

Promising Practices in Developing Effective PREK-3 PARTNERSHIPS

A Learning Brief to Inform the Ongoing Efforts to Close the Achievement Gap in Marin County

Prepared For

The Marin Community Foundation
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Preschools Partnering with AGSI Grantees

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Introduction

A History of Separate Systems

In the United States, the system set up for early learning education has been institutionally distinct from the K-12 educational system. Early learning and K-12 education each followed its own evolutionary trajectory, and so the two systems now have fundamental differences, including disparities in teacher compensation, different sets of professional standards, and different rates of staff turnover.¹ These distinctly different infrastructures create and perpetuate a propensity for partners to work within silos. As stakeholders increasingly recognize the importance of bridging this divide, a preschool through third grade (PreK-3) model has emerged. It is designed to bridge the divide between early learning and K-12, breaking down silos by focusing efforts on collaboration and alignment.

The PreK-3 model requires that schools and districts embrace the connection between preschool and elementary school education by implementing strategies that support deep collaboration across these systems. The move toward collaboration entails a paradigm shift for most schools, particularly in terms of how they perceive their role alongside preschools in efforts to improve children's early learning. At the heart of a PreK-3 system is a collective impact model, in which success is strongly influenced by the effectiveness of cross-sector partnerships. Collective impact refers to the idea that large-scale social change is possible when organizations across different sectors can work together to systematically align and coordinate their efforts around a clearly defined goal.² In the case of a PreK-3 model, collective impact revolves around partnerships between early learning and K-12 education, working as one coordinated system to support children's development and learning from preschool through high school.



A coordinated education system includes early learning partners in the continuum

About this Learning Brief

So *how* can early learning and K-12 teachers develop effective partnerships that support a collective impact model? What are the key components of an effective partnership, and what might such collaborations look like in practice? The field does not yet have an answer to these questions. There is extensive literature on the components that determine successful cross-sector partnerships and collective impact, as well as the *concepts* we should focus on when designing PreK-3 initiatives. But there is little documented in the early learning or PreK-3 fields on what it takes to establish strong working relationships between elementary and preschool partners. One of the ways in which the field can benefit from additional study, then, is to learn how collective impact is being employed across the PreK and K-12 divide, as well as how the PreK-3 design concepts are being put

This learning brief is one of four briefs created as part of the Marin Community Foundation's Achievement Gap Strategic Initiative to inform the ongoing development of a PreK-3 model in Marin County.

Other learning briefs cover promising practices in Family Engagement, Kindergarten Readiness, and Professional Development.

¹ Whitebook, M., D. Gamby, D. Bellm, L. Sakai, and F. Kipnis. 2009. *Preparing teachers of young children: The current state of knowledge, and a blueprint for the future*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California at Berkeley.

² Kania and Kramer (2011). *Collective Impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

into practice. Case studies of actual PreK-3 models add to our knowledge base by identifying the components of effective PreK-3 partnerships, as well as the factors necessary for implementing these components successfully.

This brief explores the promising practices that have emerged from the PreK-3 partnerships established as part of the Marin Community Foundation's Achievement Gap Strategic Initiative (AGSI). For this initiative, nine elementary schools are partnering with feeder preschools to implement a PreK-3 model. This brief examines the specific ways in which schools are successfully developing these relationships, drawing upon three particular preschool-elementary school partnerships in Marin County (see textbox to the right for a complete list of partners and other stakeholders interviewed for the purposes of this brief, as well as a complete Methods section included in an Appendix at the end of this brief).

To explore the ways in which AGSI schools are establishing effective preschool partnerships, we begin with a framework that draws upon collective impact concepts, as well as upon several elements that the Kauerz-Coffman *Framework for Planning, Implementing and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches* (the PreK-3 Framework) identifies as essential to a successful and comprehensive PreK-3 approach.³ Our framework focuses on these three components:

- **Shared Understanding:** Developing a common vision and language within the partnership,
- **Articulation:** Alignment and collaboration between preschool and kindergarten teachers, and
- **Accountability:** Holding partners accountable to changes in systems and philosophy.

This brief is organized into the following sections:

- **Key Components of Effective PreK-3 Partnerships:** This section introduces a framework highlighting the importance of the key components and critical factors that have served as the building blocks for effective PreK-3 partnerships in Marin County.
- **Spotlight on Success:** Here, we highlight the promising practices that have helped to support successful PreK-3 partnerships for the AGSI schools, and which embody the key component framework.
- **Integrating Key Components into School Culture:** In this final section, we share evidence of the ways in which schools have institutionalized PreK-3 partnerships, embedding this work into their school cultures and everyday practices.

Stakeholders Informing this Brief

This brief draws upon previous research from the field as well as interviews with several Marin County PreK-3 stakeholders, including:

Preschool-Elementary School Partners:

- Marin Head Start and Bayside Martin Luther King Jr. Academy (Sausalito Marin City School District)
- Old Gallinas Children's Center and Venetia Valley K-8 School (San Rafael City Schools)
- Papermill Creek Children's Corner Preschool and West Marin/Inverness Elementary (Shoreline USD)

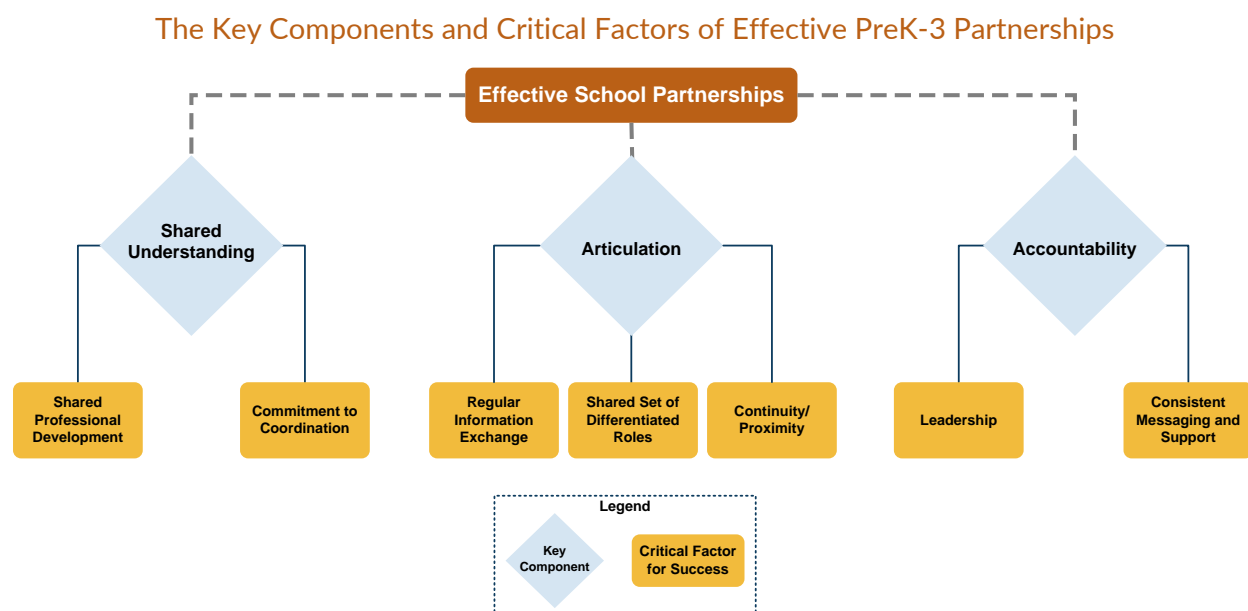
Other Marin County PreK-3 Stakeholders:

- Bremerton School District Team from Bremerton, Washington
- Marin County Office of Education
- Pickleweed Children's Center

³ Kauerz, K & Coffman, J. (2013). *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*. Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington. In particular, we draw upon their concepts of "Cross-Sector Work," "Continuity and Pathways," and "Administrator Effectiveness."

Key Components of Effective PreK-3 Partnerships

This learning brief focuses on the building blocks of effective PreK-3 partnerships for the AGSI schools in Marin County. To investigate the AGSI partnerships, we began with a framework highlighting the importance of three components: Shared Understanding, Articulation, and Accountability. Partnerships can vary in their ability to successfully put into place each of these key components, so success will – in practice – depend on how well a partnership actually *implements* each component. We interviewed partners and stakeholders to explore what effective implementation entails, and in this section we describe the factors contributing to effective implementation of each component. The exhibit below illustrates the three key components of a PreK-3 relationship, as well as the factors that are critical to successfully address each component.



In the following sections, we provide an overview of each component and factor. In these overviews we call out the ways in which the AGSI PreK-3 partnerships dovetail with the literature on partnerships and on PreK-3, but our focus is on the key themes emerging from the experiences of PreK-3 partners in Marin County.

Shared Understanding: Developing a Common Vision and Language within the Partnership

A successful partnership is grounded in a common understanding of the shared agenda, vision, objectives, and goals. FSG’s collective impact model suggests that a common agenda and shared measurement system are two conditions under which partnerships can attain true alignment. Furthermore, the PreK-3 Framework finds that cross-sector commitments are the foundation of a PreK-3 approach, where there is a shared understanding among all partners about the plan to improve student outcomes. The literature and lessons learned in Marin County point to two critical factors that have enabled PreK-3 partners to establish a common purpose and shared understanding:

- **Shared professional development** that cultivates a shared vision, common language, and use of data. By providing preschool and K-12 teachers with opportunities to learn similar concepts and

teaching strategies through joint trainings or workshops, we are equipping them with the tools to operate within one unified teaching system. Such opportunities allow for better cross-sector communication because teachers have access to and understanding of the same vocabulary and data, as well as peer-to-peer contact that can continue as they apply new practices and strategies in their classrooms.

- **Commitment to coordination** and recognizing where there are opportunities to break down silos that prevent collaborative relationships. This means making time to meet, developing new processes, sharing data, and finding ways to work together that is likely to be beyond the norm. At the root of such commitment is a respect for the different players involved. It is critical that both preschool and K-12 teachers recognize the professionalism and expertise that each brings to the table.

Articulation: Alignment and Collaboration between Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers

Without regular and continuous communication, partners cannot develop the trust and working relationships necessary to engage in the alignment and deep collaboration necessary for articulation between preschool and K-12 education. It takes time to develop routines and for each partner to recognize and appreciate that the impact of their collective efforts is greater than acting alone. Three specific factors stand out as crucial for successful communication and alignment between preschool and elementary school partners:

- **Regular information exchange** including the exchange of student data supports ongoing alignment and coordination of instruction. As schools adjust to the realities of a modern “data rich” school environment, it is all the more imperative that partners have the capacity to use and share the data they are collecting on their students’ progress. The growing widespread use of measurement tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System and the Kindergarten Observation Form, as well as the introduction of Common Core, have all advanced the need for teachers to come together to reflect on their classrooms, using data to inform instruction and planning. As Jeff Edmonson, the Managing Director of StriveTogether—a national cradle-to-career collective impact initiative—comments, “You need a common language to bring people together and that language is the data.”⁴ When preschool and K-12 teacher have an opportunity for such conversations and use data to inform adoption of similar teaching strategies and concepts, students experience a more seamless transition between grades, where there is no need to relearn systems or routines. The alternative is *fade-out-of-alignment*, explains the Bremerton School District team, when teachers spend time re-teaching material that students have already learned and lose valuable instructional time.
- Identifying a **shared set of differentiated roles** is an important aspect of alignment. A “shared set of differentiated roles” refers to the idea that actors in a particular set of organizations see themselves as part of the same ecosystem, and understand the necessity of developing an efficient division of labor that includes all of them. This requires developing differentiated roles and allocating these roles in a way that can align their work. With differentiated and aligned roles, the roles can easily articulate with one another, and the larger responsibilities of each organization can articulate with one another as well. Such differentiation and alignment, adding up to articulation, allows stakeholders to carry out what FSG describes as *mutually reinforcing activities*: “working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.” This applies to alignment in education when we consider teaching practices across age groups: while similar early learning

⁴ Bornstein, David (2005). “Coming Together to Give Schools a Boost,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2011.

curriculum and teaching methodologies guide both preschool and kindergarten classrooms, there are distinct developmental differences between the two age-groups as well as clear differences in system infrastructure, and thus instruction must diverge at times and cannot always be exactly aligned.

- **Continuity and proximity** of services and programs helps to strengthen partnerships and facilitate a seamless transition from preschool to K-12. Close proximity between preschool and K-12 classrooms (e.g. on one shared campus) allows children, families, and staff to associate the programs as part of one system, and be able to easily navigate between them. When sharing a physical space is not possible, employing a staff member who can champion coordination efforts by serving as a bridge between early learning and K-12 programs can help to provide a continuity of services. The PreK-3 Framework identifies *continuity and pathways* as a key aspect of a successful PreK-3 approach, where families have access to a clear educational pathway from preschool to third grade, and teachers understand how to help families navigate through that system.

Accountability: Holding Partners Accountable to Changes in Systems and Philosophy

The shift toward a PreK-3 system requires a change in philosophy and process – staff at both the preschool and K-12 level must learn to operate differently. While school staff may embrace their shared responsibility for student learning and welcome the opportunity to engage in collaboration and alignment, formalizing structures to support such collaboration and alignment is the true challenge. There must be accountability measures in place to ensure ongoing momentum of and commitment to establishing the formal structures and processes that support collaboration. At a minimum, accountability efforts should include the following:

- **Leadership** to support the changes in systems and philosophy needed for preschools and K-12 schools to effectively partner in their early learning efforts, and to hold schools accountable to these efforts. FSG’s collective impact model identifies the need for a *backbone support organization* that can facilitate and manage the partnership’s infrastructure. Ideally, this organization exhibits key leadership principles that include “the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.”
- **Consistent messaging and support** to sustain momentum and promote the importance of a PreK-3 partnership for all stakeholders involved. Developing such partnerships, and truly changing systems and philosophies, is difficult and time-consuming work. The presence of support and recognition of the work involved can make all the difference. The PreK-3 Framework refers to this as *visible leadership*, in which administrators and community leaders make it clear that PreK-3 is a priority, and take an active role in supporting partnerships between schools and early learning programs.

Spotlight on Success: Promising Practices in PreK-3 Partnerships

Four years into the implementation of a PreK-3 model in Marin County—as part of the Marin Community Foundation’s Achievement Gap Strategic Initiative—there is evidence of several promising practices that have helped to support flourishing partnerships between preschools and elementary schools. These practices embody the key components and critical factors outlined in the previous section.

In the following sections, we provide (1) an overview of each promising practice, including specific aspects of implementation that have enabled the model to succeed in Marin County, and (2) an example of these practices in action, highlighting the success of these efforts as well as the ways in which they reflect each part of the key component framework.

Promising Practices Supporting Successful PreK-3 Partnerships in Marin County

This section highlights the following practices:

- Professional Development Trainings
 - New Standards in Preschool Quality
 - Learning Walks
 - Preschool-Kindergarten Bridge Teacher
 - Co-Taught Summer Bridge Program
 - District County Office Coordinator Role
 - Preschool Partner Professional Learning Community
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Overview of Practices Supporting Effective Partnerships

Professional Development Trainings for Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers:

Trainings on Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) and Teaching Pyramid have provided an opportunity for preschool and kindergarten teachers to participate in shared professional development. GLAD provides a model for standards-based instruction that uses an integrated approach to build students’ academic language and literacy development, particularly for English learners.⁵ The Teaching Pyramid model provides a framework using evidence-based practices that have been proven to promote students’ social-emotional development and help teachers address challenging behavior in the classroom. Trainings on both models have given preschool and kindergarten teachers the tools to use a common curriculum and adopt similar instructional practices that they can easily align across grade levels. These shared tools have also helped to set common expectations, allowing teachers to hold each other accountable for putting strategies into practice.

We are **speaking in the same language** [because of the shared professional development]. When I went to visit [the preschool classroom], I knew what they were doing. It wasn’t confusing why they were doing certain things, and I was thrilled because I could see how much it would fit with what they’d be doing with me [in kindergarten]. It provided me with the knowledge that **we are teaching using similar methods**, and how **seamless** it will be for our kids. They won’t have this learning curve.

Kindergarten Teacher

What makes this work well?

- Follow-up coaching for teachers, providing them with input on ways to apply new practices in their classroom and guidance to make ongoing adjustments

⁵ To learn more about GLAD, please see the MCF learning brief, *Promising Practices in Building Effective Systems for Professional Development in Schools*.

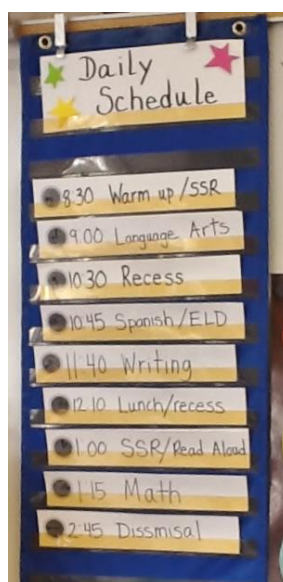
- Coverage from the district for the cost of substitutes, allowing teachers to be released for trainings
- Allowing time during trainings for break-out groups by grade level, where teachers could discuss application and challenges specific to their grade, as well as shared time with preschool and kindergarten teachers, where all grades could receive the same information

Standards in Preschool Quality: The Early Childhood Quality Improvement Project (ECE-QI), a component of the PreK-3 strategy, supports the preschool programs that feed into the nine PreK-3 elementary school sites by working with preschool staff to support quality improvement activities. Each preschool develops a quality improvement plan, receives on-site coaching to support plan implementation, and participates in professional development trainings. As part of these efforts, preschool classrooms receive a pre- and post- assessment using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The CLASS assesses the quality of teacher-student interactions in preschool classrooms, focusing on three levels of care: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The use of the CLASS provides preschools with a standard measure of early care quality and a set of norms in a field where no one set of quality standards exist. Preschools have also integrated GLAD language strategies into their classrooms in an effort to bolster their Instructional Support CLASS scores. These efforts have helped preschool staff identify a set of expectations for their classrooms and communicate with kindergarten teachers about those expectations and standards, providing a shared language and frame of reference.

What makes this work well?

- On-site coaching to guide the development of improvement plans and to help teachers put in practice what they have learned from CLASS scores and trainings
- Allowing time for intentional reflection to make meaning of the data – program staff acknowledge that this is still a missing piece, but absolutely necessary in order for teachers to make meaningful use of the data they are collecting
- Leadership that supports growth and implementation of changes in the classroom
- Resources to support program activities, including a small grant to implement improvements to the classroom identified through the plan, and stipends to cover the cost of release time for staff during trainings and other program activities

Learning Walks: Learning walks are a peer observation model in which teachers have an opportunity to engage in horizontal (within-grade) and vertical (between-grade) classroom observations to further support learning and collaboration. Designed by the Bremerton School District, learning walks provide a structured way for teachers to walk through each other's classroom and observe their work in action. Some AGSI schools have made learning walks a regular practice, and even designed school-wide walks where teachers from as far up as eighth grade have had an opportunity to visit the preschool and kindergarten classrooms. The walks have helped to increase understanding, particularly among higher grades, about the similar activities and concepts taught within each classroom, and thus where there are opportunities to coordinate across grade levels.



Alignment in action: Learning Walks introduce teachers to possible ways to coordinate across classrooms, such as posting the daily schedule to help students understand the daily routine.

What makes this work well?

It is natural for the Learning Walk model, or any peer observation model, to feel uncomfortable for participating teachers – it is not easy to have people come into your classroom and watch you do your job. Several key guidelines can help to set up a system that supports a safe and trusting environment for learning walks:

- Using a strength-based approach to introduce the topic of alignment and learning walks. Through this process, schools have an opportunity to reflect on their work and practices to date before they are introduced to the research on best practices. Schools can then celebrate what they have accomplished, while also considering how they might adjust their work to incorporate new best practices based on the research
- Identify a purpose and intent for each walk— ask the questions “What are you looking for?” “What are the key goals and objectives?”
- Create a safe space for learning walks by building understanding among all staff members that walks are designed to inform and improve *learning*, and are not meant to be evaluative
- During learning walks, avoid practices that could create an evaluative atmosphere—refrain from taking notes while observing, focus observations on facts and not opinions (i.e. take note of what was seen or heard, and avoid passing judgment on teacher performance)
- Make time for a focused debrief following the walk, where teachers can discuss what they saw and make connections to their own classrooms as it relates to the predetermined goals and objectives of the walk
- Create a sustainable system for learning walks by utilizing the Bremerton model as an initial framework that can be adapted to the individual needs and specific systems of each school

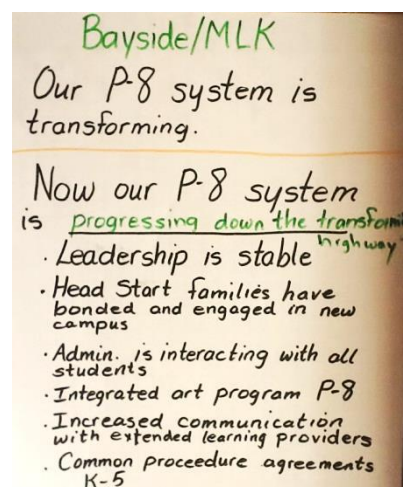
Preschool-Kindergarten Bridge Teacher: The Bayside MLK-Head Start partnership has employed through Teach for America a Bridge Teacher position that shifts between the preschool and kindergarten classroom each day, four days a week. The lead preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, and Bridge Teacher have an opportunity to stay closely coordinated given their close proximity (Head Start is located on Bayside’s campus) and the continuity that the Bridge Teacher brings. The Bridge Teacher position supports alignment and a seamless transition by sharing ideas across classrooms, utilizing similar language, and providing a familiar face for kindergartners who worked with her in preschool.

What makes this work well?

- The physical proximity of classrooms has aided alignment, and this is clearly apparent when compared to the first year of implementing the Bridge Teacher position when the preschool classroom was located on a different campus. The teacher lost significant time for instruction and alignment during the commute between campuses
- A clearly articulated job description that defines the purpose and parameters of the Bridge Teacher position. This helps to set expectations and ensure that the teacher can jump directly into the work rather than spend time defining her role

I think having **a person in both school settings** is important because there are a lot of growing pains associated with developing a PreK-3 partnership. Having a **preschool worker and advocate** in the halls of the elementary school is invaluable. As much as you are aligned on paper, having someone that is always listening for **preschool inclusion** really is what puts it in practice.

Bridge Teacher



Articulation of Bayside MLK’s P-8 system, including Head Start

- Leadership at both preschool and elementary school levels to promote and integrate the Bridge Teacher role into the school environment
- Providing the Bridge Teacher with access to the same professional development and trainings that other teachers have received, to ensure they understand and can implement the same strategies
- Establishing the Bridge Teacher as a long-term position (rather than one set up on a contract basis) to support continuity of services over time and further facilitate a seamless progression for students

Co-Taught Summer Bridge Program: The Venetia Valley four-week Summer Bridge program is co-taught by the elementary school's three kindergarten teachers and teachers from the school's partner preschool, Old Gallinas. Two of the three classes are in Spanish, and one in English, all three hours long each day. The full group of teachers works collaboratively to identify a thematic unit and design the curriculum, determining the exact lesson plan for each day. Teachers also take turns observing one another. The program has allowed the kindergarten teachers to meet as many as half of their incoming class before the school year begins, to develop relationships with incoming families, as well as learn to teach existing strategies from a preschool-level perspective, all of which has helped to ease their students' transition to the kindergarten classroom in the fall.⁶

One of the benefits from planning together [with our preschool partner] is that we are able to see what they do, how far they take [each strategy], so **we can plan our curriculum** to the level that the students are coming with. And we're able **to teach our strategies so much faster** now because they are doing it in preschool. We're not taking the whole year to get through [each] strategy. **The [children] already come in knowing a lot.**

Kindergarten Teacher

What makes this work well?

- Identifying specific units that can be coordinated across classrooms
- Designated group planning time to review each unit, daily schedule, and to coordinate roles and responsibilities for teaching each segment of the lesson plan
- Recognizing each other as equal professionals, all of whom bring strong expertise to the table and knowledge/skills that each can learn from the other (e.g. kindergarten teachers can learn how to take familiar concepts and teach them at a preschool level)
- Supportive administration (at both preschool and elementary school levels) that is committed to formalizing a strong partnership and supports linkages between PreK-3 classrooms
- Financial recognition to support the extra work involved in developing and planning new units

Marin County Office of Education Coordinator Role: The Marin County Office of Education (MCOE) has served as the *backbone support organization* for the PreK-3 initiative, supporting the coordination of PreK-3 activities across the four districts. MCOE's coordinator role has helped to hold schools accountable to establishing and maintaining PreK-3 partnerships by: (1) championing the vision of the initiative and keeping schools focused on the need for alignment; (2) prioritizing research-based best practices and innovative teaching approaches; and (3) designing and coordinating professional development activities that benefit all teachers. Schools consider MCOE their "shepherd" in this process, helping to provide efficiencies and clarity for the work, and to guide them when they have strayed too far from the ultimate vision.

⁶ For additional information about Venetia Valley's Summer Bridge program, as it relates to readying children for kindergarten, please see the MCF learning brief, *Promising Practices in Kindergarten Readiness Programs*.

What makes this work well?

- Constant communication, including regular “Monday memos” from MCOE that disseminate information on the most recent trainings or reminders about professional development
- Trust that is built from taking time to recognize each school’s work, including monthly classroom visits, regular acknowledgment that their work is critical, and reminders to keep their focus on the larger vision
- Expertise to handle the work involved in directing large-scale initiative activities and coordinating financial aspects of the grant – it has helped to have a district office representative (including someone with Superintendent experience)
- Understanding that the coordinator role is a full-time job

Preschool Partner Professional Learning Community: The four preschools that feed into Bahia Vista Elementary have developed a professional learning community (PLC). While this is still a relatively emerging model, the four preschools (Pickleweed Children’s Center, Head Start, Bahia Vista State Preschool, and Canal Child Care) have collectively begun new alignment strategies, identified ways to focus their work, and strengthened relationships with Bahia Vista staff. Given that there are many preschools feeding into the elementary school, alignment among so many programs can seem daunting. The PLC allows the preschools to act as a united front, minimizing the amount of effort and coordination needed for Bahia Vista staff to collaborate with their preschool partners, and strengthening the preschools’ presence at Bahia Vista. The PLC also serves as a vehicle through which preschool partners can demonstrate their investment in alignment, showing how they work together using a common language (such as the Teaching Pyramid vocabulary) and strategies to coordinate instruction (such as Learning Walks). In doing so, the PLC provides a way to demonstrate for teachers in higher grades how *they* can potentially collaborate with their preschool partners and, ultimately, include these preschools in a partnership that spans PreK-3. These efforts have helped to strengthen the partnership with Bahia Vista staff members, who have demonstrated their investment in this work by helping to support and guide alignment efforts. This shared sense of commitment will serve the partnership well as it moves forward in developing a PreK-3 model for the Bahia Vista community.

What makes this work well?

- The ECE-QI component, which provides a space for the preschool partners to gather and share ideas. This initially served as the catalyst for developing the PLC, and has helped to solidify the relationships between partners
- A PLC leader that has strong enthusiasm for alignment and the persistence needed to create and maintain relationships among the preschool partners and with elementary school staff
- Strong existing relationships between the preschools and Bahia Vista. Historically, there has been a sense of mutual respect between the preschool and kindergarten teachers, with both feeling validated in their roles to effectively support early learning
- Professional development trainings that provide a common language through which preschool partners can have a meaningful dialogue with kindergarten teachers

In Practice: The Critical Factors for Successful Partnerships

The table below highlights one example of success for each critical factor in the framework outlined earlier in this brief. These success stories shine a spotlight on the framework in action and the great work that schools and partners have achieved in developing successful PreK-3 partnerships.

The MCF grant has **put partnerships in the forefront** so its not one extra thing we do, but **built into the fabric of what we do.**

Preschool Director

Critical Factor for Success	Spotlight on Success
Key Component 1: Shared Understanding	
Shared professional development	<p>Before the PreK-3 grant was in place, there was no formalized partnership between West Marin/Inverness Elementary School and Papermill Creek Children's Corner Preschool. The GLAD and Teaching Pyramid trainings have provided a venue through which the two schools have established a strong partnership and found new ways to coordinate. The kindergarten teacher and Papermill Director have found it powerful to engage in shared professional development, learning the same series of strategies and approaches as a team. During the Teaching Pyramid trainings, the full team sat a table together. The West Marin/Inverness kindergarten teacher reflects on how the opportunity provided her a chance to better understand their perspective and identify common ways in which they can bring the strategies back to their classrooms.</p>
Commitment to coordination	<p>Venetia Valley has adopted the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) model, which uses a PreK-3 approach to implement a comprehensive, intensive biliteracy education.⁷ Through SEAL and the PreK-3 grant, Venetia Valley has developed regular alignment meetings, where teachers in preschool through third grade meet every six weeks to coordinate efforts, discuss new approaches and materials from trainings, share challenges, and identify any adjustments that will help to support implementation and alignment of new practices. Because many students from the elementary school also attend the Old Gallinas day care at the end of the school day, these meetings are also an opportunity for teachers to discuss any issues or needs of specific children in both classrooms. Each six-week meeting involves one day of professional development and one day to plan an entire unit. The teachers have been able to plan six full units in the last school year, including one unit planned the previous summer, which made it possible to begin the school year already in alignment. As a result of these efforts, kindergarten teachers are able to teach their strategies at a much faster pace because students are coming from Old Gallinas, already knowing the material and ready to move to the next level.</p>
Key Component 2: Articulation	
Regular information exchange	<p>The West Marin/Inverness kindergarten teacher and Papermill Director have established new routines to exchange information about their students and coordinate instruction. During the school year, Papermill's class spent a day in the kindergarten classroom, allowing the preschoolers and their parents to be "kindergarteners for a day" and participate in all of the kindergarten activities. During that time, the kindergarten teacher also observed each of the preschool students, taking notes that she later provided to Papermill staff, along with feedback on where to focus with each child for the remainder of the year in order to best prepare them for their transition to kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher followed up with a visit to Papermill later in the year, where she conducted a second observation and could provide further ideas on ways to align and implement certain strategies across classrooms. The two schools now engage in this process every other month. Additionally, the kindergarten teacher and Papermill Director met during the summer to share information about the individual graduating preschool students who will be entering kindergarten in the fall. In this "pass the baton" meeting, the Papermill Director shared information on the strengths and challenges for each child, as well as assessment data. This regular exchange of information has helped to foster a greater sense of connection between classrooms and enabled teachers on both sides to be intentional in their instruction and support for students as they transition from preschool to kindergarten.</p>

⁷ To learn more about the SEAL model, please see the MCF learning brief, *Promising Practices in Building Effective Systems for Professional Development in Schools*.

Critical Factor for Success	Spotlight on Success
Shared set of differentiated roles	<p>The Teaching Pyramid trainings included both preschool and kindergarten teachers in order to provide a space for shared professional development and coordination. While the trainings did allow teachers across grade levels time to learn and reflect together, it also became apparent that the trainings needed to allow time for same-grade group discussion. Kindergarten teachers needed time to understand the material from a kindergarten perspective, and process with other kindergarten teachers how to apply the material to their classroom setting. Similarly, preschool teachers could use the time to discuss appropriate application and use of their materials with their teams. Recognizing this, MCOE adjusted the training structure to include break-out groups by grade level. Still, it was important that all grades, and school PreK-K teams in particular, had time following the break-out sessions to come back together to collaborate and identify areas for alignment across preschool and kindergarten classrooms. These have been important lessons learned that can help to shape future shared professional development activities.</p>
Continuity of services and proximity of programs	<p>Having a Bridge Teacher at Bayside MLK has helped to bolster content, exposing K-12 teachers to what is happening in the preschool and how they can build upon it in their own classrooms. Conversely, she will learn about a lesson taught in kindergarten, introduce it to the preschool, and determine how the same content can be differentiated for preschool students. The kindergarten teacher has noticed a significant improvement in the readiness of children coming to her from the Head Start classroom. When students enter, they are already familiar with the routines, and feel comfortable in the classroom. These are major benefits for maximizing teaching time: when children come in ready to learn new material, it cuts down on time spent on classroom maintenance; and when teachers <i>understand</i> that their students are coming in already knowing the material, they do not spend unnecessary time re-teaching systems and instead provide their students with more productive learning time.</p> <p>Furthermore, the geographical closeness between Bayside MLK and its on-site preschool has fostered a deeper partnership, not just between the preschool and elementary school, but also between school staff and families. Administrators have noticed that having Head Start on site seems to have promoted an overall sense of community, where students and families see a greater connection between all grade levels, and thus feel better prepared for the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Staff also hypothesize that having preschool-aged students on campus has fostered greater discipline among higher grade students, who seem more likely to model good behavior (staff have observed fewer discipline problems this past school year). This is only a theory, but staff see this possible connection as one more reason why an on-site preschool is valuable for the community.</p>
Key Component 3: Accountability	
Leadership to support changes in systems and philosophy	<p>When Bayside Elementary relocated to the Martin Luther King Jr. Academy campus, the principal officially designated the combined schools as one PreK-8 school, signifying the school's commitment to a true PreK-3 model. As further testament to the school's value for alignment across all grades, the principal created a common afternoon prep period for all teachers. Having dedicated time together has enabled teachers to plan collaboratively, reflect on the shared trainings, and discuss implications for instructional practices across all grades. The school has also embraced the use of Learning Walks to promote alignment, inviting teachers from all grade levels to participate. As a result, teachers have been able to identify certain strategies that they can coordinate from preschool through eighth grade, such as posting classroom rules using similar language and adopting five specific GLAD strategies that all classrooms can implement.</p>

Critical Factor for Success	Spotlight on Success
Consistent messaging and support	<p>MCOE's role as PreK-3 Coordinator has been an important source of support and accountability for all school partners. This is evident in the praise that schools share often in evaluation interviews, as well as in the sense of loss that several Novato and San Rafael schools have felt since changes to the grant structure led to MCOE's role discontinuing with their districts. For schools in the Shoreline and Sausalito Marin City districts, MCOE has remained a regular presence through monthly site visits and constant communication provided through phone calls, meetings, Monday memos, and a frequently updated Marin County PreK-3 website. The memos provide information on the latest research, initiative activities, and are posted on the website, where schools have access to a comprehensive library of content (research, overview of initiative activities, calendars, and administrative information related to the initiative). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of MCOE's role has been to have a dedicated body of support that can both keep schools on track toward achieving the vision of a PreK-3 model, and recognize the significant amount of work and progress that schools are achieving along the way.</p>

Integrating Key Components into School Culture

The positive stories emerging from the AGSI PreK-3 partnerships truly reflect success when they illustrate ways in which partners have integrated the partnership work into their school cultures and everyday practices. To institutionalize this work means to ensure that these practices become “business-as-usual,” and central to the core way in which schools operate. Past studies have identified this type of change as *second-order change*, warning that such transformations in systems and culture can face “the quiet but persistent resistance of teachers and administrators’ who may not immediately see value in abandoning deeply held, and culturally reinforced, traditions.”⁸ In contrast, the AGSI PreK-3 schools highlighted in this brief are not demonstrating this type of resistance—instead they are already beginning to adopt practices that exemplify second-order change. The examples below demonstrate that these partnerships are indeed becoming a part of the fabric and future of Marin County schools.

- **A unified PreK-8 community:** As mentioned above, Bayside Martin Luther King Jr. Academy now recognizes itself as a PreK-8 school. School staff have adopted this terminology and it is further reflected in new practices to include preschool staff in all staff development activities. Preschool partners are openly invited to attend professional development days alongside elementary school staff, and are included in the school’s weekly announcements.
- **Change driven by school administrators and directors:** School leadership has been one of the most powerful drivers behind the implementation of new practices, structures, and systems, reflecting a new level of schools’ dedication to partnership alignment and collaboration. The common prep period for teachers at Bayside MLK and Old Gallinas, and the regular PreK-3 alignment meetings built into Venetia Valley’s schedule every six weeks are examples of school administrators supporting systems-level changes to promote partnerships with preschools. On the preschool side, Directors have been flexible and willing to allow their staff to participate in alignment activities and professional development trainings, despite challenges in finding replacement teachers (given that preschools do not have access to a structured substitute system in the way that district employees have).
- **Alignment as part of everyday practice:** At Venetia Valley, intentional articulation between preschool and kindergarten is becoming part of their everyday practice. Although the school has dedicated formal meeting times every six weeks as part of implementing the SEAL model, the information exchange process between grades is no longer dependent upon those formal alignment structures. Teachers are finding time to stop by each other’s classrooms to engage in more casual alignment discussions.
- **Engagement of new preschool partners:** At West Marin/Inverness, the kindergarten teacher has reached out to the newest preschool center in Point Reyes Station to begin the process of developing a partnership. The success of her relationship with Papermill Creek and the positive outcomes she has observed as a result of their alignment efforts have been a strong motivation for seeking out a new partnership that will further strengthen support for children and families in the community.

Truly institutionalized practices that schools can sustain beyond the term of their MCF grant will ultimately rely on commitment at the school board level to include PreK-3 efforts into the districts’ budget. Efforts such as those illustrated throughout this brief and in the list above provide evidence of successful PreK-3 partnerships that have the power to transform early learning efforts throughout Marin County and strengthen academic pathways for all students.

⁸ Charland, W. (2011). Art integration as school culture change: A cultural ecosystem approach to faculty development. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 12(8). Retrieved 3/12/14 from <http://www.ijea.org/v12n8/>.

In Their Own Words...

CLASS gives the preschool and kindergarten teachers a way to share levels of expectations, or at least that there are expectations....it gives them some common ground. When they are on the same plane, it changes the conversation and the work they do completely. ...Anytime elementary school folks can have a context or frame for what's happening in the preschool classroom, it's helpful for the relationship. Even for just realizing that there are standards. That alone, saying that there are standards, raises the esteem of the ECE world in the eyes of the elementary school world.

- *PreK-3 Stakeholder*

One of the things for me was learning to do the strategies I already knew in kindergarten, but understanding how to do it from a preschool point of view. When they come in the fall, they are babies and so young, and used to the preschool way. Teaching them in a way they are comfortable with makes it a lot easier to make the transition. - *Kindergarten Teacher*

The more that we support [preschools] in their work...the better they can be as partners. I think that is what has emerged for me in this whole work. The more knowledgeable and secure that preschool staff are in early childhood education, the better partners they can be. You don't want to go in and have elementary schools tell you what you need to do. - *PreK-3 Stakeholder*

There are educators who are really enthusiastic and invested in their schools and ready to move forward to bring about alignment. As well, there are many more educators who are as just as enthusiastic and invested in their schools, but are not yet operating under a shared vision that is clearly articulated and appropriately supported in regards to PreK-3 alignment.

- *Preschool Director*

That's been the fun of doing the trainings, when all of a sudden a preschool teacher shares what they are doing to build a common core foundation and a K-12 teacher is amazed to hear that. Because they didn't know that, the kindergarten teacher may spend a chunk of the fall semester teaching that same material to students. That is fade-out-of-alignment, where people are re-teaching and instructional time is lost. - *PreK-3 Stakeholder*

Teaching is by its very nature a very isolating experience, oftentimes. Somebody closes their door and does it on their own. Breaking people out to see each other and learn from each other's strategies...symbolically messages that this is important and we are all holding each other accountable. - *Elementary School Administrator*

I think you have to recognize the [preschool] and their staff. They have very capable and professional staff. I think that needs to be underscored. Sometimes we may not acknowledge that they are actually worthy partners and very capable of doing this work at a high level. That component is critical, that people recognize that. That the Director is flexible enough to allow this partnership to grow, allow their teachers to take part in our professional development. Likewise, we understand that we are learning from each other just as much as they are. That it's a team effort. That to me is the hallmark of the success of this program right now. We've gotten to that point that it's very very comfortable in our work and in the professionalism that everyone brings to the table.

- *Elementary School Administrator*

Appendix: Methods

To develop this learning brief, LFA engaged in an iterative process, drawing upon both secondary and primary qualitative data sources. The process involved five key steps:

- 1. Identify key topic areas:** LFA surveyed Marin County PreK-3 stakeholders (Superintendents, District staff, Principals, PreK-3 Site Design Team members, and community partners) to gather input on the specific implementation topics to focus each learning brief. Results indicated that stakeholders were *most* interested in the following four key topic areas: PreK-3 Partnerships, Kindergarten Readiness, Family Engagement, and Professional Development.
- 2. Explore existing literature:** LFA began by reviewing the literature associated with the topic of preschool/elementary school partnerships, including research on cross-sector partnerships and collective impact. This allowed us to ground the learning brief in the most current concepts, research, and policy, as well as provide an initial set of principles for identifying those practices in Marin County that reflect “pockets of excellence” in implementation to highlight in the brief.
- 3. Identify promising practices:** To determine the final list of practices for this learning brief, LFA looked to both the existing literature and knowledge of key staff overseeing the implementation of a PreK-3 model in Marin County. This included multiple conversations with staff at the Marin Community Foundation, Marin Office of Education, and school staff as needed, resulting in a list of the promising practices to highlight in the brief and the set of stakeholders to interview to learn about each practice.
- 4. Conduct stakeholder interviews:** To learn about each of the promising practices highlighted in this brief, LFA spoke with key staff and community partners involved in implementing the identified models. These conversations provided an opportunity for us to learn about each program or practice in depth, understanding (1) how these practices have looked on the ground, (2) what has made it possible to engage in these practices successfully, and (3) any evidence that these practices have become an integrated part of the school culture or operations.
- 5. Triangulate findings to develop a framework for effective implementation:** LFA combined the core concepts from existing research with themes that emerged from stakeholder interviews to identify the key components and critical factors that comprise a framework on how best to implement effective PreK-3 partnerships. We have used the framework to guide this brief, providing a summary of each component and critical factors, as well as the practices that embody this framework in action.