PAUL NYHAN

THE POWER OF A GOOD IDEA

HOW THE SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOL DISTRICT IS BUILDING A PREK – 3RD GRADE BRIDGE

About the Author

Paul Nyhan is an award-winning journalist and early education expert, who writes for Thrive by Five Washington and other outlets. Before focusing on education six years ago, he spent the two decades covering a variety of issues for Bloomberg News, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and Congressional Quarterly Inc.

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Acknowledgments

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THE SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT AT A GLANCE

More Than 57,000 Students (K – 12th Grade)

43 Elementary Schools with Pre-K Programs

13 Independent Early Education Schools with Pre-K Classrooms

DEMOGRAPHICS:

- Other **15%**
- Latino **26%**
- African American **8%**
- Asian **38%**
- White **13%**
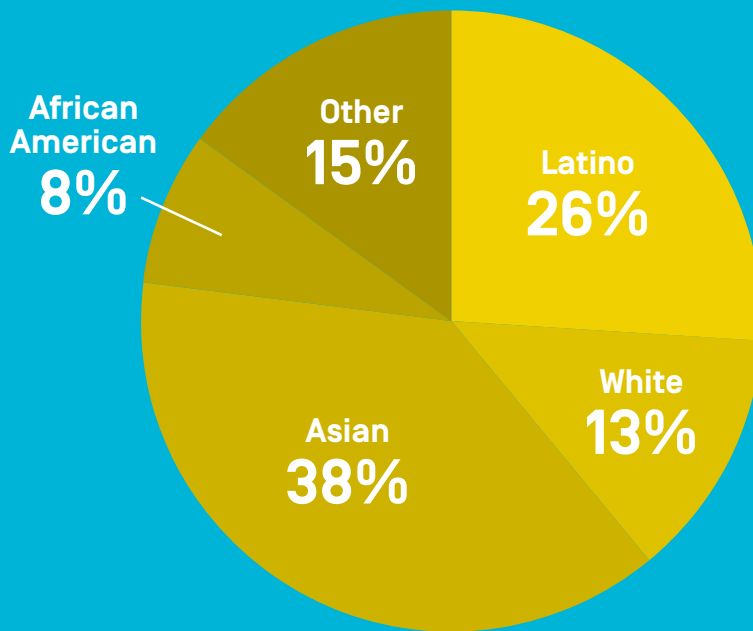
English Language Learners **29%**

Free-and-Reduced Lunch **61%**

(Source: 2013-14 school year, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) website.)

PRE-K AT A GLANCE

1,600 TO 1,700
Pre-K Students (4-Year Olds)

Approximately 80
Pre-K Teachers in General Education and Inclusive Classes

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Other 6%

White 12%

African American 15%

Asian and Pacific Islander 37%

Latino 30%
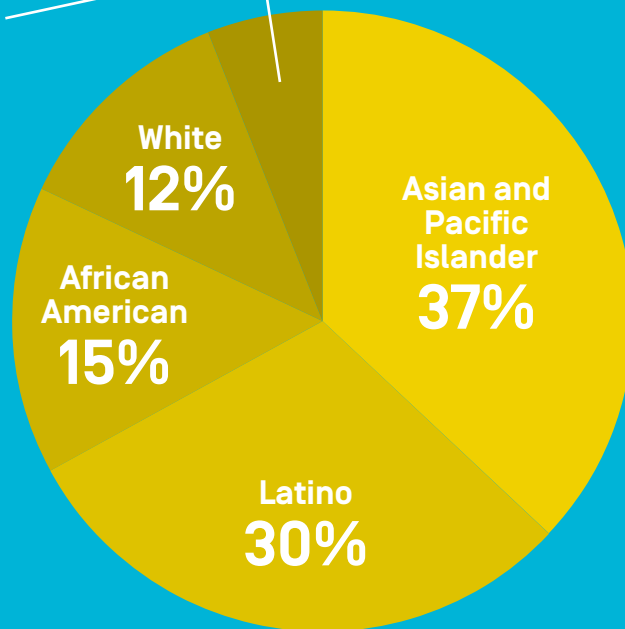
[2014-15 school year.]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008 the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) confronted a problem that has been growing for decades. It boasted the highest academic performance of any large urban district in California, yet its achievement gap was widening, as too many African American, Latino, and low-income students fell far behind their classmates.[1]

The gap was perhaps clearest in the city's Bayview and Mission neighborhoods, where only a quarter of African American and Latino students read at grade level in third grade, compared to three-quarters of white students districtwide.[2] Throughout the school system, 40 percent of African American students and 48 percent of Latino students were at grade level in math by second grade, compared to 88 percent of white students in 2011–12.[3] The achievement gap was the greatest challenge facing the school district, one that revealed systemic disconnects throughout its schools and programs, beginning with its youngest students.

This is the story of how the district began narrowing the gap by rethinking its approach to teaching and learning in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades of elementary school. District leaders worked to align curricula, professional development, assessments, and even classroom layouts across the PreK–3rd grade continuum, initially focusing on connections between pre-K and kindergarten. To lead this ambitious effort, the district turned to its underfunded and sometimes overlooked Child Development Program, which ran its pre-K classrooms.

Over the last six years, the SFUSD has been building a bridge between pre-K and third grade, beginning by strengthening its public pre-K program. Doing so generated support among successive superintendents and district leaders, and allowed early learning leaders to expand the strategy to a growing network of schools. This progress was fueled by San Francisco's long-standing commitment to early learning and a core of committed partners, including the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, First 5 San Francisco, and Stanford University. In addition, it has been supported by a growing national recognition that a PreK–3rd grade approach is among today's most effective education reforms.

At its heart, the strategy's initial success in San Francisco's public schools was about the power of a good idea, driven by talented leaders with a mix of entrepreneurial experience and an understanding that making lasting change in public education is a grinding marathon, not a sprint. These leaders committed to systemic reform and the time it would take.

Within the district, changes unfolded in a series of overlapping phases:

- Phase 1: Gaining traction among a wider circle of district leaders

- Phase 2: Bridging the typically separate worlds of pre-K and elementary school

- Phase 3: Implementing strategies to more schools across the district

- Phase 4: Revamping professional development

Much of the district's progress has to do with building an infrastructure that could sustain its PreK–3rd grade strategies over the long term. Since 2010 the district:

- Hired a new leader for the district's pre-K program with experience running public pre-K, working with traditional K–12 public school systems, and using data to drive systemic change.

- Restructured the program by stabilizing its budget, raising its stature, and giving its leader more authority over pre-K and within the school district.

- Elevated and reorganized its pre-K workplace and workforce to match realities of operating within an elementary school system.

- Developed stronger data systems and used data to improve assessments, instruction, curriculum, and professional development from pre-K through first grade.

- Generated support and understanding for alignment strategies within district leadership and on the school board.

- Began aligning pre-K and K–3 at a growing network of schools and developing professional development programs to support that alignment.

Foundations were catalysts for the initial work, and they nurtured development with strategic investments. The school district, though, was the clear leader, with First 5 San Francisco, Stanford University, private funders, and others coming together to support a compelling vision that was directed by district leaders.

The district's successes and struggles developing its PreK–3rd approach during the last six years hold lessons for other school districts exploring the approach in California and around the nation:

- **Begin with a strong platform:** It is important to have a strong early education program and long-term support from district leadership, the school board, and school leaders.

- **Work with local partners:** Foundations, non-profits with shared goals, government agencies, and institutions of higher education can be helpful resources and collaborators in building and strengthening a PreK–3rd system.

- **Hire leaders with the right skill set:** Hire people to lead early education work who are committed to PreK–3rd strategies and have skills working in both pre-K and traditional public school systems. Developing a PreK–3rd system often demands juggling four or five agendas at the same time, while also maintaining a view that encompasses all aspects of a school system.

- **Take a system-wide approach:** A PreK–3rd system is not an add-on or new program. It is a systemic approach to early elementary education.

When developing and implementing this approach it is important to rethink all aspects of a system, including curriculum, professional development, assessment, data, special education, and out-of-school programs.

- **Improve professional development:** Revise and redesign professional development for teachers, principals, administrators, and other educators, to reflect alignment across the grade continuum.

- **Focus on the whole child:** A PreK–3rd approach includes students, families, communities, out-of-school programs, and support services, while emphasizing socio-emotional development along with academic work.

- **Invest in school readiness:** Devote resources and time to development of a clear and useful kindergarten readiness measurement that is supported by data-driven assessments and aligned with systems to improve student transitions to kindergarten.

- **Start small and with interested leaders:** In rolling out a PreK–3rd approach, initially focus on a small number of high-need schools with principals who readily support the strategy.

District leaders who are serious about creating a PreK–3rd approach should not underestimate the scope of this work. It requires a close attention to detail, broad and system-wide change, and committed early education leaders. This type of change demands patience. While progress should occur every year, it may take years, or perhaps a decade, to see lasting results.
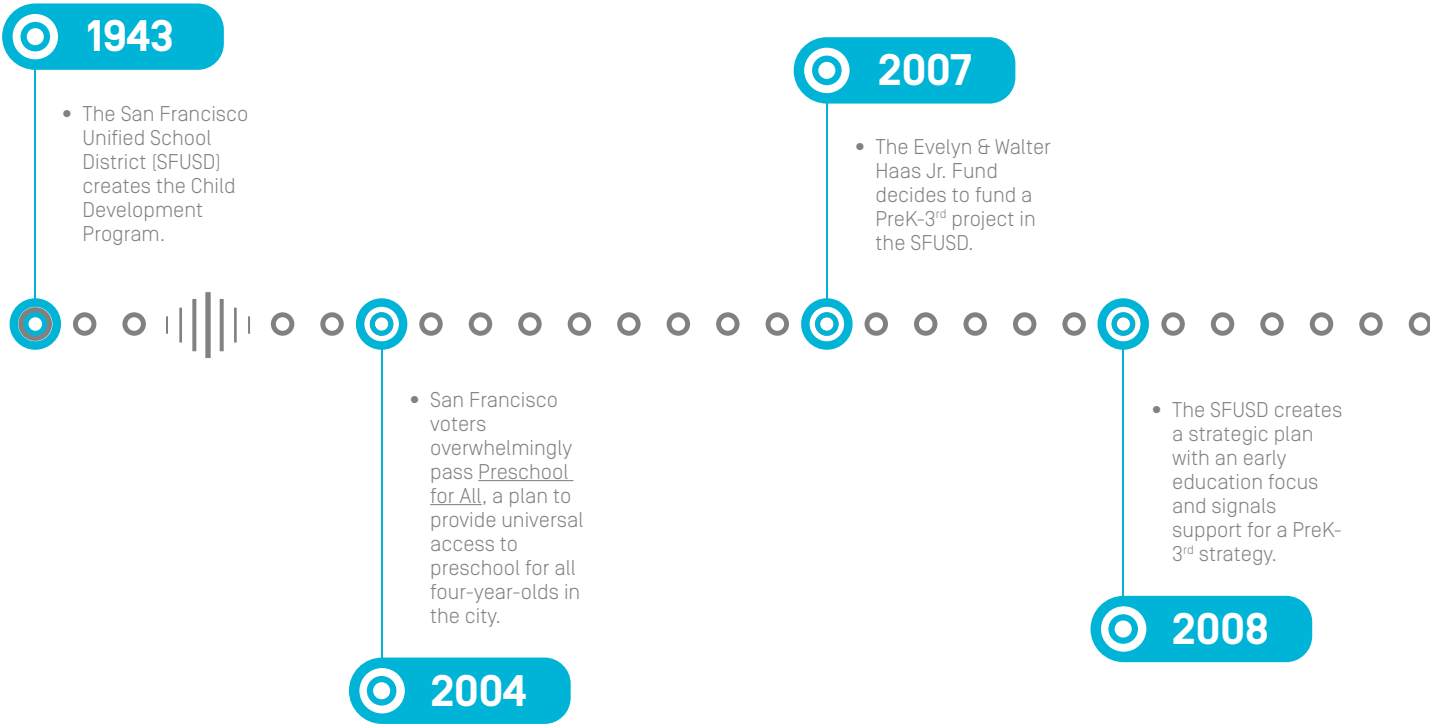
INTRODUCTION

When Early Education Chief Carla Bryant arrives at district headquarters in the morning she often has one of her Katrina moments, a palpable fear that the district cannot let any more children fall behind as it aligns its earliest grades, the way many people died in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as a response was organized. "We don't leave that child out there to drown while we teach everybody how to be lifeguards," Bryant says. Then she reaches her office door where she has taped an anonymous motto: "Patience, persistence, and perspiration make an unbeatable combination for success."

This balance of patience and urgency has defined not only Bryant's work, but the San Francisco Unified School District's early success, a success built on growing support among district leaders, a stronger foundation for early education, a new approach to professional development, and a growing number of schools beginning to produce results.

The story of San Francisco's PreK–3rd grade approach is far from over, and there are plenty of questions about its future. The district has made progress improving and connecting pre-K and kindergarten, though there is plenty of work left to align first through third grades. Broadly, it has begun changing its culture from a K–12 system to a P–12 continuum. But, aligning pre-k with K–3 grades in a sustainable way that improves student outcomes and narrows the achievement gap is not easy or quick work. Instead, as Bryant recognizes, it requires balancing urgency with an understanding that real and measurable change takes years. As the district continues the work of expanding its PreK–3rd vision to all of its schools, success depends on sustaining this balance.

A Timeline of PreK-3rd's Expansion in San Francisco's Public Schools

1943
- The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) creates the Child Development Program.

2004
- San Francisco voters overwhelmingly pass Preschool for All, a plan to provide universal access to preschool for all four-year-olds in the city.

2007
- The Evelyn & Walter Haas Jr. Fund decides to fund a PreK-3rd project in the SFUSD.

2008
- The SFUSD creates a strategic plan with an early education focus and signals support for a PreK-3rd strategy.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: 1943 TO 2009

The bedrock of the SFUSD's PreK–3rd system has been there for decades.
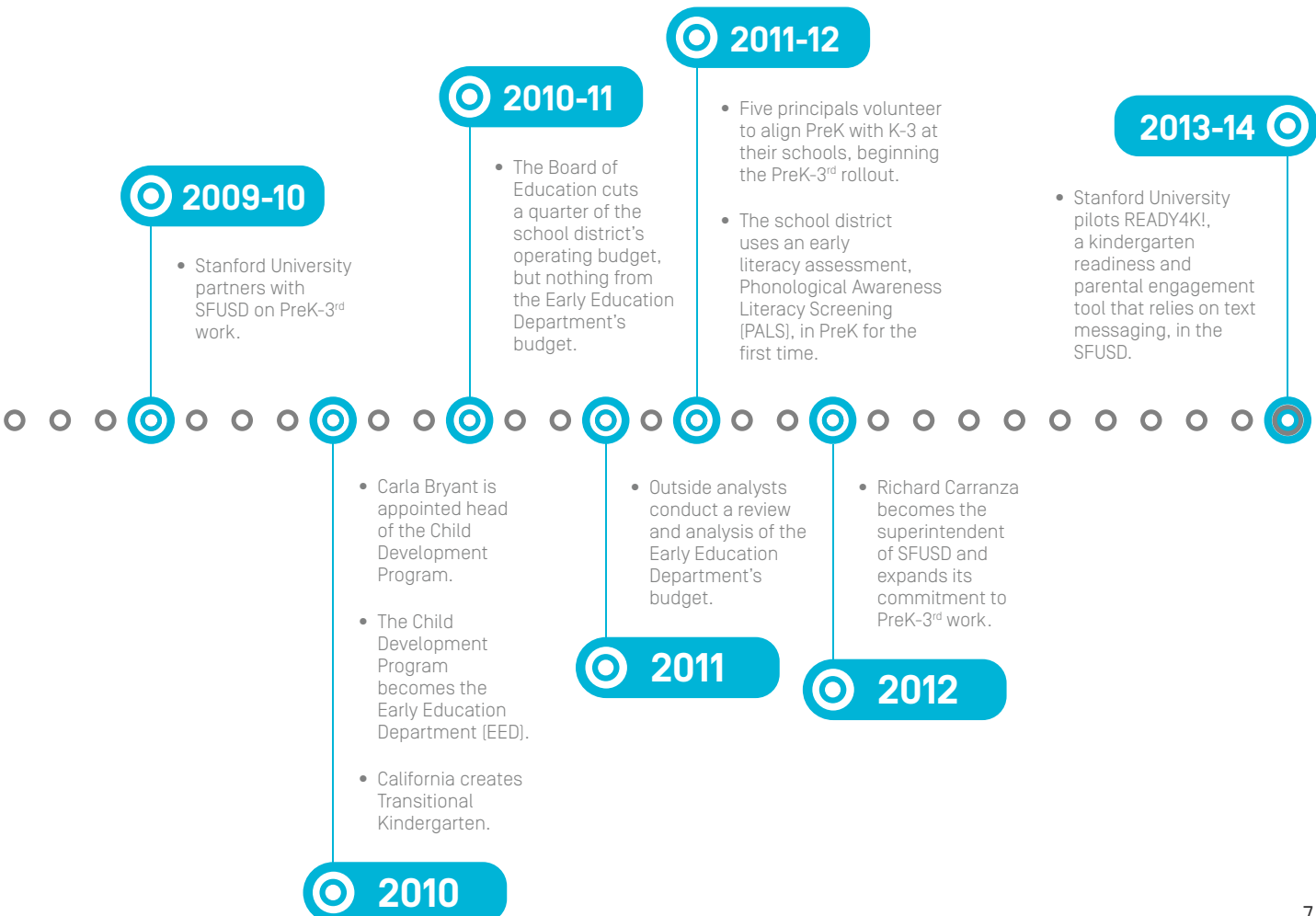
San Francisco's commitment to early education dates back to 1943, when the school district used funding from the Lanham Act—a federal public works program[4] —to provide year-round child care for working families during World War II.[5] After the war, the Child Development Program continued to provide child care for working parents.[6] But, during the next seven decades child care, in particular pre-K, began to be seen as a place to prepare children for school by supporting development of their academic and social skills.

In 2004, San Francisco voters endorsed this view when they overwhelmingly approved Proposition H, which called for universal preschool access for all four-year-old children in the city. The vote dovetailed with a growing body of research that shows the benefits of high-quality pre-K, especially for low-income and minority students.

In 2005 then-Board of Education Board member Norman Yee and other board members began asking why the district's pre-K program was not more of an integral part of the school district. Three years later, school district leaders endorsed aligning Pre-K with K–3, when then-Superintendent Carlos Garcia saw how it fit into his plan to close the achievement gap. By 2008 Garcia viewed the widening achievement gap as the district's biggest challenge.[7] "The San Francisco Unified School District sees the achievement gap as the greatest social justice/civil rights issue facing our country today; there cannot be justice for all without closing this gap," Garcia wrote in the district's 2008–2012 Strategic Plan.

In the city's public schools by third grade only 26 percent of African American and Latino students were at grade level in English language arts (ELA), compared to 74

Timeline

2009-10
- Stanford University partners with SFUSD on PreK-3rd work.

2010
- Carla Bryant is appointed head of the Child Development Program.
- The Child Development Program becomes the Early Education Department (EED).
- California creates Transitional Kindergarten.

2010-11
- The Board of Education cuts a quarter of the school district's operating budget, but nothing from the Early Education Department's budget.

2011
- Outside analysts conduct a review and analysis of the Early Education Department's budget.

2011-12
- Five principals volunteer to align PreK with K-3 at their schools, beginning the PreK-3rd rollout.
- The school district uses an early literacy assessment, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), in PreK for the first time.

2012
- Richard Carranza becomes the superintendent of SFUSD and expands its commitment to PreK-3rd work.

2013-14
- Stanford University pilots READY4K!, a kindergarten readiness and parental engagement tool that relies on text messaging, in the SFUSD.

percent of white students. Math scores told a similar story, with 40 percent of African American students and 52 percent of Latino students at grade level, compared to 81 percent of white students.[8]

To help close this divide, Superintendent Garcia made early education a priority within the district's 2008–2012 strategic plan. The pre-K program was already serving those on the wrong side of the achievement gap because between 85 and 90 percent of its students came from low-income families. Garcia committed funds from the district's portion of the 2008 federal economic stimulus package to support PreK–3rd pilots,[9] and a few years later the district began aligning pre-K and K–3 at five schools. Eventually, Garcia envisioned aligning pre-K through third grade at the 34 elementary schools that already had pre-K classrooms.

Effective Philanthropy in District-led PreK–3rd

The 2004 vote for universal preschool occurred as interest grew among San Francisco foundations in improving early childhood education. In 2007, the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund approached the school district, city, and other foundations about forming a public-private partnership that would support PreK–3rd alignment in the city's public schools.[10]

A defining lesson from these early stages was the importance of a true partnership between a superintendent with a strong commitment to PreK–3rd and funders.

The partnership wanted systemic change. The vision was to remake the city's public elementary schools into places where curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessment would be aligned from pre-K through third grade, with a focus on early and bilingual literacy, math, and social-emotional development.[11] The schools would engage families and be integrated throughout the district, including in afterschool and summer programs.[12]

The Haas, Jr. Fund was a catalyst for the idea of aligning pre-K with K–3. Instead of laying out how it should be done, the Fund brought ideas, partners, and resources to the school district, supported its planning, and raised money for the work.[13] At the same time, it created joint learning opportunities for the district, city, and funders about the research and reasons behind PreK–3rd because its leaders knew this strategy needed champions inside the district, and a core of supportive funders. (See "The Research Basis for PreK–3rd" on page 9.) In this early stage, the Fund cultivated the ground for a PreK–3rd system, according to Ruby Takanishi , a nationally-recognized expert on the strategy, who worked with the Fund and district on the approach. The Fund:

- Sent a team from the district and city to a Harvard University workshop on PreK–3rd approaches.

- Sponsored sessions with speakers such as Montgomery County superintendent Jerry Weast, where educators and policymakers learned about the latest ideas, lessons, and PreK–3rd models, which they then used to develop their own plan.

- Began what became a focus of the district's PreK–3rd work during the next five years: educating and encouraging district leaders to make PreK–3rd a district priority and devote resources to the work.[14]

This work paid off as the idea gained traction among district leaders, who began developing their vision of a PreK–3rd system. Their strategy created the context within which foundations could play supportive or additive roles, which fit their own grant-making priorities, observed Jeff Sunshine, the Children, Families, and Communities program officer at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which also provided funding for the work.

"We understood that the district needed to own and lead this effort. To have real legs, it couldn't be a Haas, Jr. Fund project," said Sylvia Yee, vice president of programs at the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. "The district hired talented staff, developed the strategy and the plan. We follow their lead, but we hold them accountable."

Early on, the Fund learned an important lesson by studying successful PreK–3rd efforts around the country: have patience. This work was going to take at least a decade because it was not implementing a simple program model. The Fund referred to its investments as "patient capital," which meant giving the district enough time to research, plan, build partnerships, learn, and produce results, such as higher average scores on

third and fourth grade standardized math and English language tests among at-risk students. "If you don't have the ability to take the long view then don't do it," Sunshine said.

The other defining lesson from these early stages was the importance of a true partnership between a superintendent with a strong commitment to PreK–3rd and funders. In recent education reform efforts, funders approached school districts with clear views of what work should look like and how money should be spent. In this case, funders encouraged and supported an idea and broad vision, but clearly wanted the district in the driver's seat. The district defined the ambitious agenda and implementation, which allowed funders and other partners to support parts of that agenda that fit their own priorities. The Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, for example, was most interested in pre-K, while Packard focused on Transitional Kindergarten (TK), but together both were contributing to broader PreK–3rd goals.

The Research Basis for PreK–3rd

- Laura Bornfreund, Clare McCann, Conor Williams, and Lisa Guernsey, _Beyond Subprime Learning: Accelerating Progress in Early Education_ (Washington, DC: New America, 2014).

- "Full-Day Preschool Linked to Increased School Readiness, Reduced Absences," University of Minnesota, Discover, Teaching + Education website, November 21, 2014.

- Lisa Guernsey and Sara Mead, _A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education_ (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2010).

- Donald J. Hernandez, _Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation_ (Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

- Clara G. Muschkin, Helen F. Ladd, and Kenneth A. Dodge, _Impact of North Carolina's Early Childhood Initiatives on Special Education Placements in Third Grade_, (Washington, DC: National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, 2015), working paper.

- Arthur J. Reynolds et al., "Association of a Full-Day vs. Part-Day Preschool Intervention With School Readiness, Attendance, and Parent Involvement," JAMA 312 no. 20 (November 26, 2014): 2126–2134.

- Arthur J. Reynolds, K. Magnuson, and S. Ou, "PK–3 Programs and Practices: A Review of Research," _Children and Youth Services Review_, 32 (2010): 1121–1131.

- Arthur J. Reynolds, Arthur J. Rolnick, Michelle M. Englund, and Judy A. Temple, eds., _Childhood Programs and Practices in the First Decade: A Human Capital Integration_ (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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- Arthur J. Reynolds and Judy A. Temple, "Cost-Effective Early Childhood Development Programs from Preschool to Third Grade," _Annual Review of Clinical Psychology_ 4, (April 2008): 109–139.

- Ruby Takanishi and Kimber L. Bogard, "Effective Educational Programs for Young Children: What We Need to Know," _Society for Research in Child Development_ 1 no. 1 (2007): 40–45.

- Ruby Takanishi and Kristie Kauerz, "PK Inclusion: Getting Serious About a P–16 Education System," _Phi Delta Kappan_ 89 no. 7 (March 2008): 480–487.

PHASE ONE: GAINING TRACTION

Before the school district could build a robust PreK–3rd system, it had to strengthen pre-K, and its first step was to find a leader with the right mix of skills to lead that work.

In 2010, the district chose an outsider, Carla Bryant, to lead the Child Development Program, which operated the district's pre-K programs and supported after-school and summer programs. Bryant brought a wide range of experience as a Head Start administrator, early learning trainer, and strategic advisor on education, including PreK–3rd alignment, for the city of Seattle. After 20 years in early education, Bryant was committed to the idea that reliable data should inform decisions and support effective education systems.

Bryant's first challenge was to get the Child Development Program's financial house in order by gaining a clearer picture of the program's $43 million budget and $6 million-plus annual deficit. The program's costs far exceeded its revenues, but it was not clear why.

The district's public pre-K program relies on confusing and sometimes chaotic streams of funding, all with different reporting requirements and regulations. The program receives roughly 75 percent of its funds from California's Title 5 program, which supports child care, pre-K (California State Preschool Program), and

child development programs in the state.[15] But it also relies on funding from the federal Title I program, SFUSD's General Fund, the city of San Francisco's Public Education Enrichment Fund (established by voter-approved Proposition H), foundations, and other private sources. Together, this funding is not enough to create and maintain high-quality pre-K and it has not kept pace with the level of support needed for universal pre-K. Instead, SFUSD's pre-K program runs a deficit and relies on outside funding for a range of support and enhancements, including professional development, some supplies, and even field trips.

Braiding together all of this funding into a sustainable stream of support for pre-K is challenging, but it can be done, said Kacey Guin, who was hired by the program in 2011 to analyze its financial situation.

"It requires people to do things differently, set up accounting structures that were able to meet federal and state reporting requirements," Guin said. "It is just time and making people stretch, and not using the idea that you can't do it as an excuse to not even try."

With foundation support, Guin and another consultant conducted a fiscal review of the department's budget, and then offered ideas about how to narrow the deficit. Their review discovered a long list of structural problems that pushed costs higher. Under the existing union contract, for example, a teacher was not responsible for wiping down tables, stacking cots, and other cleaning. That meant the Child Development Program often hired another full-time employee, and provided full benefits, to do this work.
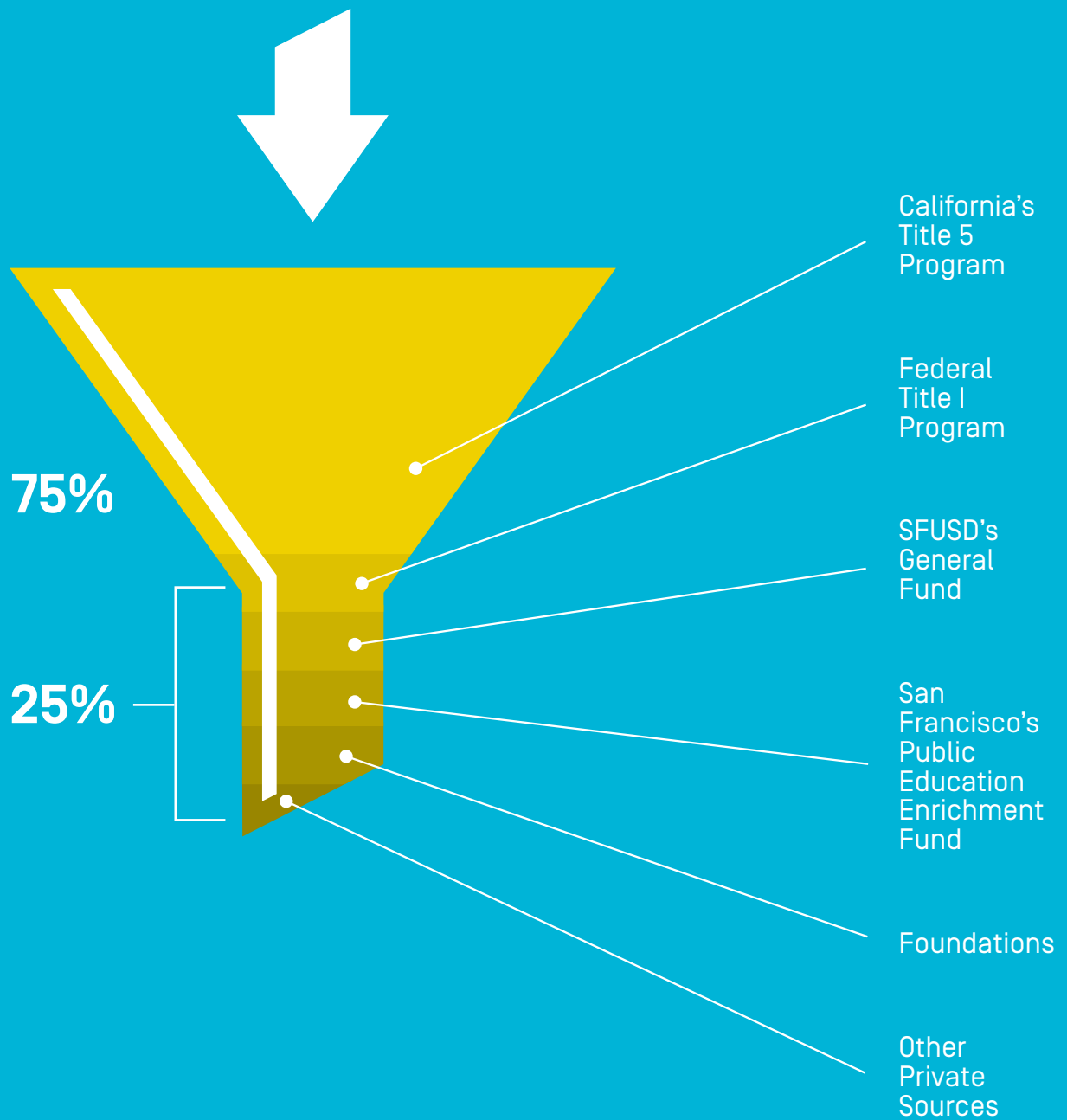
The pre-K program was riddled with these types of inefficiencies. Pre-K ran on a calendar year instead of an instructional year, for example, which meant it had to hire substitute teachers for 24 non-service days.[16] Teacher-student ratios often did not reflect the realities of running a pre-K class, and adding a seventeenth child could nearly triple staffing costs in a classroom. That is because it meant a classroom often had to hire another employee, whose salary and benefits would not be fully covered by funding that supported the new student.[17]

These are only a few examples of the costs and compliance headaches created by operating a pre-K

> "It requires people to do things differently, set up accounting structures that were able to meet federal and state reporting requirements. It is just time and making people stretch, and not using the idea that you can't do it as an excuse to not even try."
>
> **– Kacey Guin**

San Francisco Unified School District's Public Pre-K Funding

75%

25%

California's Title 5 Program

Federal Title I Program

SFUSD's General Fund

San Francisco's Public Education Enrichment Fund

Foundations

Other Private Sources

program with multiple funding sources within a public school system.

To get costs under control, the department spent the next two years working with the two unions representing teachers and principals[18] to develop a shared understanding of the role of preschool teachers. Together, they agreed to structural changes that reduced costs,[19] helped pre-K classrooms run more smoothly, and began improving quality.

The budget review had a big impact in these negotiations because Bryant was able to show negotiators how inefficient the current systems were, and how those inefficiencies created a deficit. This transparency has been a hallmark of the PreK–3rd work. "If you want others to work with you the problem has to be visible to them," Bryant said.

Key steps SFUSD leaders took to gain traction for a PreK–3rd focus:

- Partnered with foundations, non-profits, government agencies, colleges, and universities with proven commitments to early education research and implementation

- Generated support for change by showing inefficiencies in the current system

- Hired a leader for a PreK–3rd strategy with deep knowledge of early education, a data-driven approach, an entrepreneurial style, an ability to delegate, and an understanding of the culture and systems of public education

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The new union contracts made two main changes that began to align pre-K and K–3. The new provisions:

- Revised pre-K teachers' schedules to reflect the realities of enrollment, such as shifting teachers from a calendar year to one similar to a traditional school year.[20] In the summer, early education programs operated more like K–12 summer programs.

- Began putting principals in charge of pre-K at K–5 schools. Typically, pre-K directors ran their programs on elementary school campuses without a lot of oversight from principals.

Of all the changes the district made in the first few years of its alignment strategy, one of the most important was placing principals in charge of pre-K. Many viewed pre-K as glorified child care. But, if the district's strategy was going to gain traction, principals needed to oversee all students on campus. They would play a central role in the next stage of PreK–3rd in San Francisco's public schools, implementation.

Building a Common Understanding

As Child Development Program leaders strengthened the foundation for a PreK–3rd approach, they started generating support among district leaders by explaining the strategy's potential impact on the broader school system. Without support from the superintendent and other leaders the strategy was unlikely to get off the ground.

After Carlos Garcia retired as superintendent in 2012, his successor, Richard Carranza, not only supported PreK–3rd, he expanded the vision for the work. Since Carranza had entered kindergarten not knowing English, he understood how aligning pre-K with the first grades of elementary school could give students a stronger start and improve the odds they would read proficiently by third grade. Third grade is a watershed in a student's education because those who are not reading at grade level by then are four times more likely not to graduate from high school on time, according to a study by Hunter College Professor Donald Hernandez.[21] Carranza's commitment to alignment, first as deputy superintendent and then as superintendent, has played a decisive role in launching and sustaining the district's PreK–3rd approach over the last six years. "I can't imagine being able to do this work without Richard. You need a sponsor, who knows all the things that are necessary to ensure we get the work done," Bryant said.

But the strategy needed more than the superintendent's sponsorship to continue moving. To create an effective, aligned, and sustainable system, supporters needed backing from the leadership team, including deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, and program leads.

Bryant set out to change pre-K's image to match what it was becoming. Her team stressed the growing amount of

research that shows it prepared students for kindergarten, improves academic achievement, and reduces costs, such as special and remedial education placements. And they referred to pre-K as a grade, not a program that could be jettisoned during tough economic times.

Supporters also explained how high-quality pre-K improved the metric by which district leaders were ultimately judged, high school graduation rates, with a football analogy. By not investing in pre-K they were deciding the first quarter of an at-risk student's education did not mean much, and instead throwing a last-minute Hail Mary pass in high school in an attempt to ensure she graduated.

For the district to close the achievement gap, pre-K needed to be seen for what it could be, another grade and an integral part of the public school system, not simply child care for working parents. As part of this new language of investment and integration, the Child Development Program became the Early Education Department (EED) in 2010.

"You need to make a case for ROI (return on investment)," Superintendent Carranza said. "You pay now or you pay later."

But, desks of district leaders are littered with new education reforms and initiatives, many mandated by the state or federal government. Over the last four years, an optional PreK–3rd approach emerged from this pile and won their support because the Early Education Department repeatedly showed it was a proven idea that fit into the district's broader vision.

In this early phase, perhaps the district's most significant change was to elevate the director of the Early Education Department two levels to a cabinet-level position, giving her more leverage in decisions and a higher profile. With this move, the superintendent made it clear pre-K was a priority, and the department began to be seen on

the same level as other departments. "Early education reports directly to me. I provide the political cover," Superintendent Carranza said. "People understand if Carla is in a meeting, it is like a superintendent is in the room."

To speed and bring focus to the work, the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund and the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund covered most of the cost of the elevated EED position, with a salary that reflected the job's broader responsibilities, for the first two years. After two years, the district committed to fully pay for the position. The chief of early education was now in charge of aligning pre-K with other programs, developing robust assessment and professional development systems, and engaging community-based preschools.

Any school district aligning pre-K with early elementary grades should build a common understanding of the alignment's value among its leaders to sustain the strategy. "We are not there yet," Superintendent Carranza said. "But I think we have a good head of steam."

The School Board Connection

District leaders are important, but a new idea is unlikely to gain traction in a public school system if it does not earn the support of its other leader: the school board. Since a school board sets a district's direction and budget, it plays a leading role in launching and sustaining education reforms. In San Francisco, the board has been a strong supporter of the emerging PreK–3rd system because

Early Education Department staff developed a high-quality model, produced data to support it, and, perhaps most importantly, took the time to explain its value to board members.

If board members do not understand reasons for a change, they will not support it, Sandra Lee Fewer, a five-year veteran of the board and former chair, said. Instead, factions on the board will chip away at a proposal. As part of its PreK–3rd strategy, the EED explained how improving kindergarten readiness, raising expectations for early education teachers, and changing the perception of pre-K from child care to the beginning of a P–12 system could help the entire district.

In addition, early education staff built on board members' support by keeping them in the loop about everything from looming union negotiations on teacher and principal contracts to the need for investments in professional development from pre-K through third grade, Fewer added. Broadly, EED Director Bryant made a case for systemic change, backed by reliable data, throughout early elementary schools, which would align pre-K with kindergarten, first, second, and third grade, and ultimately narrow the achievement gap. "She does her homework. She does the data," Fewer said. "Every board member believes in it."

Since a school board sets a district's direction and budget, it plays a leading role in launching and sustaining education reforms.

Nowhere was the school board's support for PreK–3rd clearer than the district budget. In the wake of the Great Recession, the board cut a quarter of the district's operating budget for the 2010–11 school year. But it did not cut a dollar from the Early Education Department's

The department has "gone from being one of the dysfunctional parts of the district to one of the groundbreaking parts of the district." – **Superintendent Carranza**

budget. This decision reflected the evolution of the department from an often overlooked drag on the district's funds to one of the solutions to its greatest challenge—the achievement gap— in a few short years. The department has "gone from being one of the dysfunctional parts of the district to one of the groundbreaking parts of the district," Superintendent Carranza said.

Key steps SFUSD leaders took to build understanding and broad support for PreK–3rd investments:

- Secured the commitment and sponsorship of the superintendent and school board

- Defined pre-K as an investment that can improve student achievement and save money by reducing referrals to special education and remedial education

- Elevated pre-K within the school district hierarchy to ensure early education leaders have the authority to integrate and align pre-K with kindergarten, first, second, and third grade

PHASE TWO: BRIDGING TWO WORLDS

Initially, the biggest barrier to creating a PreK–3rd system within the SFUSD was that pre-K and K–3 essentially belonged to two separate worlds. Even where pre-K classrooms were located on elementary school campuses, pre-K teachers and administrators had little contact with their principals. Five years ago, too many pre-K teachers did not participate in professional development for a variety of reasons.[22] Today, it is impossible to opt out.

Sometimes elementary school staffers were not even aware they had a pre-K on campus. During a 2005 visit to one elementary school, the receptionist could not tell First 5 San Francisco's Ingrid Mezquita where the pre-K classroom was until she realized, "Oh, you mean the nursery school." She then showed Mezquita the classroom, which turned out to be a converted hallway. The idea that elementary school staff did not deal with pre-K was something Mezquita and others in pre-K development heard over and over again.

The district's goal was to change that mindset by merging these two worlds into one seamless educational experience for students, and keeping them in the same school from pre-K through third grade. At the heart of this vision was bringing pre-K teachers, early education administrators, elementary school teachers, and principals together through joint professional development, shared staff meetings, and visits to each other's classrooms. Together, they would align curriculum, instruction, and assessments across all five grades.[23] This system would both sustain the positive impact of high-quality pre-K, which some research has shown fades by third or fourth grade, and help students who did not attend those programs catch up. The Early Education Department explained this in its <u>first annual report on its PreK–3rd work</u> in 2012:

> The reason the PreK–3rd model minimizes diminished impact is that it addresses the cause: schools do not consistently carry through the curricular and instructional work that made such an impact on children in preschool. The PreK–3rd system is designed to address the problem of children coming to Kindergarten unprepared and "leaks" in the pipeline from PreKindergarten to third grade.

Stopping these leaks and aligning pre-K with K–3 began with the principal. In many ways, principals are the field marshals of education reform because they can advance a strategy by integrating it into the common vision and language that are hallmarks of strong schools. Or, they can resist that change. Others may construct a policy, but principals are charged with making it a reality by implementing its new systems, curricula and professional development.[24] If district leaders drive a PreK–3rd strategy, principals make that strategy work. "When implementing PreK–3rd, principals are as important as teachers. If principals are on board, it makes a big difference for the necessary teacher collaboration within and across the grade span," said Takanishi.

In their new 2012 contract, principals agreed to get on board, but they had to learn a new system. Since pre-K relies on different funding streams than the rest of the district, its classrooms do not follow the same rules. As principals took responsibility for pre-K on their campuses, they had to learn these rules and systems, everything from a new curriculum to licensing. They received a stipend along with their new responsibilities.

Some principals were eager to get on board, and Superintendent Carranza made it clear that "if a principal does not want to stay in a school with a pre-K we will find them [sic] another school."

Like many moves in its PreK–3rd approach, the Early Education Department started small. Even before their 2012 contracts, principals at five schools, including the head of Bryant Elementary School in the city's Mission District, volunteered to align pre-K with their other grades during the 2011–12 school year. At Bryant, 86 percent of students are Hispanic, 69 percent are English Language Learners, and nearly all qualify for free lunch.

Bryant Elementary also sat on the wrong end of the achievement gap. In 2012, only 22 percent of its third grade students were at grade level or above in English and language arts, and 56 percent were proficient or better in math.[25]

Bryant Elementary and the other initial schools worked to retain their students from pre-K through third grade, a

hallmark of successful PreK–3rd efforts because it allows families to bond with school staff and students to move through an aligned curriculum and classrooms where teachers are working together and sharing information across all five grades about students' strengths and weakness. Principals at those five schools began to

see benefits, in better prepared kindergarteners, more effective teaching, or a more smoothly running system.

In the end, only one principal with an on-site pre-K took Superintendent Carranza up on his offer of a move to a new school without that grade.

The Bigger Picture

PreK–3rd alignment supports the SFUSD's broader push for education reform that is driven by Vision 2025, a comprehensive plan to transform teaching, learning, and the entire school system.[i] A key part of the push was the creation of Superintendent's Zones, groups of low-performing schools, initially in the Bayview and Mission districts, which receive systemic and focused support. Next year, the district will refine the idea by focusing on individual high-need schools.

As district leaders developed these broader reforms, they understood what was needed to help schools. "The challenge was building the capacity," Guadalupe Guerrero, SFUSD's Deputy Superintendent of Instruction, Innovation and Social Justice, said. "As we rebuilt, it's been about lessons learned, [what] effective teaching and learning look like."

The district's PreK–3rd work complements and supports these broader district initiatives by focusing on the early years.

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[i] SFUSD and Collective Invention, *SFUSD Vision 2025: Reimagining Public Education in San Francisco for a New Generation*, June 2014.

PHASE THREE: IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

When the school district began implementing its PreK–3rd strategy in the 2011–12 school year, it started small by focusing on the five pilot schools, which were both receptive to the idea and needed support.

Dr. Charles R. Drew Alternative Elementary School was one of those pilots and another obvious choice because its principal, Tamitrice Rice-Mitchell, used to run the school's pre-K program, and its current pre-K director was eager to connect with elementary grades.

Drew is located in San Francisco's Bayview District, where the poverty rate is far higher than the rest of the city and many households are headed by single mothers. A year earlier, the district recognized that Bayview's schools needed help by designating the neighborhood as one of its two Superintendent's Zones, areas in the city with underperforming schools that received additional resources and support. (See "The Bigger Picture" sidebar.)

At Drew Elementary, information began flowing up and down all five grades, but especially between pre-K and kindergarten, on curriculum, students' strengths and weaknesses, and professional development. Pre-K teachers started attending bi-monthly Instructional Leadership Team meetings with other elementary-grade teachers and joining them in professional development. Together, they began aligning their curriculums. "We were making sure the pre-K teachers were at the table when we were making major decisions about the school," Rice-Mitchell said. "There would be a voice that said 'What about pre-K?' so we couldn't forget."

A few years into this alignment, veteran kindergarten teacher Christine Melia saw its impact in her classroom at Drew, where two-thirds of the students are African

Thinking System-Wide

When SFUSD decided to implement a PreK–3rd framework it was determined to integrate that framework into its entire system and ensure it covered all students. This meant creating a shared understanding of expectations for teaching and learning from grade to grade. Instead of creating another stand-alone program, the Early Education Department wove the strategy into programs like special education, health, dual language, and Student, Family, and Community Support.

This type of comprehensive coordination is not easy, especially in public school systems that are often "siloed." It requires early education staff and district leaders to focus on integrating even small aspects of a district's programs, while keeping one eye on how the entire system is coming together. This meant the district asked school nurses and social workers, for example, to begin working with pre-K students, in addition to elementary students. This systemic view defines the SFUSD's PreK–3rd vision, which focuses on the whole child, a student's and family's engagement with all aspects of a public school, rather than a single grade or issue.

"Making pre-K an integral part of early school success called for a real culture shift," said Sylvia Yee of the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. "We needed individuals who understood what it meant to build a system. And they needed to know how to do it."

American. "I have never had so many kids ready to start reading. Literally, they are the most adept group of kids I have ever seen," Melia, who has taught kindergarten for eight years, said earlier this year. "I think preschool is crucial."

> *"We were making sure the pre-K teachers were at the table when we were making major decisions about the school. There would be a voice that said 'What about pre-K?' so we couldn't forget."*
>
> **– Tamitrice Rice-Mitchell**

Getting Results

Tangible progress in the form of consistently improving scores on standardized tests in the upper grades may be years away. Alignment takes time. Supporters of SFUSD's PreK–3rd system preach patience to stakeholders, such as foundation boards, saying it may take a decade to see lasting gains in student achievement across all grades, especially in the highest-need schools. They also stress, though, that there needs to be progress every year.

San Francisco's school district clearly wants to use PreK–3rd to help turn around struggling schools, but thinks of it more like turning around a cruise ship than a speed boat. "You have to be prepared to make a long-term commitment," Superintendent Carranza said. "It is not immediate gratification."

The six-year-old PreK–3rd strategy already is showing promising signs, though plenty of work remains. The percentage of students moving from SFUSD's pre-K classrooms to kindergarten who were ready for school rose from 38 percent in 2012–13 to 45 percent in 2013–14, based on preliminary figures.[26] The percentage of kindergarten-ready Latino students jumped from 17 percent to 32 percent during the same period. Since these data are still early and based on relatively small groups of students, it is important to develop and analyze information over a longer period to gain a clearer picture of the strategy's effectiveness.

Beyond these initial results, there are other reasons to expect progress. As SFUSD developed its strategy, it relied on successful PreK–3rd work in Miami-Dade County, FL; Chicago, IL; Boston, MA; Bremerton, WA; New Jersey; and Montgomery County, MD, to guide its work.[27]

The Montgomery County Public Schools system, for example, is engaged in a long-running effort to align pre-K through third grade. Ninety percent of its incoming kindergarteners were ready for school, and 89 percent read at grade level by the time they are in third grade, according to a 2010 report.[28]

Students who spent four to six years at Chicago-based Child-Parent Centers—roughly equivalent to PreK–3rd grades—were more likely to graduate from high school and reach a higher socio-economic status and were less likely to have been arrested or incarcerated, compared to a control group.[29]

In Washington state, a year after the Bremerton School District launched a PreK–3rd framework in 2001, the percentage of incoming kindergarten students who needed remedial education dropped from 40 percent to below 5 percent.[30]

Key steps SFUSD leaders for quality implementation of PreK–3rd work:

- Built support among principals who are critical for successful implementation of PreK–3rd.

- Set high expectations, and then began building capacity with a small group of schools

- Integrated all aspects of elementary school into a PreK–3rd system, including special education and out-of-school programs

PHASE FOUR: REVAMPING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO CREATE TOOLS TO BUILD PREK–3RD

The district's Early Education Department was in charge of developing the PreK–3rd system, but teachers had to actually build it inside their classrooms by aligning curriculum, instruction, standards, and student assessments across all five grades. Professional development could give them tools to do this. But in 2010, professional development was divided among many of the district's departments and too often training for pre-K was limited or even, sometimes, non-existent.[31] Aligning professional development from pre-K through third grade would be a big step towards addressing this decentralized environment.

The Early Education Department recognized that one of the keys to implementing a PreK–3rd strategy was to design a professional development system that spanned all five grades. Its goal was to establish two-way communication and collaboration between pre-K and early elementary teachers through joint professional development and a shared understanding

Leveraging Partnerships: First 5 San Francisco's Support of Professional Development

The San Francisco Unified School District may lead the PreK–3rd work, but it is not alone. First 5 San Francisco, Stanford University, and the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund are among supporters that play critical roles in the system.

The key to the partnerships, though, is that all these groups play supporting roles, focused on areas aligned with their strengths and priorities.

First 5 San Francisco has been a leading partner, playing a central role in the redesign and improvement of professional development in the pre-K program, a role it played even before the district's PreK–3rd work began. When San Francisco voters approved Proposition H in 2004, they endorsed universal preschool access, or Preschool for All (PFA), for all four-year-old children in the city, and First 5 San Francisco was charged with making that promise a reality.

Since much of First 5 San Francisco's work has focused on improving quality among preschool and pre-K providers around the city, it was an obvious candidate to help the Early Education Department (EED), particularly in aligning its pre-K program with state Early Standards. Today, the agency funds nearly all professional development for the EED's pre-K programs and helps the district integrate that professional development into training for kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teachers.

PFA is expanding to cover early learning for children from birth to age five, and the district and city are reviewing how to manage that expansion. First 5 will continue to play a critical role in the district's PreK–3rd work.

of standards and assessments. Ultimately, pre-K teachers and administrators would work with their peers from kindergarten, first, second, and third grade in an aligned professional development system.

The department focused on four priorities: high-quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment; strong, positive adult-child interactions; clearly defined student outcomes; and individualized/differentiated instruction based on assessments and data.[32] With these priorities as a guide, the department took a set of major steps in the first year of PreK–3rd alignment. It:

- Created a comprehensive model for PreK–3rd professional development that relies on collaboration and self-directed inquiry.

- Added tools to pre-K programs, like a Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry approach used across the district, where a principal, site administrator, or coach works with a team of teachers on using student data to inform lesson planning; and Teaching Pyramid pro-social development training.

- Began working on an English language arts curriculum that could be integrated across all five grades, with plans to implement a dual language curriculum.[33]

The Early Education Department uses five forms of professional development: instructional coaching; technical assistance; Professional Learning Communities; site-based team meetings; and workshops and training on English language arts, dual language, inclusive practices, math/science, social emotional learning, family engagement, physical education, and curricular approaches, according to SFUSD materials.[34] The department tries to make these forms easy for teachers to access and use, another of the guiding principles of its PreK–3rd approach.

"Our mantra with professional development: Is it working for you?" Drew Elementary principal Rice-Mitchell said.

In Bayview schools, for example, kindergarten and first grade teachers started attending training workshops with pre-K teachers, and pre-K and kindergarten teachers planned lessons together.

Kindergarten and pre-K also began to look similar. Coaches worked with kindergarten teachers to create classrooms that were more conducive to learning by

using an approach that encouraged students to learn by exploring. Under this method, a classroom was set up to enhance a student's sense of ownership.

When you walk into Christine Melia's kindergarten classroom at Drew Elementary, for example, students are all sitting at low and long tables working in groups of five or six. At one table, students read books, which they can put away on nearby shelves installed at their level. At another table, students puzzle over snap cubes, number puzzles, and Geoboards. A third group of students paint on easels. When you head downstairs to Nicole Zanotelli's pre-K classroom, you see the same low tables, shelves, and easels. That is because kindergarten and pre-K classes are being redesigned with the same developmentally appropriate furniture and layouts.

 "We want pre-K teachers to go with their coaches and visit K classrooms. We want K teachers to go to pre-K teachers so they see" how both enhance learning, said Meenoo Yashar, director of program quality and enhancement at the Early Education Department. "We also are informing our principals. . . . We share the data so they can go back to their teaching staff."

Today, principals use these data to inform their decisions, following one of the rules of the district's PreK–3rd

Early Education Department (EED) Professional Development Model

One-on-One
Instructional Coaching

Small Group
Content Workshops & Professional Learning Communities

Large Group
Common Core English & Math

Source: San Francisco Unified School District

The department hired full-time coaches, freed from their teaching duties to focus full time on training and supporting educators. Coaches worked across the PreK–3rd continuum, aligning curriculum and instruction as they trained teachers.

In the district's PreK–3rd model, coaches have a broad job description. They use classroom observation, including videos and co-teaching; facilitate and support Professional Learning Communities; and arrange visits to pre-K classrooms in other schools or at community-based sites.[36] Once again, coaching is based on disparate forms of data that are collected in different grades.

The drive to improve and align professional development was one of the key areas where outside partners supported the district's PreK–3rd work. Nearly all of the Early Education Department's "Program Quality Enhancement" work, including leads, coaches, behaviorists, and family engagement support specialists, are funded by grants from philanthropies and First 5 San Francisco, a public agency that manages the Preschool for All program.

Going forward, these grants raise concerns about the sustainability of the professional development systems, part of a broader question surrounding the sustainability of PreK–3rd work in general. Unlike K–12, pre-K is not officially a public grade and does not yet enjoy the same level of support, said First 5 San Francisco's Mezquita. The entire district has not yet fully embraced the approach—the department is expanding its work based on relationships with schools, principals, and teachers—and that means it is inconsistent, Yashar said.

But the district is making clear progress. "The professionalization of the teaching force in early education, I think, is light years ahead of where [it was] five years ago. That's important because it affects how they view themselves as instructional leaders," Superintendent Carranza said.

approach. Principals and teachers rely on Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) and Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) data to see if pre-K students are developing academic and social-emotional skills they will need in kindergarten. If there are gaps, they tailor professional development to support those skills.

Elsewhere at Drew Elementary, pre-K and inclusion, or special education, teachers observe each other at work, paying close attention to how teachers listen to and elicit responses from their students. Then they discuss their observations at bi-monthly meetings of the Instructional Leadership Team to see what needs to change.

Twice last year, the EED went to Bayview to hold Professional Learning Community sessions for teachers from pre-K through first grade, the principal, and after-school teachers. As educators ate dinner together, they examined data on student performance and outcomes and discussed how to use that information to improve and align classrooms.

Within professional development, there was a shift to on-site and ongoing coaching from mentors, veteran teachers who worked with less experienced teachers. The department hired full-time coaches, freed from their teaching duties to focus full time on training and supporting educators. Coaches worked across the PreK–3rd continuum, aligning curriculum and instruction as they trained teachers.[35]

Key steps SFUSD leaders took to improve the quality of pre-K teachers:

- Elevated pre-K teachers through professional development

- Built a deep bench of talented professionals in an early education department to manage high-quality professional development

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS: BUILDING KINDERGARTEN READINESS MEASUREMENTS WITH STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Kindergarten readiness is the bridge in a PreK–3rd system. Preparing students for kindergarten, assessing their readiness, and designing systems that support smooth transitions, are three critical steps a school district can take to integrate pre-K with its elementary schools.

If kindergarten readiness is the PreK–3rd bridge, data sets are the planks on that bridge. In an aligned system, measurements connect pre-K and kindergarten teachers with a common language of shared data on students' strengths and weaknesses, which both can use to improve instruction and alignment. Given the importance of kindergarten readiness, the school district began work on new ways to measure it early in its PreK–3rd work, and Stanford was an important co-pilot.

Assessments are only as good as the underlying information, and like other elements of its strategy, the school district wanted data-driven assessments and measurements. Overall, the district has become more aware of how to manage and use data to improve instruction in recent years. At pre-K sites, it began working with managers on how they could use this information to inform teaching and planning, and sharing that data with principals who oversaw pre-K classrooms, according to SFUSD's Ritu Khanna, assistant superintendent for research, planning, and accountability. Today, the district can assign an identifier to each pre-K student that allows it to track a student's progress through twelfth grade.

"We have increased our ability to measure, but we also built site capacity for using measurements," Khanna said. The district "was also improving its ability to collect, analyze and use the data to help teachers with their teaching in both pre-K, TK, and K."

The district also knew it could not develop all of these data alone. With its highly trained researchers and nationally recognized experts, Stanford was a natural collaborator, and it helped the district develop a more systemic approach to collecting high-quality data. Without high-quality data it is hard to know how well a PreK–3rd strategy is working, according to Stanford's Ben York, one of the partnership's researchers.

Instead of throwing yet another assessment at teachers, Stanford's team from the Center for Education Policy Analysis built new data systems and helped teachers implement the systems, according to Laura Wentworth, director of the Stanford University/San Francisco Unified School District Partnership. Led by Professor Susanna Loeb, the team collected data, analyzed it, and then helped the district use it to inform professional development, curriculum, and instruction.

In the 2011–12 school year, Stanford and the SFUSD took a big step towards a kindergarten readiness measure by selecting and implementing an early literacy assessment, the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), in selected pre-K classrooms for the first time.[37] The next school year, it expanded PALS assessments to all four-year-old students in its pre-K classes and began sharing that data with teachers, administrators, and leaders in the Early Education Department.[38]

To gain a clear view of student achievement in pre-K and K, though, educators needed multiple sources of data, and Stanford researchers began developing a kindergarten readiness measurement that used both PALS and DRDP, an assessment of a student's literacy, math, social-emotional, and other skills based on teacher observations. Together, these measurements gave teachers, principals, and administrators snapshots of how classrooms were performing, where students were and were not developing, and where to focus instruction.[39]

The 2012–13 school year was a turning point in this work because for the first time a broad spectrum of educators responsible for the district's PreK–3rd

SFUSD 2011 Child Assessment Matrix, PK-4th Grade, Post-EED Redesign

Pre-K	TK	K	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade
DRDP (3x)	DRDP-SR (3x)	Brigance	Brigance	SFUSD CLA Math & English	SFUSD CLA Math & English	SFUSD CLA Math & English
PALS (Literacy)	PALS	PALS	PALS	CA STAR Math & English	CA STAR Math & English	CA STAR Math & English

Assessment Definitions:

DRDP = Desired Results Developmental Profile.

DRDP-SR = Desired Results Developmental Profile - School Readiness. Administered prior to matriculation to Kindergarten and in Transitional Kindergarten (TK).

BRIGANCE K = Screen administered shortly after K entry.

PALS = Phonological Awareness Literacy Screen.

CLA = Core Curriculum Common Learning Assessment, SFUSD district-wide assessment.

STAR = California Department of Education Standardized Testing and Reporting. Also known as CST or California Standardized Tests.

Source: San Francisco Unified School District

continuum—principals, pre-K administrators, pre-K teachers, and kindergarten teachers—analyzed PALS and DRDP data in an organized way.[40] Now, the EED could develop a kindergarten readiness measure that used an observation-based tool (DRDP) and a more traditional assessment (PALS).

By 2013, Stanford researchers were producing a number of tools and data sets that helped the district better align

and use data within its P–12 system in everything from teacher training to parental engagement. Today, Loeb often accompanies Early Education Department staff to meetings with principals, district leaders, and foundation officials to help explain kindergarten measurements and their importance.

All of these steps led to the development of a broad kindergarten readiness tool that showed 38 percent of

the district's pre-K graduates were ready for kindergarten in 2014.[41] Beyond providing this picture of incoming kindergarten students, the new tool helped the district allocate resources by sending coaches and funding to schools where high numbers of children arrived unprepared for kindergarten.[42]

"It is so much easier to address needs of a child in kindergarten who might be a year behind," said Luis Valentino, associate superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. "Once you pass the third grade it becomes so difficult."

As the partnership between Stanford and the school district grew, the widening stream of data and deepening relationship allowed university researchers to explore new ways to help schools, students, and parents.

No one has a bigger potential impact on kindergarten readiness than parents. A striking and early sign of the achievement gap is that by age four, children with college-educated parents may have heard 32 million more words than children from households that rely on public assistance, according to a now-famous study.[43]

At Stanford, researchers began to think about how technology could help parents close this word gap. Around San Francisco, engaging low-income parents in early education can be challenging. Turnout is low at many parenting workshops and there are not many proven programs the district can use to address that challenge. In close collaboration with the Early Education Department, Loeb decided to develop and pilot a parenting program, READY4K!, which would send weekly text messages to parents about how to support early literacy development and other skills their preschoolers would need in kindergarten.[44] Since the university had been working with the district for years on early literacy the relationships needed to coordinate the pilot were already there, according to *Stanford News*.

The texting project produced one of those breakthroughs that are too rare in education policy, an inexpensive approach that works and is scalable.[45] It costs roughly $1 per family each year to send three text messages a week, one about a literacy skill, a second with an activity to develop that skill, and a third with suggestions about how to continue developing it, according to *Stanford News*. It is relatively easy for school districts to implement the

program because parents can join by checking a box on an enrollment form.[46]

READY4K! works. Researchers found preschoolers "acquired about two to three months' worth of learning during the pilot," *Stanford News* reported. According to the publication,

> An accompanying study of the pilot found that the texts, on average, helped increase the frequency with which parents engaged in home literacy activities, such as telling stories, going over words that rhyme or completing puzzles together. Participating parents also showed higher levels of engagement by asking teachers questions about their children's growth.[47]

The texting program supports one of the main goals of the district's strategy to align pre-K through third grade: better parental engagement. If parents engage in their children's education early, they can begin forming one of the most important relationships in a PreK–3rd continuum, a strong and positive connection with a school and its teachers.[48]

Key steps SFUSD leaders took to move their PreK–3rd approach forward:

- Created strong data systems, since research should inform implementation and implementation should inform research

- Developed a data-driven kindergarten readiness measure to align and improve assessment from pre-K through third grade.

- Adopted a whole-child approach that includes student, family, and community engagement

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Engaging Community-based Providers

By 2014, the Early Education Department had built momentum for its PreK–3rd strategy by securing support from key district leaders, forging partnerships, and beginning to implement its approach in a network of elementary schools. But despite all this progress, the district's work only reaches a third of the city's pre-K students.

In San Francisco, two-thirds of SFUSD's incoming kindergartners attend community-based pre-K (CBOs), or do not attend pre-K at all. Overall, roughly 80 percent the city's four-year-olds attend some type of pre-K.[49] But there is little unifying all of these community-based providers, which range from Head Start programs to home-based child care. There is no common professional development system, curriculum, or kindergarten-readiness measure.

Today, this decentralized network stands as one of the next major challenges for SFUSD's PreK–3rd system. If the district wants to close the achievement gap among its students it needs to connect with the two-thirds who do not attend its public pre-K program. The district's work to connect with community-based providers is in the early stages, and it hopes to build on a promising and collaborative approach it is developing with Kai Ming Head Start, which has been open to partnering with the district.

Under this approach, Kai Ming and the district would share student data and assessments. Kai Ming staff would be encouraged to learn more about the district's assessments and establish systems to ease transitions to kindergarten, including sharing information about incoming students with kindergarten teachers. Kai Ming and SFUSD pre-K teachers already participate in joint training on a cultural curriculum.

This partnership remains a work in progress, as Kai Ming and the district work on formalizing their relationship in a Memorandum of Understanding that could provide a framework, or at least valuable lessons, for other community-based providers.

Broadly, the Early Education Department would like to share more data with the city's community-based providers that would help both groups understand what works and what needs work in district and community-based pre-kindergartens.[50] The district hopes to use data from an agreement to identify best practices and develop professional development programs that both SFUSD and community-based programs could use. If the district and CBOs share data, kindergarten teachers would have clearer pictures of their incoming students, pre-K teachers would have a better understanding of how to prepare students, and students would have better transitions.[51]

This work is anything but straightforward. First, many groups in San Francisco—community-based providers, city agencies, the district, and other partners—have to agree, at least generally, on what high-quality pre-K is. Underlying that question is tension in the community over what child care and early education should be. Then these groups have to decide if and how to align their resources to support high-quality pre-K. Complicating these challenges is that community-based providers rely on a wide range of approaches, and do not always have strong relationships with the district.

But, the school district has little chance of narrowing the achievement gap if it does not reach more than a third of the city's potential kindergarten students. To succeed, the district, community-based providers, the city, and other partners need to develop stronger relationships and a shared vision of school readiness, challenges any district building a PreK–3rd system faces.

"Connecting to community-based early learning is the next frontier for the district along with its partners in the city, especially with First 5," said the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund's Yee.

Outside Forces Propelling PreK–3rd: Transitional Kindergarten and Common Core

As SFUSD built its PreK–3rd framework, two outside education reforms, Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and Common Core State Standards (CCSS), fueled its efforts.

Transitional Kindergarten: When California created Transitional Kindergarten in 2010, it essentially added a new grade at the beginning of the public school system to help children born between September 2 and December 2 prepare for kindergarten. This new grade sounded more than a little like pre-K.

Transitional Kindergarten focused on the same goals as SFUSD's PreK–3rd strategy: prepare children for kindergarten, improve quality in early education, and close the achievement gap. The new TK grade, for example, required lead teachers to hold higher degrees. It even provided a plan to help early education teachers earn qualifications to become TK teachers and associate TK teachers.

State legislators proposed a version of Transitional Kindergarten that was "in natural alignment with SFUSD's PreK–3rd framework. PreK–3rd alignment and coherence at the preschool to kindergarten transitional point is a fundamental piece of the legislation. The bill requires that kindergarten core curriculum standards guide the development of the TK standards; this will better prepare students for kindergarten and support a smooth transition for students."[52]

Common Core: Common Core State Standards (CCSS) created another opportunity to align pre-K with K–3, and gave early educators and elementary grade teachers a common framework and language.

Common Core provides standards for what K–12 students should know and be able to do in math and English. In San Francisco public schools, teachers are beginning to work towards those standards in pre-K because Common Core goals are shared among early educators and elementary school teachers. These shared goals are sparking conversations between the two groups about how to align instruction, teacher training, and curricula in ways that are grounded in early childhood foundations and connected to Common Core, according to EED staff. "We are talking the same language now," Drew Elementary principal Rice-Mitchell said.

Essentially, Common Core demands the kind of alignment the district is constructing within its PreK–3rd system.

Both Transitional Kindergarten and Common Core create important opportunities and incentives for districts to create a more seamless early education experience for its young students.

BUILDING THE REST OF THE HOUSE

During the last six years, the San Francisco Unified School District has made remarkable progress in its construction of a PreK–3rd system, but its biggest challenges may lie in the future.

As mentioned in the previous section, the school district must work with city partners to reach out to those varied community-based pre-K programs (CBOs) around the city, which sometimes have starkly different views of what pre-K should and should not be. A big and complex part of that work will be aligning expectations and data between the district and CBOs. The district will have to engage these programs in its approach without benefit of the relationships it has with its own pre-K classrooms.

While the district has begun aligning pre-K with first, second, and third grade, it has focused on integrating pre-K and kindergarten, and the later grades largely remain the next frontier. Alignment through third grade will add more complexity and a lot more teachers. In this expansion, the Early Education Department and district leaders will have to sustain the often detailed and grinding work of aligning and expanding training, coaching, and professional development for teams of teachers across five grades. At the same time, they will need to better align curriculum, instruction, and standards, with a focus on the special needs of English language learners and African American students.[53] These still-emerging systems will need to engage all educators, from pre-K teachers and assistant teachers to third grade teachers and paraprofessional educators. Finally, they will need to find ways to help ensure students remain at the same school, where all this work is aligned, from pre-K through third grade.

The complex funding of public pre-K is another major hurdle for the SFUSD, and any school district in California, in building a PreK–3rd system. The district, in collaboration with other districts, should push for simplification and integration of the myriad public funding streams that support pre-K.

To make progress on these challenges, district leaders need to answer a set of core questions.

Turnover among leaders is inevitable; two superintendents have run the school district during the last six years alone. How will the district sustain the necessary leadership and momentum of its PreK–3rd strategy? The answer lies partly in how quickly and thoroughly it can align professional development, assessment, instruction, and curriculum from pre-K through third grade. This work is a grind, but the faster the district aligns these systems, the higher the chances it can bake a PreK–3rd approach into San Francisco's broader public school system. The district, though, has to strike a balance between the urgency to get this done and the patience this work requires.

More important, the entire district, not only EED, needs to be engaged in the alignment of pre-K and K–3. "The true test of the strategy's staying power will be when PreK–3rd's cheerleaders are not in the EED, but instead throughout the district," Bryant said.

So far, the district has largely focused on high-needs schools receptive to aligning pre-K with K–3. Like any urban school district, though, the SFUSD is a sprawling system that includes 22 elementary schools with pre-K on campus. Not all of its teachers and principals will embrace this new vision, and how the district navigates this resistance will go a long way towards determining its long-term success. The district will have to decide what approach and leadership is needed to continue this alignment through third grade, and maintain the energy and commitment generated for PreK–3rd during the last six years. Leaders also will need to recognize what is working and what needs to change in the future to improve student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps one of the biggest questions about the future of PreK–3rd in the district is: how much innovation and change can the district layer on its educators and systems at one time? This is an exciting time for public education, with new ideas spurring debate in the state and U.S. capitols. But, teachers and their leaders have been dealing with a steady stream of new ideas for years. Cash-strapped school districts only have so much bandwidth and appetite for change, and both could wane amid new waves of national, state, and district reforms.

The SFUSD's PreK–3rd strategy has a simple but powerful advantage: years of research and successful models have shown it can improve student performance and lower costs. District leaders, principals, and teachers may be weary of being told how to change, but not of ideas that align with reasons many became educators in the first place: to guide students on a bridge toward success.

"What we are talking about fundamentally is that too many of our children enter preschool with no books in their home, living in high crime neighborhoods where parents are struggling to make ends meet. We are trying to impact that child before he or she ever crosses over our kindergarten threshold," Superintendent Carranza said.

Amid all the budget work, alignment, and professional development of the last six years, the greatest achievement of the district's PreK–3rd approach may be how it has begun to change the school district's culture of K–12 to P–12. By the beginning of 2015, pre-K was no longer a separate program, but instead was becoming an integral part of the public school system. It was also beginning to spark greater alignment and better student outcomes across the P–20 continuum.

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