, summarized as follows: program design and implementation for impact, ongoing assessments of children and settings, redefined adult capacity-building models, language-rich, rigorous, and engaging curricula, and partnership with families focused on language and learning.
The mirror image of excitement over new forms of productive collaboration is the difficulty of changing structures and building the capacity to execute this kind of work on an ongoing basis.

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First grade teachers conducted extensive inter-visitations to each other’s classes. The first grade teachers in particular became very enthusiastic over the teaching practices they observed in the Tools of the Mind classes. Both the district Director of Curriculum and Early Childhood Coordinator regarded the level of interest expressed by the first grade teachers as an “aberration,” and this interest propelled the project forward as not only first grade teachers but eventually second and third grade teachers as well began to adopt specific Tools of the Mind practices for use in their own classrooms.

To varying degrees in different districts, the P-3 CIA project also helped address three other types of coordination problems as it led to improved collaboration across traditional silos, across schools, and between district schools and private preschool providers. As mentioned above, in Worcester the project led to extensive, ongoing, and in fact daily collaboration between the early childhood coordinator and an assistant director of special education. In Boston the grant was explicitly deployed to foster collaboration between the Curriculum and Instruction department and both the Office of English Language Learners and the Special Education department, leading not only to the development of tools and resources to support language learning and the Common Core standards, but also to further collaboration beyond the scope of the grant on the selection of tools for diagnosing and screening student learning needs. Increased collaboration between general education and special education teachers was a theme in Pittsfield, Randolph, Shirley, and other districts. The significance of the opportunity to share resources and work to align practices across the different schools in the community was emphasized by districts such as Brookline and Old Rochester, and as will be discussed further below, some districts (e.g., Springfield, Worcester, and Marlboro) were able to extend their relationships with private community preschool providers.

The vertical team structure allowed districts, in the participants’ minds, to carry out different kinds of projects while benefiting from the input of a diverse set of early grades teachers and administrators. Anticipating conclusions discussed further below in this report, seeding more meaningful collaboration across grades, silos, schools, and public/private early childhood providers is among the organizational impacts of the P-3 project. Yet the participants encountered many problems and obstacles as they attempted to bridge organizational boundaries, leading to some of the more vexing challenges and limitations of the project. The mirror image of excitement over new forms of productive collaboration is the difficulty of changing structures and building the capacity to execute this kind of work on an ongoing basis.
4. The P-3 Projects

The P-3 CIA recipients could choose from among the eight broad P-3 “components” that the ESE outlined: leadership and organization, assessment and data, instruction, curriculum, inclusion, family engagement, classrooms as learning environments, and transitions. While many of the teams chose a variety of activities that cut across these categories, nonetheless most districts tended to have a primary focus of activity. In some cases the projects were specifically and directly focused on the needs of students with disabilities (e.g., creating inclusion classrooms or providing professional development in inclusive instructional practices). More often, however, the projects supported the successful inclusion of students with disabilities through broader improvement and alignment activities that would support the learning of all students while focusing on students who are performing below proficient and especially students with disabilities. Analysis of the projects that the 44 districts carried out suggests that these areas of primary focus clustered around eight types of projects:

- Aligning standards, curriculum, and assessments
- Developing instructional tools and related professional development
- Adopting P-3 (or P-5) instructional approaches
- Supporting social-emotional skill development
- Collaborating with private preschool providers
- Improving transitions
- Designing inclusion structures
- Engaging families

These categories overlap with the eight components provided by the ESE to frame the project but are somewhat different: district projects did not cluster around some of the components (e.g., classrooms as learning environments and leadership and organization17) and three of the clusters cut across the components (i.e., development of instructional resources, adoption of unified instructional approaches, and collaboration with private providers). The project clusters indicate the needs the vertical teams identified and the primary activities districts developed to address these needs. They reinforce the multi-dimensional character of the Foundation for Child Development and Harvard PreK-3rd Project frameworks, demonstrating the types and breadth of activities required to fully address the challenge of improving P-3 education.

Aligning Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment

Watertown’s Experience: Alignment of Expectations and New Instructional Programs. Watertown’s experience with the P-3 CIA grant serves as a good introduction to the work many districts did on curriculum alignment. As in a number of districts, Watertown’s P-3 grant took place in a context in which multiple, overlapping taskforces and grants were operating throughout the district.

17 As noted, P-3 projects frequently impacted leadership and organization indirectly as the team worked on project activities.
In Watertown’s case, the P-3 vertical team functioned as a bridge between the work that an early childhood task force had done as well as work that had been carried out under the auspices of an ESE Closing the Literacy Gap grant, on the one hand, and on the other, and a reading task force that was underway concurrently in the district and that focused on the district’s K-3 reading program. During the study team phase of the project, the Watertown team read relatively broadly, including materials on the OWL pre-kindergarten program, a chapter on academic vocabulary by Robert Marzano, material on the *Daily Five* (a technique for structuring literacy block time around critical literacy activities), a Casey Foundation report on the importance of reading by the end of third grade, and an article on using interactive read-alouds in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. The members of the vertical team came to a consensus around the need to deepen the teaching of vocabulary and oral language throughout the district in the early grades as well as to improve the use of read-alouds and think-alouds, a pedagogical focus that was consistent with that of the district Reading Task Force.

Based on this preliminary work, the team undertook two projects intended to strengthen vocabulary teaching in particular as well as the district’s approach to literacy more generally. First, Watertown surveyed teachers in grades pre-K through third regarding those literacy standards they consider to be most important. The members of the vertical team reviewed the survey findings and then engaged in intensive discussion regarding which standards would serve as critical end-of-year expectations for each grade. They hammered out a consensus and for each grade divided first the Massachusetts ELA standards, and later the Common Core standards, into three categories: essential, taught, and exposure. They also produced expectations documents that were shared with all teachers. Following up on the work of the Watertown early childhood task force, members of the vertical team then made a presentation to community private preschool providers about the Watertown kindergarten expectations and posted the presentation and supporting documents on the district website.

The teachers on the team found the increased clarity regarding Watertown expectations to be highly beneficial for themselves and for their colleagues and are continuing these conversations in dual grade meetings. In particular, the clarity around expectations was found to be particularly helpful for supporting the learning of students with disabilities. The project coordinator for the P-3 grant, elementary school principal Anne Hardiman, summed up this perspective by saying that, “When there is better alignment of expectations and we can better articulate what a standard means in the fall, winter, and spring, we can start targeting instruction earlier.” The idea is to first establish a good curriculum, good tier 1 teaching and learning, and then be in a position to target instruction and design interventions consistent with the tiered instructional model.

While working on the Watertown expectations document, the team also led the process around adopting a new pre-kindergarten literacy program. Both the P-3 team and the Reading Task Force came to the conclusion that in order to improve literacy teaching and learning, and in particular vocabulary learning in the early

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18 Annie E. Casey (2010).
grades, the district would need to adopt literacy programs that had strong emphases on vocabulary development. The P-3 team chose the OWL curriculum for pre-kindergarten classes. The Reading Task Force chose *Elements of Reading*, a program designed in part by Isabelle Beck, the renowned vocabulary expert. The P-3 team chose the OWL program not only for its emphasis on vocabulary and its selection of high quality books, but also for the inter-disciplinary way in which it incorporates reading into science and social studies discussions as well.

Watertown has historically been a district in which teachers develop their own units of study, and therefore there was skepticism among many teachers and to some degree resistance to the idea of using a purchased curriculum, a curriculum that some might regard as "canned." Yet within a few months of the adoption of the OWL program, teachers were voicing enthusiasm about the program’s effectiveness, and as it turns out the enthusiasm of the PreK teachers for the OWL program provided support for the adoption of the *Elements of Reading* program by the K-3 teachers. The adoption of both programs was informed by and in effect framed by the consensus the P-3 team and the reading task force had come to regarding the need to strengthen vocabulary instruction and oral language development and to improve the use of read-alouds and think-alouds.

Thus far Watertown has chosen to stick with its current early literacy assessments and its current approach to writing (Writing Workshop). The district uses the Fountas and Pinnell benchmarking system as well as NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress assessment and the *Words Their Way* assessments.

The leaders of Watertown's P-3 team regard the project is having led to four specific outcomes:

- Clarity around end of grade literacy expectations as indicated in the expectations documents
- The adoption of the OWL program
- Changed instructional practices throughout the early grades across the district in terms of the way words are taught and embedded in different activities and in the use of read alouds and think alouds
- Establishing the practice of critical conversations across grades about teaching practices and learning outcomes

In many respects Watertown's experience with the P-3 grant foreshadows a number of the themes that characterize the experience of many grant recipients. A number of districts implemented a combination of alignment and curriculum development/adoption activities. Strengthening teaching and learning around vocabulary and oral language was a pedagogical focus found in many district projects. Like in Watertown, in many districts the P-3 team benefited from the work of other related task forces and grants; and some districts in fact separate grants were pooled to support the work of a single team. The members of Watertown's P-3 team found the cross-grade, vertical conversations to be pivotal in terms of their own development as teachers and as district educators, and administrators found this to be a critical professional development opportunity.
and an important capacity building step in terms of the development of distributed teacher leadership.

**Curriculum Work in Other districts.** Curriculum alignment and development of the sort demonstrated by Watertown was perhaps the single most common cluster of activity across the P-3 CIA sites. Districts identified the need to refine the alignment of standards in efforts to create consistent grade level expectations. A wide range of districts made in aligning curriculum of central component of their P-3 efforts, including Amherst, Lynn, Malden, Neshoba, or Spencer East Brookfield, Fall River, Rockland, West Springfield, New Bedford, and Saugus. Most of this work included creating curriculum maps or scope and sequence documents either in English language arts (the more common choice) or in math.

In some cases vertical teams included assessments in their curriculum maps in order to align their use of assessment tools as well. Two districts, Attleboro and Dennis – Yarmouth, made the alignment and selection of assessment and screening tools the centerpiece of their P-3 efforts. Attleboro, for instance, implemented the use of the ESI – P, the AimsWeb K-2 for math, and piloted the Kindergarten Dial-3, and included professional development to support the use of these tools as well. Other districts incorporated the alignment of assessments into related projects. A number of districts worked on Response-to-Intervention (tiered instruction), and the selection and proper use of assessment tools for screening and diagnostic purposes was a component of their implementation of RTI. Gill Montague created an assessment binder as part of its work aligning *Tools of the Mind* with its K – 3 literacy and social skills curricula. Shirley and Old Rochester created writing assessments and rubrics as part of the work they did on writing instruction. Likewise, Holyoke tackled the streamlining of its P-3 literacy assessments as part of a comprehensive early literacy plan, work that is beginning in Springfield as well.

Finally, a number of districts supplemented or improved their early literacy and/or social skills curricula through the adoption of programs or the development of units of study. For example, Leominster provided professional development for the adoption of the OWL program, Northampton implemented a Writers Workshop approach to writing, and Wareham adopted *Elements of Reading* for kindergarten and first grade.

**Holyoke’s Expanding Trajectory of Projects.** Holyoke provides another example of a vertical team that focused on curriculum alignment and development, a team that gelled during the first year of the grant and developed increased momentum as it moved from project to project. The first project the Holyoke group worked on was to create four education classes for paraprofessionals who work in the early grades on early childhood development, early childhood programming, and on educating children with disabilities. Here again the link to supporting students with disabilities in particular was clear as it is often the case the paraprofessionals provide extra intervention for students with disabilities and other struggling learners. The paraprofessionals were divided into two cohorts, one in which the students took academic courses in English and another in which the courses
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According to Holyoke Early Childhood Coordinator and project coordinator Mary Curro, the P-3 grant gave her support in making the case for the importance of early childhood within the district.

In the first year the Holyoke team also created *Welcome to PreK* and *Welcome to Kindergarten* brochures and organized "Welcome to K" field trips in conjunction with the community Head Start program.

In year two of the grant the team continued working on the classes for paraprofessionals while also developing a laminated fine motor skills guide that was distributed in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes. During the second half of the second year and into the third year, the team developed a K-2 science curriculum, adopting the *Growing Up Wild* program for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Then in year three of the grant, while continuing work on the science curriculum and also adopting the social skills curriculum, *Al’s Pals*, the team undertook the ambitious work of developing a district early literacy plan, one that would connect to the broader district literacy plan that the district was in the process of writing.

Holyoke had been a *Reading First* district in which half the district schools have implemented a *Reading First* core program while the others continued using balanced literacy as they had in the past. The new early literacy plan cemented a move back to a coherent district wide adoption of the balanced literacy approach centered around the Fountas and Pinnell approach to balanced literacy. The literacy plan includes a streamlined assessment calendar using the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment system. The district has purchased *Leveled I Literacy Intervention* (LLI), a reading intervention intended for small groups of struggling readers. And it is providing professional development for teachers in shared and guided reading. All pre-kindergarten staff will participate in professional development using the Fountas and Pinnell *Literacy Beginnings* resource.

Teacher members of the Holyoke P-3 vertical team emphasized (and appreciated) that the new early literacy plan makes clear for teachers how children are diagnosed, how their progress is monitored, and the criteria for determining when a child requires intervention services. Each elementary school in Holyoke has a literacy coach to help with these decisions and to provide literacy services.

According to Holyoke Early Childhood Coordinator and project coordinator Mary Curro, the P-3 grant supported her in making the case for the importance of early childhood within the district. Holyoke’s district leadership has prioritized early childhood literacy in its Level 4 district turnaround plan and is in the process of creating an early childhood literacy task force. This task force is part of the district’s efforts to reach out to community private preschool providers, local businesses, and community agencies and work with them and families to improve early learning across the city. The district has received a grant to establish a family literacy center at the district-wide prekindergarten school, and is considering expanding the number of prekindergarten classes it offers.

The challenges that the P-3 teams in Watertown and Holyoke experienced foreshadow several of the challenges other districts found as well. In Watertown,
while the P-3 team built on the work of other ad hoc groups and other grants and worked closely with the Reading Task Force, nonetheless coordinating these different groups introduced an element of challenge and moving forward there is still significant work to be done in terms of coordinating the products and recommendations of different teams. Further, district leaders are eager to maintain the cross-grade work of the vertical team after the grant while improving the use of horizontal grade-level common planning time as well, yet they have concerns about their capacity to do this after the grant funding ends.

The vertical team in Holyoke regards the main challenges moving forward as effectively reaching out and connecting with community private providers, a recurrent theme throughout P-3 sites. Further, like Watertown, Holyoke has found it difficult to provide meaningful cross grade professional development opportunities given scheduling conflicts.

**Developing Instructional Tools and Related Professional Development**

A number of the P-3 vertical teams chose to develop instructional resources that teachers and coaches throughout their districts could use to improve classroom practice. These instructional resources typically took the form of a guidance document, either an online resource or a paper document, and the recommended instructional practices were often geared towards supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities. In several cases these resource guides were also intended to support the district’s transition to the Common Core standards by providing teachers guidance on instructional practices they could use as they teach the new standards. Typically the development of instructional resources was paired with professional development on using the new resource and/or implementing the embedded practices, professional development that in some cases included paraprofessionals as well as general education and special education teachers.

Lunenburg, Nashoba, and Worcester all created resource guides on inclusion, and in Worcester’s case the resource guide was developed as an online resource. Revere created an accommodations website and an inclusion booklet. These resources were designed with English Language Learners in mind as well. In all of these cases project leaders emphasized that the development of inclusion resource guides was part of efforts to raise the profile of inclusion in their districts and served to focus attention, both at the district and classroom levels, on the district’s commitment to inclusive teaching practices.

Vertical teams developed other resources as well. Salem created a website that provides parents with guidance on supporting their children’s learning. Two other districts develop resources that are profiled in other sections of this report. Lowell developed a home visiting protocol that is discussed in the section on social-emotional skills, and Brookline created a transitions toolkit profiled in the section on transitions.

Two of the largest districts in Massachusetts, Boston and Worcester, chose to
develop instructional resources as a primary activity of the P-3 grant, and developing an instructional resource was a component of Springfield’s work as well. Here it is worth noting that this was perhaps not a coincidence. In the smaller districts that receive the grant, the vertical team was often in effect a committee that included representatives of most of the early grades and most or all of the schools in the district. Selecting a curriculum or developing an approach that the team members could then roll out to their colleagues was in these districts, while challenging, nonetheless a simpler proposition. From another perspective, it is also the case that even though the grant was a relatively small sum for all districts, this was particularly the case in Boston, Springfield, and Worcester in terms of the grant’s size relative to the district’s total budget. For the larger districts, developing an instructional resource that teachers throughout the system could make use of made sense as a smart use of the funds.

Yet Boston and Worcester were similar in their use of the P-3 grant in another way in that in both cases the grant was used strategically to bridge the boundaries separating organizational departments, boundaries which are perhaps more challenging to bridge in larger districts. Creating stronger connections between general education and special education and English language learning is a consistent theme across the districts that received the P-3 grant, but this theme took on added valence in the case of Boston and Worcester.

In Boston the grant funds were used to pull together a senior level working group that included representatives from the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, the Office of English Language Learners, and as organizational and leadership changes allowed, representatives from the Office of Special Education as well. The grant provided an important opportunity for these departments to collaborate on developing consistent approaches to improving teaching and learning. In this case the working group began by working on the selection of assessment and screening tools that could help with the identification of students who need extra services and supports. This collaborative work on diagnostic tools continued throughout the grant and in fact has extended beyond the grant as well. Further, during the grant, with the selection of the new leader of the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, the grant was also used to develop instructional resources that would support student language development and the teaching of the Common Core standards.

Boston used the grant funds to contract with the Harvard literacy expert, Nonie Lesaux, to develop a guidance document on the development of language in children that includes eight recommended instructional practices. The district is developing professional development on the use of this resource and intends to use it to shape the development of curriculum maps and units of study that address Common Core standards. The district also plans to draw on the underlying approach and recommended instructional practices found in the language development guidance as it develops classroom observation tools.

The Boston working group is continuing its collaboration as it works on summer school, screening and assessment, and curriculum integration. Similarly, an
The important outcome of the P-3 grant in Worcester has been the development of a strong working relationship between the Office of Early Childhood and Special Education. In particular, the Early Childhood Director and an Assistant Director of Special Education formed a close partnership that has altered not only the relationship between the two departments, but also the culture of the early grades as the members of the P-3 vertical team and other early grades school-based staff have seen the integration of Early Childhood and Special Education initiatives.

In the first year of the grant, the Worcester team conducted community outreach activities to private providers and did an internal assessment as well. Team members identified the need for a teacher resource focused on what inclusion means in the Worcester Public Schools. They then began planning a teacher resource that would be online and available to all Worcester Public Schools’ teachers.

In year two the team divided into smaller groups and each tackled different sections of the new inclusion website. The website went live during year two of the grant. The website is divided into different sections, including:

- What is inclusion?
- What are accommodations and modifications?
- What are nontraditional assessments?
- What are effective classroom behaviors?

Under each of these categories are a variety of definitions, facts, tips, strategies, checklists, and examples of aids and services. In addition there are pages specifically on the needs of English language learners and for specific kinds of disabilities. Worcester shared this comprehensive online resource with the other P-3 districts at one of the ESE-sponsored networking events and generated significant interest in the idea of creating such an online resource for teachers.

Also in year two the vertical team began planning a series of professional development workshops and made some significant improvement to the transition process. The team surveyed preschool teachers about the kinds of professional development they thought they most needed. In the end the team was able to secure three days at the beginning of the school year during which they would provide a series of professional workshops for Worcester Public Schools preschool teachers and instructional assistants, Worcester Head Start teachers and instructional assistants, and teachers and instructional assistants from other community private preschool providers. While planning the first three days professional development workshop, a team of preschool teachers, including teachers from the Worcester Head Start program and community-based programs, developed a set of rubrics in order to norm teacher expectations around readiness for kindergarten. The group also developed procedures and recommendations to improve the movement of records and the effectiveness of transition nights.

The Worcester alignment team began the third year the grant (2010-11) with the first three-day professional development workshop series. The workshops
addressed a range of topics including using the Massachusetts pre-kindergarten standards, developing comprehensive plans involving families and community providers, implementing inclusion strategies, meeting behavioral needs, and supporting English Language Learners. Teacher feedback on the workshops and on the opportunity to work together as preschool teachers was positive, and the Worcester team plans to continue the workshops as an annual event.

As the third year of the grant proceeded, teachers continue to improve the pre-kindergarten rubrics and also conducted a series of cross visitations between Head Start preschool classrooms and Worcester Public School kindergarten classrooms, visitations that included opportunities for debriefing afterwards. During this third year the alignment team also began a fourth project—following up on the website, the professional development workshops, and the transition/rubric work—developing an accommodations and modifications document as a companion to the Houghton Mifflin literacy program used throughout the Worcester Public Schools. While the literacy program includes differentiated activities, the early childhood and special education educators in Worcester have found that the provided lessons nonetheless do not adequately address the full range of learning needs of the students in the early grades. For this reason they are creating an additional resource that will help teachers further differentiate to meet the needs of students, particularly those with special needs.

The major obstacles for the Worcester team continue to be the challenge of scheduling professional development opportunities for community providers given the longer teaching day in community preschools and the difficulty of securing release time for these teachers. They would like to be able to schedule more professional development opportunities for Worcester Public School teachers and to continue their transition work to include the transitions from kindergarten to first grade and from first-grade to second-grade, as their primary focus during the grant has been on the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

In assessing the impact of the work of their work on the P-3 grant over the course of the three years, the project leaders use as one gauge their observations of classroom practice. They cite changing patterns, including an increased focus on oral language development and improvements in classroom set-up as well as more effective use of the Boardmaker tool, visual cues, the use of graphic organizers, and pre-reading and bookwalks. They see as a particularly positive indicator the increased willingness on the part of teachers throughout the system to place calls and ask questions regarding students with disabilities, an indication of greater awareness both of the range of student learning needs and the resources available in the district to address these needs. They cite as an important cultural shift both the way in which early childhood and special education work together, but also the perception throughout the early grades of the district operating as a system to meet student learning needs rather than separate offices rolling out separate initiatives.
Adopting P-3 (or P-5) Instructional Approaches

Some districts sought to improve teaching and learning by employing their P-3 vertical team to help guide their adoption of a new literacy program or to develop curriculum units, as we have seen. Related to these efforts but independent of the grant, Boston recently adopted the Reading Street program, and after investigating literacy program options, Springfield chose the Lead 21 program from McGraw-Hill soon after the grant ended. Other P-3 grant recipients used the grant to implement unified instructional approaches across the PreK – 3rd grades, including response-to-intervention, writing approaches, and Tools of the Mind. In these cases, that all the grades were working on the same approach serves to provide a high degree of focus for the vertical teams, and as a group these teams tended to be among the highest on the enthusiasm/productivity scale.

Two districts (Middleborough and Winchendon) used the P-3 grant to implement Response-to-Intervention (RTI) models. (Response to intervention was also a component of Leicester's P-3 work and other districts, such as Northampton, have work underway). These efforts included researching interventions, visiting other districts that have implemented RTI, creating resource binders for use in schools, establishing new staffing arrangements and new class schedules, and implementing new progress monitoring tools. Project leaders in both Middleborough and Winchendon are of the opinion that they have completed important stages in their implementation of RTI/tiered instruction. As these districts report:

The Tiered Instruction model has impacted students in several very positive ways. First the model we use is very individually focused with a emphasis on data driven intervention. This approach has allowed for specific needs-focused instruction for all students showing academic weaknesses. It is a better use of staffing and of time. Teachers are having more focused and collaborative conversations regarding student needs and intervention planning is organized and well thought-out. In addition, one clear result of the way we are providing services to our students in need is a reduction in Special Education referrals at the early elementary level. (Winchendon Final Report)

This project supported the School Improvement Plans of all three elementary schools in the area of safety nets for students... The work of this community had a direct impact to the steps taken at the building level during their Building Based Support Team (BBST) meetings. Thus, it provided a heightened awareness to what is done at the pre-referral level for students.

A more consistent master schedule has been developed for the two grades 1-5 elementary schools whereby all students are offered RtI during an uninterrupted band of time at the onset of the school day. In each school 11 tier 3 interventionists were able to be put into place without cost to the district and all general education teachers will be
Improving the use of inclusion practices across all classrooms provided the central organizing motif for Pioneer Valley's P-3 work during the course of the grant. The vertical team reviewed best practices in inclusion and examined how teachers were currently using inclusion practices throughout the district. The team surveyed staff and hosted inclusion focus groups to identify best practices and gather data about current implementation efforts. The team’s work resulted in an amended district literacy vision that clearly highlights inclusion as a priority and in a literacy action plan that spells out how the use of inclusion practices will be improved as an integral component of the literacy action plan.

Three of the districts that participated in the P-3 grant made improving writing instruction the centerpiece of their project activities: Old Rochester, Northampton, and Shirley. Early on in the vertical team process in Shirley, a special education teacher identified handwriting as an issue of concern in the early grades. The district had already done significant work on reading and math, and thus the discussion of handwriting led to a focus on improving writing instruction more generally. A special education teacher and a classroom teacher stepped up and provided leadership for the group over the course of the three years of the grant. During the first year of the grant, using a backward design model, the team identified end-of-year writing expectations for each grade. The district investigated approaches to improving writing and settled on using the Six Traits model as the mechanism it would use. The team compiled a binder of resources on the Six Traits model for each teacher and then purchased Six Traits instructional materials that included book crates for each classroom teacher. The school’s librarian supported the effort by labeling library books according to the six traits using a colored sticky dot system. The team organized Six Traits workshops for teachers and supported six traits professional development opportunities. The final year of the grant was spent working on sample lessons that included modifications and accommodations for students with disabilities.

While the team is still working to support full implementation of the six traits approach across all elementary school classrooms, the newly arrived principal of the elementary school finds it encouraging that many teachers are requesting professional development on the six traits model. The Shirley team sees as its primary accomplishments better understanding and clarity regarding grade level expectations in writing, improved teacher know-how regarding supporting students in improving their writing, and the capacity as teacher leaders to build a
consensus around identifying a common instructional need and carry out a plan to address this need.

**Gill-Montague: Cross-grade Pollination Using Tools of the Mind.** Gill Montague's experience with the P-3 grant provides an interesting case of a district that not only aligned grades 1-3 with a new pre-kindergarten and kindergarten program, but moreover took the opportunity to plumb and mine the new program for instructional practices that could be adapted for grades one through three as well – a somewhat rare instance of pushing early childhood practices up. The P-3 grant in Gill Montague coincided with the district’s adoption of the *Tools of the Mind* curriculum in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. *Tools of the Mind* is an increasingly popular early childhood program designed by researchers in Colorado based on the theory and research of the Russian early childhood educator Lev Vygotsky. *Tools of the Mind* is most known for the way in which it supports students in developing self-regulation skills through play, but it is a comprehensive approach that includes distinctive approaches to reading, writing, and math as well. *Tools of the Mind* is an innovative and well thought-out approach to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, and in this respect it is perhaps less surprising that Gill-Montague ended up not only aligning the program but adapting elements of it for older students as well.

Gill-Montague’s introduction of the *Tools of the Mind* program took place in a context in which the district was working to address a high dropout rate. The P-3 vertical team was concerned with how early years education might be influencing student success in later grades and in particular about turning students off to learning by not engaging them in the learning process. The team was influenced in this regard by an article by researcher Robert Balfanz on the dropout problem that cautions against eliminating joy in the classroom in the early grades.

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The P-3 grant ran during the period when the prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers were undertaking the formidable task of converting their classrooms to the *Tools of the Mind* approach. Under the joint leadership of the district’s Director of Curriculum and Instruction and Early Childhood Coordinator, the vertical team began a deliberate process of analyzing the alignment of the *Tools of the Mind* approach with the curricular programs in use in grades one through three. These included the Houghton Mifflin literacy program, the *Math Expressions* math program, and *Responsive Classroom*. The team was particularly interested in assessing the alignment of *Tools* and *Responsive Classroom* given the former's emphasis on self-regulation.

As part of its alignment investigation the team organized classroom inter-visitations between first-grade teachers and the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten *Tools of the Mind* classrooms. The team organized relatively long classroom visits and ample time for debriefing between the participating teachers after the observations. The participants then came together and used guiding
questions to focus their conversations around the alignment issues that emerged and documented their findings in the project binder. During this time the team compiled a binder that clearly indicated the schedule of assessments that would be used throughout the early grades in Gill-Montague. They also attended a dinner professional development event with Tools developer, Deborah Leong.

In general the team found that Tools of the Mind and Responsive Classroom were aligned. Over time the first-grade, kindergarten, and prekindergarten teachers have figured out ways to incorporate phonics and sight words into the Tools curriculum in order to make the transition to first-grade somewhat smoother for students. What was somewhat unexpected, however, was that the first-grade teachers became very enthusiastic about the Tools practices they observed in the prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. These teachers found the level of student engagement in the Tools classrooms to be striking, particularly the students’ enthusiasm for writing. Some of the participating teachers and administrators found the district’s standard reading program to be less motivating for students. The first-grade teachers were impressed by the students’ behavior, their self-regulation skills, and in particular were interested in the way in which students used learning plans and worked in pairs with study buddies on tasks such as peer editing. As a result, the first grade teachers began trying out some of these practices in their classrooms as well.

Driven in part by the interest and enthusiasm of the first-grade teachers, in the second and third years of the grant the team was able to bring in second and third grade teachers to participate in the intervisitations as well. They too were interested in the use of learning plans, study buddies, and supports for student self-regulation. Teachers in first through third grades in Gill-Montague have all begun to incorporate Tools practices into their classrooms, and several grade level teams worked during the summer of 2011 to plan additional use of these kinds of activities as appropriate for their grade. Further, the district has extended the extensive use of the Magic Treehouse series – which figures prominently in the Tools of the Mind curriculum – up to grades one through three. Teachers and administrators have been pleased with the way the series engages students and in particular boys in reading.

In sizing up the impact of the P-3 in grant Gill Montague, teachers and administrators cited the following outcomes: the use of the Magic Treehouse series, the binder of aligned assessments, and greater emphasis on oral language, written language, and comprehension rather than on so-called "splinter skills." Classroom observations indicate that teachers have shortened teacher-directed meeting times allowing for more student work in centers and that teachers are increasing partner work among students and beginning to have students use learning plans to guide their independent and partner activities. Teachers are also working on executing transitions between activities that are shorter and smoother through the use of some of the practices they have observed in the Tools classrooms. The project leaders have been pleased with the level of collaboration they are seeing both within grades, for instance in the second and third grade
As we have seen, the research on the impact of early childhood intervention is demonstrative in calling attention to the importance of social emotional skills in addition to early literacy skills.

Supporting Social-Emotional Skill Development

The next cluster of activity shares much in common with our discussion of adopting an instructional approach: addressing the need to improve social-emotional skills. As we have seen, the research on the impact of early childhood intervention is demonstrative in calling attention to the importance of social-emotional skills in addition to early literacy skills. Many districts investigated developmentally appropriate practice and the connection to social-emotional development during the research phase of their vertical team work. Several districts used the P-3 grant as an opportunity to turn their attention to social-emotional skill development as a complement to their considerable ongoing efforts through other initiatives to improve student academic preparation. Northampton had other grant funds that they used to deepen their work on emotionally responsive practice and the role of play. Districts implementing Tools of the Mind (Amherst, East Spencer/Brookfield, Leicester, and Gill-Montague) all addressed executive function skills through that program. Leicester and Lunenburg did work on the Responsive Classroom approach either through the P-3 grant or other grant funds. Lawrence provided a variety of supports to classroom teachers in their effort to promote student independence and self-regulation. Pittsfield built on earlier work establishing a Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) system throughout the district by providing all teachers with social-emotional support kits from the Center on the Social-Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) and related training in social stories, yoga kits, and movement cards. These tools are used with all students but are part of the district’s tiered approach to providing behavioral supports to students.

Lowell: A Three-Pronged Approach to Developing Social-Emotional Skills. Lowell provides another good example of a district in which social-emotional skills and behavior served as a focus of the P-3 team. The project in Lowell began with a team of 10 working on aligning pre-kindergarten with kindergarten and first grade. Much of the first year was spent as a study group reading a number of books and articles and debating the pros and cons of various strategies for the team to pursue. The team consulted with then assistant superintendent (now superintendent) Jean Franco, who impressed upon them the need to find a topic that would engage teachers throughout the early grades. Student behavior was a topic that had come up persistently throughout their conversations, especially the behavior of kindergarten students, a challenging issue for principals. Jean Franco pointed out that many of the student special needs referrals were for behavior, but that many of these eligibility considerations resulted in determinations of "no special needs."

For these reasons the Lowell team chose the development of social-emotional skills as their strategic focus for the P-3 grant. This focus proved to be engaging for

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19 Heckman (2008); Morrison (2005).
The Lowell teacher community, as the team grew in the second and third years of the project, the vertical team decided to work on three projects related to behavior and social-emotional skills and broke up into three groups to work on these projects: one on developing an approach and related materials for home visiting, one on CSEFEL training, and one on developing a set of social-emotional standards that could be presented to the district for adoption.

One group decided to work on parent involvement and engagement by establishing stronger relationships with families through home visiting. Lowell had a tradition of doing home visits, and this group wanted to expand the practice and improve the effectiveness of the visits. The members of this group researched home visiting models used around the country and then developed their own approach. The approach outlines the process for two home visits and is supported with brochures for teachers and families, a teacher training presentation, and a report for the district.

The goal of the first visit is to develop a positive relationship and a strong connection with the parent(s) by talking about hopes and dreams and avoiding discussion of academics or behavior. Teachers do not take notes as a way of emphasizing the friendly, low-stakes nature of the visit. Parents and students both have responded very positively to these visits. The second visit then addresses where the child is academically. The teachers in the home visiting group have designed a homework box that is given to the family at this visit. The box has the child’s name on it and includes books at the child's level and other materials relevant to the child's needs or interests—pencils, flashcards, cubes, math games, and reading games. The visiting teacher plays the games with the student and parent(s). This visit also includes discussion of a specific academic goal for the student to meet. A number of teachers have tried out the new protocol and homework box with favorable results.

Lowell is currently working to roll out the home visiting process throughout the Lowell elementary schools. The superintendent has allocated funding for training in the new protocol and for stipends to support teachers in doing home visits. All administrators and 75 elementary and middle school teachers have been trained in the home visiting process. These teachers will receive stipends to conduct two home visits for up to 8 students in each of their classes during the 2011-2012 academic year.

The second Lowell sub-committee of the P-3 vertical team worked on expanding the use of CSEFEL social-emotional instructional practices and materials by both teachers and families. One of the PreK inclusion classroom teachers in Lowell began using CSEFEL materials a couple of years ago and has found the tools—such as problem-solving cards, feeling charts and wheels, and relevant children’s literature—helpful for her students. She participated in the CSEFEL sub-group and has led training during district professional development days for the all the district preschool teachers as well as several teachers from other grades. A few kindergarten teachers are now implementing the CSEFEL practices and others are
interested in learning them. The sub-group has also arranged a six-week CSEFEL training for eight families, training that they hope to continue offering for families moving forward.

A third Lowell group attempted to address student social-emotional skills systemically at the district level by developing a set of social-emotional standards that lays out expectations by grade. The elementary schools in Lowell have a variety of behavioral/social-emotional programs in place. By developing a consistent set of expectations, the group hopes to create alignment in how the programs are used and to what ends. The group researched standards across the country and was impressed with the Illinois social-emotional standards. They chose to use them as the foundation for their work. They have adapted Illinois' standards for use in Lowell. Lowell’s school committee has approved these standards, and the district has begun training in monthly leadership forums on the use of these standards in schools.

Collaborating with Private Preschool Providers

P-3 educational improvement efforts have both internal and external dimensions. The areas of focus we have seen in the projects described thus far—curriculum alignment and development, developing instructional resources, providing professional development, implementing new instructional approaches, and improving social-emotional skill development—suggest some of the kinds of internal work that is required in building an effective P-3 system. Yet preschool in the United States is provided by a mixed delivery system that includes school districts, Head Start, and other institutional private providers. The P-3 movement aspires to improve and align the continuum of services not only within districts but across districts and private providers as well. The district success stories of P-3 improvement found Montgomery County, MD, Union City, NJ, and Bremerton, WA among others include both substantial internal and external work: integrating the district pre-kindergarten classes into the early education continuum and then aligning and improving teaching and learning across this continuum while also working at the community level to support alignment and improvement activities in private preschools that will improve kindergarten readiness.

Most of the P-3 grant recipients identified significant internal needs to address through the work of their vertical teams during their initial study team year. Given these identified needs, the small size of the grants, the hunger to take advantage of the seemingly rare opportunity to focus on the P-3 continuum, and difficulties inherent in working with the myriad private providers outside the district system, it perhaps makes sense that most districts chose strategies with a primarily internal focus. Yet reaching out to and collaborating with private providers was an important topic of discussion for many of the P-3 vertical teams in the project and an area of focus when the districts came together at their ESE-sponsored networking events.

Several of the participating P-3 districts had success including private community providers in their professional development activities. Nashoba created an
Inclusive Practice Resource Guide and included community providers in the training it provided on the use of this guide. As part of the work outlined in its Early Literacy Action Plan, Northampton worked with community preschool providers on best practices in early literacy and oral language development. Leominster similarly included private providers in its training on oral language and accountable talk, and Leominster and Malden both worked with private preschools as they implemented new transition forms to provide better information on students as they transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten. Worcester included community providers in the four-day early childhood professional development workshops it developed as part of its P-3 work. Marlborough initiated a *Chat about Children* event that focused on the transition to kindergarten and included discussion of social skills, curriculum, classroom management, and communication. Likewise, collaboration with private community providers was integral to Springfield’s P-3 project, the district that perhaps was able to take its work with the community the furthest, as described below.

**Springfield: Public-Private Instructional Learning Walks.** Springfield’s P-3 project took place in a context in which both the district and the city have made early literacy a significant priority. The Springfield-based Davis Foundation has worked with the district and a host of community organizations to launch a multi-faceted Reading Success by Fourth Grade initiative. Reading Success by Fourth includes a range of activities including public service announcements parenting workshops, professional development for early childhood educators, support for accreditation and QRIS activities, a literacy course for family day care providers, support for home visiting, collaboration with pediatricians, and a special project on early literacy with the Springfield Housing Authority. The Springfield school district is building on its history of collaboration with community private providers to advance its P-3 efforts in early literacy and through this collaboration developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, the first such MOU in the state. The MOU and an associated strategic work plan outline numerous collaborative activities centered on sharing information, tracking student progress, engaging parents, pediatricians, and libraries, and providing training to teachers. Finally, the district is improving the teaching and learning of literacy through a range of activities including the placement of instructional leadership specialists in every school, providing training in the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment system, expanding Reading Recovery and implementing LLI, providing leveled reading content bundles to be shared by teachers working in the same grades in the same schools, and recently purchasing a new literacy program to be used throughout the district.

Springfield’s P-3 vertical team chose to focus on three core activities: shared professional development between the district and private providers, online PreK instructional guides and lesson plans, and the implementation of the CLASS observation tool in PreK and K classrooms. Our focus here is on the work of the shared professional development sub-committee of the P-3 vertical team. The Springfield Public Schools has been collaborating with its early childhood provider community for a number of years. In 2000, the district and community providers established the Springfield Early Childhood Education Partnership, a...
council that facilitated a variety of alignment and collaboration activities. The P-3 vertical team built on these relationships as it developed a shared professional development initiative, which has become known as its professional learning community initiative. The shared professional development sub-committee of the vertical team decided to create small local partnerships across the city that would include an elementary school and neighboring preschool providers, including Head Start programs, YMCAs, and other preschools. The project coordinator of SECEP helped coordinate the partnership activities. The main activity of these local partnerships would be instructional learning walks in which teachers would visit each other's prekindergarten programs, observe classes, and conduct the debriefing conversations based on these observations.

The instructional learning walks began at three local partnerships. The planning team has created a reflection form and a classroom environment checklist to support the conversations that take place after the instructional learning walks. The experience of one of the local partnerships provides an example of how Springfield's public/private professional learning communities are operating. This partnership includes the Sumner Elementary School, the YMCA preschool program, and a Head Start program in the neighborhood. Teachers began conducting instructional learning walks across these three sites in the fall of 2010. During the first round of visits teachers made no judgments about the practices they saw but rather very deliberately began to build the relationships across the three sites and stuck to relatively superficial types of observations. Across the board, the general consensus was that there was a lot of good instructional practice occurring at all the sites and that all the teachers were learning from the experience. Through these discussions the participating teachers and administrators identified a need at community preschools for additional professional development on working with students with autism. As a result, an autism expert from the Springfield Public Schools provided a professional development workshop to the community preschool teachers and administrators. The participants found the workshop very helpful, and the autism workshop served as a good example of the way in which the public school resources could be deployed to the benefit of the community at large.

The PLC continued with a second round of visits, in this instance focused on oral language and transitions from activity to activity. Teachers who participated in these instructional learning walks during 2010-11 academic year commented they always got new ideas from the classroom observations and debriefing conversations, new strategies and “tricks” to try out in their classrooms. The director of the Head Start program commented that she was impressed by the consistency she observed across the public school PreK classrooms and the way teachers handle disruptive behaviors, for instance during center time. Teachers at the YMCA noted how some of their colleagues in the professional learning community deliberately used more challenging words with their students as well as the extensive use of visual supports for vocabulary words. Likewise Springfield teachers observed the effective use of a "peace corner" in one of the YMCA classrooms.
The public/private prekindergarten professional learning communities in Springfield generated a good deal of enthusiasm in the three local partnerships during the 2010-11 academic year. The P-3 vertical team including community partners will continue beyond the P-3 CIA grant during the 2011-12 academic year with the goal of expanding the professional learning communities to include additional local partnerships.

**Improving Transitions**

A number of districts worked on improving student transitions from prekindergarten to kindergarten and from kindergarten and first grade, and in a couple of cases the transition across older grades as well. As a piece of its multi-faceted project, as we have seen, the Worcester team developed pre-kindergarten rubrics to norm expectations and provide more consistent information for kindergarten teachers. They also improved the movements of records from prekindergarten to kindergarten and created guidance for schools on holding transition nights. Several districts, including Leominster, Malden, and Marlborough, developed documents such as transition forms, learning guides for parents, and brochures. Leicester developed a student success plan document, and Nashoba created a multi-cultural interview form.

Two districts used the P-3 project as an opportunity to develop comprehensive approaches to transition across their schools. Quincy focused on the transitions to kindergarten and first grade and created transition websites and guidance on move-up nights and family learning nights and organized annual opportunities for kindergarten teachers to visit first-grade classrooms for two days. Brookline’s experience with the P-3 grant provides another example of a comprehensive approach to transition, in this case through the mechanism of a formal program review.

Brookline has in place a program review process led by a senior district administrator to periodically assess its academic programs in the different content areas. The issue of transitions, especially in the early grades, has repeatedly arisen in previous program reviews. Transition practices vary across Brookline’s eight PreK-8 schools, and prior to this work, there were few mechanisms in place to share best practices across schools. As result Brookline chose to use the P-3 project to conduct a formal program review of its early grades transitions, especially the transitions from prekindergarten and kindergarten. The Director of Program Review and the principal for Early Education, who supervises all pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes across Brookline’s eight schools, convened the vertical team, which in addition to the focus on transitions also pursued a secondary theme around organizing inclusive classroom environments.

The Brookline team used the eight P-3 categories suggested by the ESE to develop a district vision of the pre-kindergarten to grade 3 continuum. The vision outlines “where the district would like to be” by listing “what it looks like” under each of the eight categories. The team then used the grant money to hire an outside consultant to conduct a survey and hold focus groups in order to collect data that
The team worked with the consultant to develop a guiding primary question for this study: "In what ways does the Public Schools of Brookline align teachers, therapists, leaders, and policies to work together collaboratively to support each and every child's entry into, and transition through, PreK, kindergarten, grade 1, 2, 3?"

The Brookline vertical team then used its vision document and the report to develop an assessment of strengths and areas of need and an action plan to improve transitions, especially for students with disabilities, organized around the seven categories provided by the ESE (not including transitions). The team gathered best practices from across the district’s eight schools to inform the development of a transitions toolkit that includes, for example, the kindergarten screening process, a “Welcome to kindergarten” booklet, a “Passage to Primary” transition form that is now being used in other grades as well, guidelines for “Peek and Practice” days (move up days), a transition best practices timetable, placement process guidelines, and other materials. The Early Education principal developed a transitions presentation to support the use of the transitions toolkit.

In reflecting on the work she did with the vertical team, a first-grade teacher emphasized not only the importance of the transitions toolkit but also of the professional development and discussion the team had on creating inclusive spatial environments. This teacher showed off the changes she made in her room as a result of these discussions. She also emphasized the importance of the improved documentation that kindergarten teachers would be providing first-grade teachers through the Passage to Primary form, a form she hoped would be used in subsequent student transitions as well. She gave as a specific example of the influence of parents through the team’s initial survey a specific practice that the team has implemented. Parents requested that their child not be the only student from a different country or from a specific country in a class. Students felt more comfortable when there were a few other kids "like them" in their class. As a result the vertical team has recommended and begun to implement the practice of clustering students not only from the same country (e.g. Japan), but also, for instance, students who use wheelchairs, or English Language Learners, or even students who have been adopted from other countries.

The P-3 project leaders emphasized the significance of the project as one of the first instances of culling best practices from across the district’s eight traditionally autonomous schools in order to develop more consistency across the schools, in this case around the important topic of transitions. The transitions toolkit was presented in the fall of 2011 and now the challenge will be to support principals, many of whom are new, in carrying out the toolkit’s recommendations and to continue supporting inclusive teaching practices throughout the schools. The Brookline case is somewhat distinctive in the context of the P-3 grant in the way that the program review mechanism was deployed to structure the team’s work on transitions. As a result not only did the P-3 team include a senior district administrator in addition to the Early Childhood principal, but it also invested in data gathering and analysis, and developed a robust, well-documented transitions toolkit.
Many students who would have been placed in self-contained classrooms are succeeding in the inclusive classrooms, and some of them are expected to continue in regular classrooms beginning in second grade.

Designing Inclusion Structures

Project leaders drew explicit links between the types of activities we have described thus far and the benefits for students with disabilities, and often for English Language Learners as well. Aligning curricular expectations and assessments (and thus having clearer intervention guidelines), focusing on the development of oral language, vocabulary, and/or social-emotional skills, adopting consistent approaches to writing, implementing Tools of the Mind, collaborating with private providers (e.g., on autism in Springfield and on inclusion practices in Worcester), and improving transitions all support the learning of students with disabilities, especially when their needs are taken into consideration during the design of these programs. Further, as we have seen, districts like Lunenburg, Nashoba, and Worcester worked to deepen their districts’ implementation of and commitment to inclusion through resource guides and targeted professional development. The grant supported the implementation of response-to-intervention systems (e.g., in Marlborough and Winchendon), and others had intervention work underway that ran parallel to the plans of the vertical team (e.g., Leveled Literacy Intervention in Springfield).

In addition to these initiatives, two of the 44 participating districts, Lynn and Chelsea, used the grant as an opportunity either to create (or support the creation of) new classes for students with disabilities. The Lynn team was motivated by a specific problem its members identified. The district had both inclusive preschool classes (for both students with disabilities and typically-developing students) and self-contained preschool classes. Yet in kindergarten and above there were only regular and self-contained classes. As a result, students with disabilities who were not yet ready for regular kindergarten were put into the self-contained kindergarten class. Those students tended to remain in the self-contained track. Even in instances when the district had placed students in a transitional kindergarten class, they typically remained in a self-contained track. Yet members of the Lynn team felt that some of these students could succeed in regular classrooms with the proper support.

To address this problem Lynn first created two inclusive kindergartens in one underperforming school as a pilot. The district provided extra support to these two classrooms by assigning an experienced special education teacher and an aide to the two classes, in addition to the two classroom teachers. The special education teacher and the aide would rotate between the two classes – each spending half a day in one class while the other was in the other class, and then switching. The teachers and the team found this model to be very effective for the students in the inclusive classes, but the arrangement had an unintended consequence. Because the inclusive kindergarten classes were capped in size, the other kindergartens in the school became too large. For this reason the next year the district changed the model: instead of two inclusive kindergarten classes, they formed one inclusive kindergarten and one inclusive first-grade class. Having only one smaller capped class per grade solved the problem for the non-integrated classes.

Lynn supported this arrangement with both horizontal and vertical common
planning time for teachers, some extra materials paid for by the grant, and professional development on literacy and small group instruction. The team has found the model to be highly successful: many students who would have been placed in self-contained classrooms are succeeding in the inclusive classrooms, and some of them are expected to continue in regular classrooms beginning in second grade. English Language Learners are also benefiting from the integrated classes as are those kindergartners who did not attend preschool and enter school behind their peers. The Lynn team and senior leadership in the district are now planning on moving the model to a second underperforming school, and the team hopes to implement it district-wide eventually. Project leaders report that this inclusion project has helped to build the district’s commitment to the inclusion model more generally.

Chelsea’s P-3 project took place in a context in which the district was in the process of creating three new substantially separate classrooms and thereby significantly expanding the number of slots for students with disabilities in preschool and kindergarten. Previously these students would have been served outside the district. As the Chelsea project liaison wrote in the district final report on the grant, "It may seem incongruous to report upon the creation of sub-separate classrooms as progress in inclusive education. However, viewing educational placements on a continuum of least restrictive to most restrictive, Chelsea’s commitment to develop this programming in-district represents a culture shift and a big step forward in including all learners.”

Chelsea’s P-3 vertical team focused its efforts on supporting the new substantially separate classrooms. A major focus of the Chelsea project was to support the integration of technology to support diverse learning needs, including extensive professional development on the use of interactive whiteboards, the Boardmaker visual aids program, DVDs and social skills development, and other technology resources. Further, the grant funds were used to provide professional development within the district on special education, including workshops on autism, behavior management, and sensory processing disorders. Teachers were supported in attending professional development workshops outside the district as well.

Project leaders report more consistency in instruction as a result of the program of professional development the team has supported as well as extensive use of the district's new technology resources. As one concrete example, project leaders have found that there has been a culture change regarding how teachers are serving students with sensory processing disorders. Further, a major outcome of this work is the development in the district of greater "fluidity" in the way students are placed in different classrooms. Students in substantially separate classroom may spend part of their day in regular classrooms, for instance, participating in group literacy activities.
Engaging Families

A number of the P-3 grant recipients also chose to develop their districts’ family engagement activities. Lowell’s extensive work in developing a home visiting protocol and increasing home visits, discussed above, stands out as a good example of the district building stronger relationships with families, in that case in the context of a broader push to support the development of student social-emotional skills. Some districts developed websites (e.g., Salem) and resource binders (e.g., Saugus) to aid families in supporting their children’s learning, while others such as Leominster, Quincy, and Randolph, sponsored family literacy events, learning nights, and other engagement activities.

The Sabis International Charter School provides another good example of a district that used the P-3 grant to build stronger relationships with families and the capacity for families to support their children’s learning. Sabis organized monthly family nights specifically for families of students with disabilities. These events take place on the first Tuesday of each month and have been pivotal in increasing trust between the school and families. Teachers organize a variety of learning games for parents and children to play together, and like Lowell they have developed an elaborate set of activities around making and using homework boxes. These nights function also as a kind of support group for families, and parents report improved self-esteem and increased confidence in their ability to advocate for their children as a result of these events.
5. Obstacles and Challenges

Three sources of data shed light on the obstacles and challenges that districts faced in their P-3 alignment efforts: on-site interviews with members of the P-3 teams, responses to a specific question on obstacles and challenges that all the sites addressed in their final report, and telephone interviews with five districts that either dropped out of the project, did not reapply for the grant funds, or in one case, a district that was not able to carry out a significant portion of its planned strategy. These participant reports centered around six familiar challenges that are common themes in the school improvement literature.

Leadership Transitions and Conflicting Priorities. Clearly districts whose P-3 improvement efforts flourished benefited from senior leadership support, and conversely, there were numerous instances where the P-3 work led to increased buy-in and support from senior leaders. Yet several districts reported that transitions in leadership made carrying out the strategies planned by the vertical teams significantly more difficult. Several of the districts that dropped out or did not reapply for the P-3 grant experienced leadership transitions that made it difficult to devote attention to organizing the vertical teams, and in some cases senior leaders had other priorities that conflicted with or simply supplanted the strategic agendas of the vertical teams.

Competing Initiatives. Again echoing a common theme in the research literature, many districts, including some of the most successful, noted the challenges of both coordinating with other initiatives and of finding time to meet and carry out P-3 alignment plans in contexts in which multiple initiatives were underway. Even in the relatively common instances where P-3 teams were able to build upon the work carried out by related literacy and/or special education task forces, keeping these various initiatives moving in parallel and aligned required ongoing attention.

Buy-in and Deep Implementation. One district dropped out of the grant because administrators were not able to find teachers willing to serve on the P-3 vertical team, but this seems to be a single anomaly. A common dynamic, as we have discussed, across the many of the P-3 sites was the development of an enthusiastic vertical team in which members read and discussed a common set of readings, became energized, planned a few strategies, and often with the help of a project leader or two, carried out these strategies. A number of districts reported, however, that rolling out the initiative to teachers that were not members of the team was a challenge since those teachers did not have the same level of buy-in. A related issue arises in which the team’s focus involved changes in instructional practices, whether inclusion strategies, new approaches to writing instruction, or increased focus on oral language and vocabulary development. Several districts wisely noted that “deep implementation” of new classroom practices is a perennial challenge, especially beyond the proponents on the team.
Vertical and Horizontal Team Time. The single most common challenge encountered by the districts that implemented the P-3 grant was finding time for teachers to meet vertically across grades. Several districts raised this issue while also emphasizing the importance of teachers meeting horizontally by grade-level to plan lessons and assess student work. The experience of early grades vertical meetings was profound for many team members. As we have seen, many found the vertical discussions to be “eye-opening” and the opportunity to align curricula, strategies, and practices across the grades to be pivotal for improving student achievement. Yet school schedules made scheduling such meetings difficult, and thus vertical teams were not able to meet as frequently, and do as much work, as they aspired to do. Scheduling meetings that members of different schools across a town could attend presented a related problem, as did finding mutually-agreeable times for school districts and community providers to come together. Clearly, districts were able to arrange some of these meetings, but the frequency and consistency of their reports highlighting this issue suggests a fundamental problem. This finding is symptomatic of a larger, well-documented pattern in American schools: American teachers have less common planning time than teachers in most other industrialized countries (Darling-Hammond).

Professional Development Time. The final frequently-cited challenge relates to the issue of the school schedule as well as to the challenge of changing classroom practice: limited opportunities to support teachers in learning new strategies and approaches through professional development. This issue was particularly challenging in districts, like Worcester, that were trying to schedule professional development that Head Start teachers and teachers working in private providers could attend as well.
6. Summary of Findings and Lessons Learned

In this case a targeted state grant did in fact effect district level change.

There is a need and in fact a hunger to focus on the early grades and in particular to focus on alignment across the early grades.

Most of the districts that received the P-3 grant funds embraced the opportunity to identify a district need in the early grades related to the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, plan a strategy, and carry out this strategy. In a clear majority of cases districts carried out projects closely related to improving teaching and learning: aligning expectations across grades, developing and/or selecting new curricula, adopting unified instructional approaches across grades, supporting teachers in implementing new teaching approaches and strategies, improving student transitions building closer relationships with families, and in a couple of cases developing new inclusion structures. Factors that contribute to the impact this grant program has had include a climate in education circles supportive of P-3 efforts, easily identifiable needs at the district and school levels related to early grades instruction, the broad design of the grant program that allowed districts to identify their own needs, and the desire to make good use of state funds and maintain a good relationship with the ESE. Regardless of the precise combination of local factors that motivated different districts to carry out this work it is clear that in this case a targeted state grant did in fact effect district level change.

Further, it is clear from the response of the participating districts that there is a need and in fact a hunger to focus on the early grades and in particular to focus on alignment across the early grades, grades that may not have received as much attention of late due to the pressure on the part of administrators to devote attention to the testing grades. Districts acknowledged through their identification of needs clear gaps between their district prekindergarten classes and the expectations, curricular offerings, instructional strategies, and professional development opportunities that characterize their kindergarten through third-grade classrooms. For this reason the district teams welcomed the opportunity to include prekindergarten in their alignment work. In some districts there was a similar gap between kindergarten and first grade that they addressed through their alignment projects. Districts found the vertical team structures to be effective mechanisms for carrying out alignment activities.

That district projects clustered around eight types of activities (overlapping with the ESE components) suggest that district needs in the P-3 domain are in fact, as the P-3 frameworks suggest, multi-dimensional. Comprehensive solutions to improving early grades education, and in particular solutions that address the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners, will likely entail, contingent on local strengths and areas in need of improvement, some combination of the following measures:

- Alignment of expectations, curriculum, and assessment
- Improvement of instructional approaches and strategies (through resource guides, purchased programs, the adoption of unified approaches, and aligned professional development)
Districts indicated a clear need for capacity-building support for vertical, cross-district teams, for initiatives that required departments to collaborate, and for developing strong connections with private providers.

In carrying out their P-3 projects, districts encountered familiar challenges, including leadership transitions, conflicting leadership priorities, competing initiatives, and securing broad buy-in and deep implementation. Yet it is in the area of structural and organizational challenges that the P-3 grants are perhaps most revealing. The responses of the districts point out the degree of the challenge districts face in aligning the work of teaching and learning across grades, schools, and organizational silos even as they made some progress in bridging these organizational boundaries. While many districts were determined to continue their P-3 efforts and some had secured district funds to continue the vertical team meetings, a number of project leaders reported their concerns that the vertical alignment work would end with the grant. Time for vertical teams to meet continues to be a major obstacle. Districts indicated a clear need for capacity-building support for vertical, cross-district teams, for initiatives that required departments to collaborate, and for developing strong connections with private providers.

Finally, many districts completed projects that will clearly impact teaching and learning beyond the grant period. Evidence of this includes curriculum maps, new literacy programs, new assessment tools and schedules, and school- and district-wide and approaches to writing instruction (e.g., Six Traits and Writing Workshop). Given the small size of the P-3 grants, the relative novelty of the early grades vertical team opportunity, and the design of the program, most were understandably not yet integrated into district planning processes. Yet the P-3 efforts are most likely to be sustained and developed beyond the specific projects carried out are those that have become institutionalized in district improvement plans (e.g., Holyoke), literacy plans (e.g., Watertown, Holyoke, and Springfield), program reviews (e.g., Brookline), assessment schedules (e.g., Dennis-Yarmouth, Holyoke, and Gill-Montague), and response-to-intervention systems (e.g., Winchendon and Marlborough). Further, most projects have not yet formally assessed the impact of their work on classroom practice and student learning. Moving forward, districts can build on the work on the P-3 teams by integrating P-3 initiatives into district planning processes and assessing their impact using interim outcome benchmarks, including the results of instructional learning walks and other classroom observations.

A summary of these findings follows:

- Targeted state grants can effect district change.
- There is an ongoing need to address the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the early grades, and cross-departmental, vertical teams that include prekindergarten educators are effective structures for doing this work.
Improving teaching and learning in the early grades requires multi-dimensional efforts along the lines suggested by national P-3 frameworks.

Projects secured buy-in and bridged organizational boundaries, yet significant organizational challenges remain and warrant ongoing attention and capacity-building support.

Thus far, most districts have assessed their work informally using as measures projects completed, products created, processes improved, organizational reforms implemented, cultural change, and informal classroom observations.
7. Recommendations for Future P-3 Efforts

Support Cross-Grade, Cross-Departmental Collaboration on Improving Teaching and Learning from Prekindergarten to Third Grade (and Beyond). Many school districts struggle to bring departments and grade-levels together to support joint initiatives and systemic change. The P-3 grants revealed the extent of these problems while providing a relatively small and short-term though effective mechanism to address them. First, the grant showed the need for and efficacy of vertical teams in the early years. Several districts noted that vertical teams need to supplement, but not supplant, the important and different work of horizontal grade-level teams. Fundamentally, teachers in schools need to do collaborative work along at least two dimensions: horizontally to plan lessons and units and assess student progress and vertically to align expectations and implement consistent approaches. In order to maximize teacher collaboration around improving teaching and learning, schools should be organized as matrix structures with teachers participating on both horizontal and vertical teams. Second, in many cases the grant led to increased collaboration between separate district offices, including Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education, Early Childhood, and English Language Learning. Districts can support continued cross-grade and cross-departmental work around P-3 improvement by establishing permanent vertical team structures; states can support these efforts through similar grant designs and networking and capacity-building support.

Build District and State Support for District/Private Provider Collaboration. As challenging as bridging organizational boundaries across grades, schools, and departments within districts is, it is nonetheless significantly more challenging to extend beyond the district sphere of control and create meaningful, effective, and sustained collaboration between districts and community preschool providers. Most participating P-3 districts identified pressing needs within their districts as priorities for their vertical team projects. A few, however, such as Springfield, Worcester, Northampton, and Watertown, built on previous collaborations to undertake joint projects with private providers; others such as Marlborough and Holyoke are now working to strengthen their capacity for joint action with private providers. Significant progress in aligning and improving P-3 education in Massachusetts will require capacity-building and coordination across districts, private providers, ESE, and EEC (the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care).

Employ Effective School and District Improvement Planning and Implementation Practices. The MA ESE is currently supporting district improvement planning and plan implementation practices that are more focused and coherent than traditional school improvement plans and that use interim benchmarks to monitor, assess, and adjust plan implementation. Interim benchmarks include early evidence of change, short-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes. The approach

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Using planning and plan implementation practices that are focused, coherent, and guided by implementation checkpoints can help districts maximize the impact of P-3 initiatives while providing evidence of success in order to build support for future early grades investments.

That underlies these practices is outlined in books such as *Strategy In Action* and *Deliverology*. The ESE uses the former in its required new superintendent induction program as well as in the planning process it has established for Level 4 districts. As discussed above, the work that Holyoke’s P-3 vertical team carried out supported the district’s growing commitment to setting the improvement of early childhood education as a priority, a priority that is clear in the district’s Level 4 plan. In this respect, Holyoke has the potential to be an interesting test case for the use disciplined plan implementation processes to support P-3 improvement efforts.

Most of the P-3 projects were not yet integrated into district improvement plans, and most did not employ interim benchmarks to guide and assess implementation efforts. As a result, most teams relied on more informal measures of project success. Given the small size of the P-3 grants, this is perhaps to be expected, yet in some cases project leaders were able to correlate changes in classroom practices to professional development offerings. Moving forward, using planning and plan implementation practices that are focused, coherent, and guided by implementation checkpoints and benchmarks can help districts maximize the impact of P-3 initiatives while providing evidence of success in order to build support for future early grades investments.

**Continue Providing State-wide P-3 Capacity-Building and Networking Opportunities.** There was a broad consensus across districts that the networking opportunities the ESE provided were helpful. Districts requested continued workshops on important P-3 topics and for webinars and workshops in which districts can learn from each other. The Early Literacy and Numeracy Workshop and Professional Learning Community meetings recently launched by the EEC and ESE is an example of the kind of networking project leaders requested.

**Deepen ESE, EEC, and District Collaboration.** Districts report a need for greater collaboration between ESE and EEC on early years initiatives. The Early Literacy and Numeracy Workshop mentioned above is an example of such collaboration. Joint grants might be another example. Improved coordination between the two agencies and between the agencies and districts could help in streamlining and aligning district policies, procedures, and initiatives.

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21 Cambridge Education, including the author of this report, provided support to the ESE as it developed the Level 4 planning process.