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## Early Childhood Community School Linkages: Advancing a Theory of Change

Kristin E. Geiser  
S. Kwesi Rollins  
Amy Gerstein  
Martin J. Blank

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## INTRODUCTION

As national attention increasingly focuses on the importance of children’s development in their early years, we have the responsibility—as community members, parents, educators, leaders, and policy makers—to do our part to ensure that young children have the opportunity to thrive. While there are a number of efforts in place to support young children and their families, many focus on one of two domains: *either* improving early childhood care or education<sup>i</sup> or improving elementary education. Research suggests, however, that there is an essential third domain to attend to in our work to support young children: improving the quality and continuity of a child’s experience and her access to essential supports and services as she transitions from early childhood care or education into the elementary grades.<sup>ii</sup>

Several promising initiatives situate early learning within a continuum that spans ages 0-8 and includes attention to a child’s transition into elementary school. The Foundation for Child Development’s focus on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Education, New America Foundation’s Early Education Initiative, and the Family and Work Institute’s Mind in the Making-Community Schools Project<sup>iii</sup> are three strong examples. Reframing and reforming early learning within a 0-8 or PreK-3 framework requires bridging two sectors—early childhood care or education and elementary education—that have, up to this point, operated relatively independently of one another. There is sufficient evidence that this kind of cross-sector collaboration is possible and well worth the effort, as it promotes coordination and learning among those who serve children and ultimately has the potential to promote youth development across a number of interdependent dimensions.<sup>iv</sup> Fostering coherence across the early childhood and elementary sectors is, therefore, a promising pathway for school improvement and a key building block for the improvement of more broadly defined youth and community outcomes.

Cross-sector collaboration in the service of youth development is also at the core of the community school movement which seeks to reimagine and transform schools not only as *places*, but also as *a set of partnerships*. After more than 15 years of research and development regarding community schools, the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership (CCS-IEL) has learned a great deal about what it takes to translate the idea of *schools as hubs of community partnerships* into practice. Cross-sector collaboration is also central to the work of Stanford University’s John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center), a center that partners with communities to develop leadership, conduct research, and effect change to improve the lives of youth. The notion of cultivating cross-sector partnerships with a specific focus on improving linkages between elementary education and early childhood is a natural extension of the work of both CCS-IEL and the Gardner Center. The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework for translating the idea of improving linkages into practice.

*Community schools are full-service neighborhood hubs where the school and partners from across the community come together to make sure children and families have what they need to be successful—in school and in life.*

## **FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE LINKAGES PROJECT**

In 2009, CCS-IEL embarked on an ambitious action research and development project, leveraging the community school system infrastructure present in three geographic regions (Tulsa, Oklahoma; Multnomah County, Oregon; Albuquerque, New Mexico) to advance research and practice around a preK-3 approach that includes strategic partnerships between the elementary community school sector and early childhood sector.<sup>v</sup> The Early Childhood and Community School Linkages Project (the Linkages Project) was guided by the premise that regions with relatively mature community school initiatives were uniquely positioned to incorporate a range of alignment practices known to smooth children's transition from the early years into the early grades.<sup>vi</sup> Further, CCS-IEL believed that these initiatives were well-positioned to take successful practices to scale and to prompt improved local, district, and perhaps even state-level policies, leading to broader impact for children and families. In order to understand the strengths and limitations of this hypothesis, CCS-IEL engaged the Gardner Center as a research partner. The Gardner Center conducted a three-year implementation study designed to yield insight into the conditions that support and hinder efforts to improve linkages.

## **FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY: ADVANCING A THEORY OF CHANGE**

After three years of implementation and the completion of a formal implementation study of the Linkages Project, CCS-IEL and the Gardner Center are poised to advance an evidence-based theory of change for early childhood and community school linkages.<sup>vii</sup> While there is some variation in how thought leaders describe the specific elements of a theory of change, most agree that it articulates a theory of how complex change may be accomplished. A theory of change is more than an action plan. It includes actions (sometimes referred to as strategies or practices), but it grounds them in a coherent rationale and maps them onto a series of indicators that will signal whether or not the actions are moving the overall work in the direction of the desired long-term outcomes. While a theory of change describes a coherent vision for change, it functions more like a compass than a map, pointing to key practices and indicators that can help orient and guide an effort to improve linkages while honoring and making room for local adaptation.

By advancing a theory of change for community school linkages, we are translating the learnings of the Linkages Project into a tool that can be adapted to local efforts designed to ensure that all children—particularly our most vulnerable children:

- experience a smooth and successful transition into the early grades, and
- demonstrate growth across a number of youth development outcomes, including but not limited to higher levels of engagement, learning, and healthy development in the early grades.

With these goals in mind, improving linkages requires much more than a few isolated changes; rather, it requires concurrent attention to multiple, interdependent levels of policy and practice. Our theory of change, therefore, assumes an integrated tri-level approach, attending to changes in three dimensions:<sup>viii</sup>

- Settings (classrooms, schools, early childhood centers),
- Systems (cross-sector collaboratives, school districts, geographic regions); and
- Individuals (children and families).

The implementation study identified a number of practices that improved linkages at the setting, system, and individual levels. When we examine the implementation patterns across project sites and regions, we see a promising theory of change for improving early childhood community school linkages (see Figure 1). The following section goes into greater detail regarding each of the core components of the theory of change and describes some of the strategic levers, practices, and short-term outcomes that are documented in the implementation study.

### Strategic Levers

There are a number of practices that foster change at the setting, system, and individual levels. Before we present those in greater detail, however, it is worth noting that there are a few strategies that facilitate improvements across all three levels. We refer to these as “strategic levers.” When implemented well, these levers tend to enhance a tri-level approach to improving linkages:

- **Cultivate shared responsibility for smooth and effective linkages.** By framing an effort to improve linkages as one that involves attention to children, families, settings, and systems, responsibility for this work shifts from one person or agency to the collective work of a number of different stakeholders. In the regions participating in the Linkages Project, cultivating shared responsibility was an explicit part of the implementation process not only in the early stages of the project, but throughout its duration—a reminder that this work is never “done” and that it supports each phase of implementation.
- **Start where it makes sense in your local context.** There is no one right place to start; rather, it is important to find a natural place to begin improving linkages. Elementary and early childhood teachers in all three regions found different entry points through which to begin their work (e.g., co-teaching in summer transition programs, co-hosting a kindergarten information evening, visiting one another’s classrooms). Regional leaders also found different pathways by which to engage their stakeholders to improve linkages (e.g., Chronic Absence Initiatives, Cradle to Career Initiatives, Literacy Initiatives). Based on the observations that were conducted as part of the implementation study, one

approach did not stand out as “better” than another; what seemed to matter most was the fit between the approach and the local context.

- **Cultivate leaders with authority, expertise, and commitment to sustain and scale linkages.** There were three key components of this strategy: (a) funding a dedicated position and selecting a qualified leader to coordinate improved linkages, (b) connecting with experts who support and advocate for improved linkages (e.g., national organizations such as Attendance Counts!, the National Center for Community Schools, local university partners, curriculum and pedagogy experts); and (c) building the capacity of system- and setting-level leaders (e.g., superintendents, principals and early childhood education directors) to promote effective linkages within their settings. Leaders with some degree of expertise in both elementary and early childhood education tended to develop creative strategies to improve linkages with relative ease.<sup>ix</sup> The researchers who conducted the implementation study often described these leaders as “multi-lingual”—effectively moving between and integrating early childhood, elementary, and community school knowledge and experience.
- **Promote community school development.** In the Linkages Project, community schools in more advanced stages of development were well-positioned to improve linkages, in part because they tended to view themselves as one of several interdependent settings supporting children and families and they saw partnering with other organizations as essential to their work. Through staffing (e.g., a community school coordinator) and school structures (e.g., policies and procedures for initiating and sustaining partnerships), more mature community schools also possessed the technical capacity to facilitate relationships with early childhood organizations.<sup>x</sup>

Based on the implementation study, these four levers were key to promoting the normative and structural conditions that support improved linkages. Such changes, in turn, seemed to make it easier to imagine and implement changes in practice. The following section describes some of the promising practices and short-term outcomes that were observed in the three regions that participated in the Linkages Project. The discussion begins with system-level practices and outcomes, continues with the setting-level, and concludes with practices that were designed to provide direct support to children and families and short-term outcomes associated with those practices.

## Practices and Short-Term Outcomes

### **System-Level Practices**

Based on the work of the three regions that participated in the Linkages Project, system-level support reflected five core practices:

- 1. Build a shared understanding among multiple stakeholders regarding the importance of improved linkages.** This was accomplished by (1) disseminating ideas (e.g., through free lectures, brochures, and books) to broad and diverse audiences, and (2) situating improved linkages within existing priorities that broad and diverse audiences already supported. For example, in one Linkages community, conversations around student attendance in schools and efforts to reduce chronic absence highlighted the importance of consistent kindergarten attendance. Within this context, improving linkages was an organic and strategic complement to an effort that was already underway. Leaders from a number of agencies and programs collaborated to expand their chronic absence work to include explicit attention to linkages and in so doing, advanced a broader understanding of and commitment to improving linkages.
- 2. Create and sustain mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration that include an intentional focus on linkages.** This translated into the creation of a Linkages Steering Committee or equivalent leadership group consisting of the leaders of multiple agencies who participated in a deep and ongoing planning and implementation process.
- 3. Institute policies and cultivate norms that promote coherence across early childhood and elementary sectors.** This translated into a number of practices across systems including: district support for early childhood and elementary professionals to learn with and from one another; explicit district-level expectations regarding and support for developmentally appropriate classroom practices (e.g., instructional coaching and classroom learning materials); and district responsibility for branding, marketing, and coordinating early kindergarten registration.
- 4. Promote learning and innovation.** System-level leaders encouraged their stakeholders to visit other communities engaged in linkages reform. Regardless of their stage of community school development or linkages implementation, leaders within and across regions valued every opportunity that they had to learn from their colleagues in different settings. In addition to valuing the visits, participants were often encouraged and supported by their supervisors to adapt what they had observed to their local schools or early education centers. This culture of experimentation led to a number of new practices that began as small scale “pilot” efforts which, in turn, sparked further learning and innovation.

### **System-Level Short-Term Outcomes**

As Linkages communities implemented specific system-level practices, they observed the following short-term outcomes:

- Early learning and elementary leaders developed formal and informal mechanisms for collaboration
- Multiple role groups were engaged in efforts to improve linkages
- Broader reform efforts and initiatives included an explicit focus on creating, sustaining, and scaling improved linkages

Through the implementation of system-level practices, local leaders in both early childhood and elementary education felt that they were no longer operating within silos, either defined by a domain of expertise (e.g., elementary teacher, early childhood) or by the physical boundary of one's work environment (e.g., county office, district office, elementary campus, early childhood education center). They also reported that they felt that the regional conversations about linkages were expanding to include a larger and more diverse audience. Overall, system-level practices tended to provide the higher level messaging and infrastructure needed to support and sustain setting-level changes.

### **Setting-Level Practices**

In the context of improving linkages, *settings* are specific places designed to serve children ages 0-8 and their families. Participants in the Linkages Project focused on two settings in particular: elementary community schools and early childhood education centers. Almost all of the setting-level efforts documented in the implementation study were designed to enhance coherence or alignment between settings through three key practices:

- 1. Facilitate collaboration between early childhood and elementary teachers.** Setting-level leaders expected and supported teachers to collaborate in a number of ways including: learning from one another (e.g., observing one another's classroom, talking together about their practice) and engaging in shared practice (e.g., co-authoring students' kindergarten transition plans prior to the start of the school year, jointly reviewing and aligning assessment practices to obtain more consistent and meaningful data on student learning, co-hosting a kindergarten information night, and co-teaching a summer transition program).
- 2. Establish spaces for learning and support within elementary settings that are suitable for families with young children.** Creating spaces specifically for young children and their families communicates to both families and school staff that a smooth transition to school begins well before kindergarten. Some elementary settings created spaces designed specifically for young children and their families, including a designated early childhood room with a colorful rug for parent-child classes and rocking chairs for soothing infants. Other elementary settings created outdoor play areas suitable for young children including climbing structures appropriate for toddlers.



- 3. Foster relationships among and between families and teachers spanning early childhood and elementary settings.** Long-term relationships among and between families and teachers can foster a feeling of continuity and coherence, but certain school structures (e.g., changing teachers each year) typically hinder long-term or multi-year relationships. In some Linkages communities, elementary schools found ways to foster longer term relationships. For example, one school created a multi-age classroom (e.g., K/1, 2/3) where students remained with the same teacher for two consecutive years. Another school implemented a K-5 strand where children progressed through a specific sequence or “family” of teachers and experienced a number of opportunities to learn and connect with the entire “family” (K-5 strand of students, families, and teachers). Within these new structures, the most important ingredients for success were the specific practices that emerged to nurture the relationships between and among children, teachers and families.

### ***Setting-Level Short-Term Outcomes***

As early childhood and elementary teachers developed a greater understanding of and appreciation for one another’s expertise, they began to improve coherence and alignment across their settings. For example, elementary teachers found opportunities to simultaneously address academic standards and attend to children’s developmental needs. Likewise, early childhood educators found opportunities to integrate the academic language associated with elementary school practices into their early childhood practices. Within a relatively short-time, Linkages Project participants noticed three specific indicators of progress:

- Teachers and site leaders had a greater appreciation for the ways in which early childhood and elementary expertise could inform and improve practices in both settings
- Early childhood and elementary teachers collaborated regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment
- Setting-level policies and practices were explicitly designed to improve linkages

Such setting-level changes ensured that the system-level efforts were actually translating into changes in classrooms, elementary schools, and early childhood care or learning centers, and they helped set the stage for changes that directly supported individual children and their families.

### ***Individual Child and Family-Level Practices***

While system- and setting-level practices are intended to support children and families, practices designed to build the capacity of children and families directly were an important dimension of Linkages Project participants’ efforts to improve linkages. Two practices were most prevalent across regions:

- 1. Orient children and families to the school system and setting prior to the start of kindergarten.** Across all three regions, teachers and schools developed a number of ways to provide infants, toddlers, and preschool children and their families opportunities to



become familiar with the elementary school setting, policies, and procedures (including how to access education specialists and other essential services) prior to the start of kindergarten. A few schools also created a more intensive summer transition program to provide additional support to incoming kindergartners and their families who had not previously participated in a formal early childhood education program.

- 2. Equip families to support and advocate for their children.** Across all three regions, efforts to equip families for a smooth transition tended to fall into one of three categories: (a) promoting literacy development, (b) understanding and navigating the K-12 education system, and (c) actively participating in the school community. Several elementary schools hosted story time for families with young children where school staff read books aloud while modeling and explaining strategies to support literacy development with a toddler or preschool age child. Most schools that provided literacy support also gave families books to borrow or to keep which allowed them to practice literacy strategies at home and helped them create a home library. To connect with families who felt more comfortable participating in their primary language, some schools partnered with community based organizations or paid parents a stipend to lead story time in families' primary languages. In addition to literacy activities, Linkages sites organized a variety of parent education opportunities to situate kindergarten in the greater arc of K-12 education and postsecondary education and employment opportunities and equip parents to support their child's K-12 success.

### ***Individual: Child and Family-Level Short-Term Outcomes***

School staff credit new child and family-level practices with improvements in three areas:

- Children arrived ready to engage with the instructional program
- Parents were engaged, serving as volunteers, helping their children at home, and advocating for their children
- Children and their families experienced continuous (uninterrupted) access to essential services

Community school staff in all three regions observed that children and families who were familiar with the school setting prior to the start of kindergarten seemed to feel comfortable and prepared to start kindergarten. Children arrived knowing how to enter into the classroom setting (e.g., where to put their backpacks, how to enter into morning circle time on the carpet), felt comfortable meeting their personal needs (e.g., using the bathroom, navigating the lunch line), and were ready to move quickly into the instructional program. Staff in one school reported that children who participated in Linkages activities also demonstrated improved attendance and academic achievement. Staff in another setting noted that efforts to connect with families prior to the start of school helped the schools ensure that the children were quickly connected with important services—such as learning specialists and educational support services.

Children were not the only ones who seemed to benefit from new practices; school staff reported that families learned to support and advocate for their children, displayed increased capacity and efficacy to support their children (e.g. help them with homework), and were quickly engaged in school volunteer activities. In two of the regions, parents began forming networks where they shared childcare and school pick up responsibilities, discussed parenting strategies, and organized opportunities for their children to connect outside of school. In another region, parents created a group to advocate for state-level policies that would better support early learning and development. These indicators of improvement are an important complement to the changes observed at the system- and setting-level.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Many school and community leaders are working tirelessly to improve the experiences and outcomes of our most vulnerable children and their families. As research continues to illuminate the relationship between early learning and long-term indicators of positive growth and development, many efforts to improve youth and family outcomes are focusing on children ages 0-8. Acknowledging the role of early childhood care or education in closing the opportunity gap, President Obama made a plea in his 2013 State of the Union address:

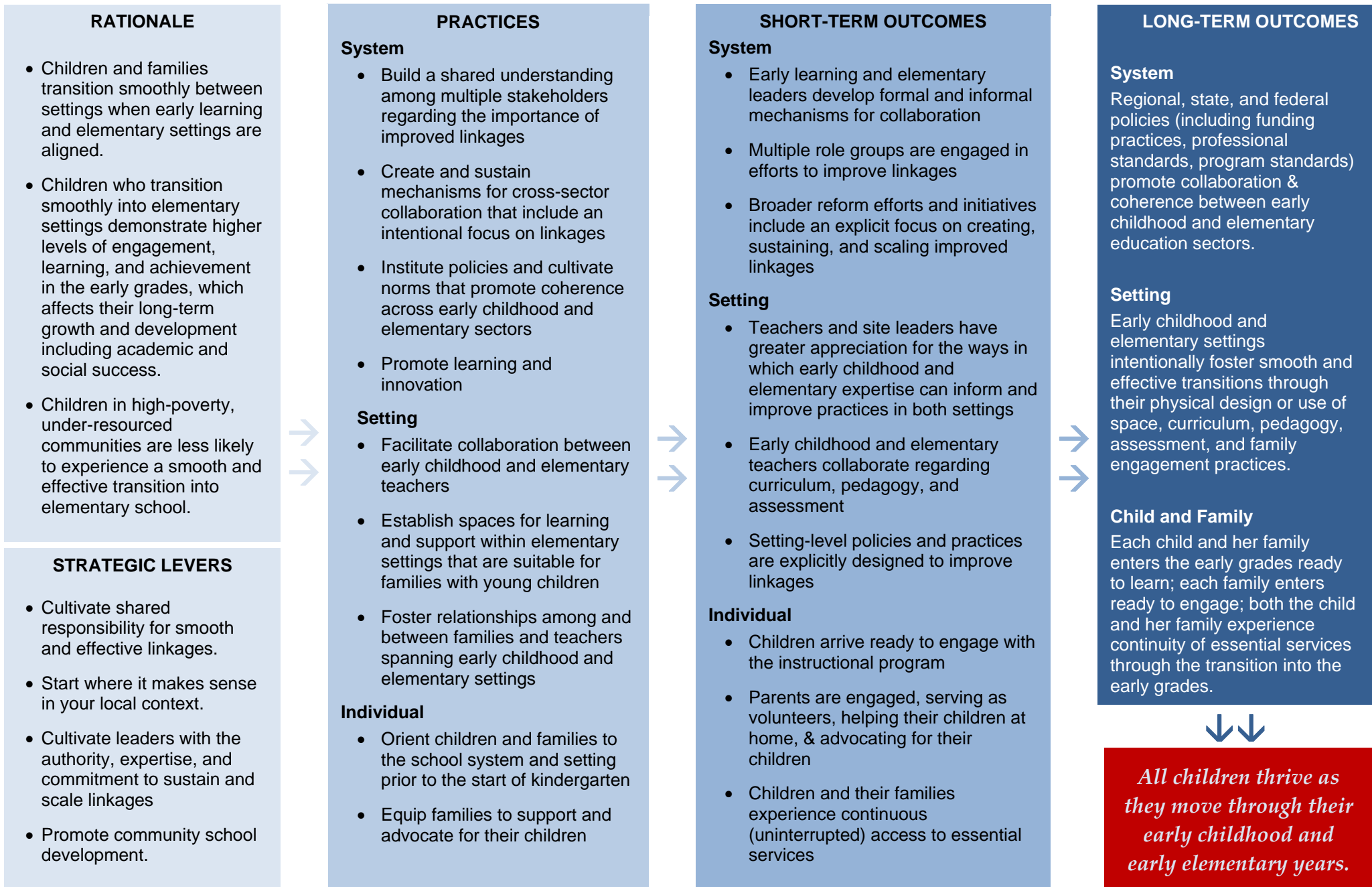
*“...Let’s do what works, and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let’s give our kids that chance...”*

As superintendents and system-level leaders around the country try to make meaning of the child development and early learning research, they need guidance to incorporate early education strategies in ways that make sense for their communities. Some guidance comes in the form of federal and state policy, including funding for specific programs. For example, as part of his 2014 fiscal year budget President Obama unveiled his “Preschool for All” proposal, which calls for spending \$75 billion over a 10-year period in a new partnership with states to provide high quality, full-day preschool for 4-year-olds in families at or below 200 percent of the poverty line.<sup>xi</sup> This is an important step in the right direction. However, if we are to achieve the long-term, positive results we want for children, families, schools, and communities, then in addition to creating high quality preschools, we will also need to attend to the *quality and continuity of practice* across early childhood programs and elementary schools, increase the *scale* of those efforts; and promote their *sustainability*.

By translating the idea of improved linkages into a theory of change, the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership and its national partners, including the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, are advancing an actionable framework for creating coherence between early learning and elementary education that will help accelerate efforts to ensure that all children thrive as they move through their early childhood and early elementary years.

**FIGURE 1. A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD & COMMUNITY SCHOOL LINKAGES:**

Creating coherence between early learning and elementary education at the level of systems, settings, and individual children and families.



## **ABOUT THE JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER FOR YOUTH & THEIR COMMUNITIES**

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at the Stanford Graduate School of Education partners with communities to develop leadership, conduct research, and effect change to improve the lives of youth. Named for the prolific thinker, innovator, and activist John W. Gardner, the Gardner Center was founded in 2001 by Milbrey McLaughlin, the David Jacks Professor of Education and Public Policy. Our guiding philosophy distinguishes us from other research organizations in that we:

- focus on all aspects of a youth's development—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical
- work in deep partnership with communities, responding to questions posed by partners
- bridge the gap between research, practice, and policy
- generate actionable knowledge through regular and iterative exchanges
- seek to inform a study's stakeholders as well as the broader field about our work

## **ABOUT THE COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

The Coalition for Community Schools, staffed by the Institute for Educational Leadership, is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education (cradle to career), youth development, community planning and development, higher education, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy as well as national, state, and local community school networks. The Coalition advocates for community schools as a strategy to leverage local resources and programs, changing the look and feel of the traditional school structure to best meet the needs of children and families in the 21st century.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP (IEL)**

The mission of the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) is to equip leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that prepare children and youth for postsecondary education, careers, and citizenship. For 50 years, IEL has maintained its commitment to preparing leaders and educators, providing them with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help children and youth succeed. By bringing together stakeholders to create social capital, find common ground, build trust and share strategies that work, IEL has helped instill the idea that education is a shared responsibility among school systems, families, communities, businesses, and governments, and has helped forge strategic partnerships to transform that vision into measurable results for young people, regardless of background or disability. IEL champions the need for leaders at all levels to shake off institutional constraints and work across boundaries to address the needs of young people and their families.

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- i Early childhood education refers to the care and education children experience prior to elementary school. In most states, early childhood education includes preK, although in some states, preK is part of elementary education.
- ii See, for example, Schulting, A. B., Malone, P. S., & Dodge, K. A. (2005). The effect of school-based kindergarten transition policies and practices on child academic outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(6), 860; and LoCasale-Crouch, J., Mashburn, A.J., Downer, J.T., & Pianta, R.C. (2008). Pre-kindergarten teachers' use of transition practices and children's adjustment to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 23, 124–139.
- iii The Mind in the Making-Community Schools Project is a W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded pilot project being implemented by Families and Work Institute in partnership with Institute for Educational Leadership and the Children's Aid Society.
- iv McLaughlin, M. & London, R. (2013). Using cross-agency longitudinal data for improvement of schools, programs, and policies for youth. In M. McLaughlin & R. London, (Eds.) *From data to action: A community approach to improving youth outcomes* (1-15). Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- v For more information on the regions that participated in the Linkages Project, see [http://www.communityschools.org/about/community\\_school\\_linkages.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/about/community_school_linkages.aspx).
- vi For a detailed discussion of the framework informing the design of *Linkages*, see Melaville, A., & Pearson, S. S. (2009). *The early childhood and community schools linkage project: A framework for action*. Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership. Available at <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Early%20Childhood%20&%20Community%20Schools%20Linkage%20Project%20Framework.pdf>
- vii The full report of the *Early Childhood and Community School Linkages Project: Implementation Study* is available at [http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/reports/ECE\\_Linkages\\_Implementation\\_Study.pdf](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/reports/ECE_Linkages_Implementation_Study.pdf). A research brief based on the full report of the implementation study, *Improving the Quality and Continuity of Practice across Early Childhood Education and Elementary Community School Settings*, is available at [http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/publications/GardnerCenter\\_RB\\_ECELinkages\\_2013.pdf](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/publications/GardnerCenter_RB_ECELinkages_2013.pdf)
- viii For more on the tri-level focus, see Dukakis, K., London, R., McLaughlin, M., & Williamson, D. (2009). *Positive youth development: individual, setting and system level indicators*. John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, Stanford University.
- ix This finding is consistent with research conducted at Illinois State University. For more information, see *Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum* (2009). Retrieved February 26, 2013 from [http://leadershiplinc.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/FINAL\\_LINCreport.pdf](http://leadershiplinc.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/FINAL_LINCreport.pdf).
- x For more information on the developmental stages of community schools, see Children's Aid Society (2011), *Building community schools: A guide for action*. Available at [http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/files/upload-docs/NCCS\\_Building%20Community%20Schools.pdf](http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/files/upload-docs/NCCS_Building%20Community%20Schools.pdf)
- xi U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Early Learning: America's Middle Class Promised Begins Early*. <http://www.ed.gov/early-learning>.