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*for Youth and Their Communities*

# Early Childhood Education and Community Schools Linkages Project: Implementation Study

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## Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Education and Community Schools Linkage Project (Linkages) is an initiative of the Coalition for Community Schools (the Coalition) at the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL); this report was funded by IEL with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Coalition initiated the project to demonstrate strategic linkages between Early Childhood Education (ECE) opportunities and community schools that lead to better results for vulnerable children and lay a foundation for their success in school and life. While the ultimate goal of Linkages was to improve the experiences and outcomes for children and families, the Coalition acknowledges that factors at the setting-level (e.g., school) and the system-level (e.g., district, region, state) shape these individual-level outcomes. In 2009, the Coalition identified three regions engaged in the community school movement (Multnomah County, OR; Albuquerque, NM; and Tulsa, OK) to deliberately work toward these goals. Each region, in turn, identified between two and four elementary community schools (community schools) to serve as demonstration sites for a total of nine demonstration sites. These demonstration sites received a grant and technical support to improve linkages in their settings.

To better understand the conditions that supported and hindered implementation within and across the demonstration sites and regions, the Coalition engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (JGC) as a research partner. This is the JGC's final report from the Linkages implementation study. The study aimed to better understand the practices, outcomes, and conditions that facilitate and hinder the building of smooth, effective, and sustainable linkages. It relied on qualitative data collected over the course of three years. The research team interviewed nearly 70 people representing more than a dozen role groups, conducted more than 100 hours of observation, and analyzed hundreds of pages of documents participating regions created while planning and implementing Linkages.

This report identifies new practices and organizational arrangements that sites and regions implemented to improve the capacity of individuals, settings, and systems to facilitate smooth linkages; finds preliminary evidence of positive outcomes at all three levels, with the most significant changes occurring at the setting level; and identifies factors that influenced implementation. Key findings are outlined below and summarized in Figure 1. The report concludes with a brief discussion of questions and issues for further scholarly inquiry and consideration in practice.

### **New practices and organizational arrangements**

- Practices designed to build the capacity of children and families included familiarizing children and families with the community school setting prior to the start of kindergarten; equipping families of young children to support literacy development; providing a summer transition program for incoming kindergarten families who did not participate in a formal ECE program; and situating kindergarten in the context of K-12 education and equipping parents to support and advocate for their children.



- Practices designed to build the capacity of settings included providing professional development opportunities for community school and ECE professionals to learn about each other’s practice and improve continuity across settings; organizing students in new ways in order to foster relationships among and between families and teachers; and creating physical spaces within the community school that are welcoming and developmentally appropriate for families with children ages 0-5.
- Practices designed to build the capacity of systems included providing shared professional development for system-level leaders; creating regional leadership for Linkages that includes a well-facilitated cross-agency team with the authority to inform the direction of the work and translate it into practice; providing opportunities for key stakeholders to engage with relevant education research; and positioning ECE educators and elementary educators as colleagues.

### **Preliminary outcomes**

- Individual-level outcomes included an increased sense of comfort, belonging, engagement, competency, and efficacy among children and parents, and increased involvement of children and parents/guardians in setting- and system-level leadership roles.
- Setting-level outcomes included a new vision for how ECE and elementary educators, settings, and systems facilitate student and family transitions to kindergarten; increased respect for colleagues and commitment to cross-agency collaboration; new practices and a greater sense of efficacy among educators; and new parent networks and ways to engage parents in schools.

Systems-level outcomes included new professional development opportunities designed to foster continuity between ECE and elementary practices and professionals; new district and regional policies; new system-level campaigns promoting kindergarten registration; and preliminary acknowledgement of the value of early learning at the state level.

### **Factors affecting implementation**

- Factors that influenced implementation included a combination of highly skilled staff and supporting organization to steer Linkages implementation; mature stage of community school development; opportunities for regions to learn from one another; proximity between ECE settings and community schools; system-level responsibility for kindergarten registration; resource availability and alignment; distributed expertise and multiple champions; opportunities for multiple organizations and role groups to collaborate; and access to a comprehensive ECE system that shares indicators with elementary education systems.



**Figure 1. Summary of practices, outcomes and factors affecting Linkages implementation.**

Practices	
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiarize children and families with the community school setting prior to the start of kindergarten;</li> <li>• Equip families of young children to support literacy development;</li> <li>• Provide a summer transition program for incoming kindergarten families who did not participate in a formal ECE program; and</li> <li>• Situate kindergarten in the context of K-12 education and equip parents to support and advocate for their children.</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide professional development opportunities for community school and ECE professionals to learn about each other’s practice and improve continuity across settings;</li> <li>• Organize students in new ways in order to foster relationships among and between families and teachers; and</li> <li>• Create physical spaces within the community school that are welcoming and developmentally appropriate for families with children ages 0-5.</li> </ul>
System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide shared professional development for system-level leaders;</li> <li>• Create regional leadership for Linkages that includes a well-facilitated cross-agency team with the authority to inform the direction of the work and translate it into practice;</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for key stakeholders to engage with relevant education research; and</li> <li>• Position ECE educators and elementary educators as colleagues.</li> </ul>

Preliminary outcomes	
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort, belonging, and engagement;</li> <li>• Competency and efficacy; and</li> <li>• Leadership.</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new vision for how ECE and elementary educators, settings, and systems facilitate student and family transitions to kindergarten;</li> <li>• Increased respect for colleagues and commitment to cross-agency collaboration;</li> <li>• New practices and a greater sense of efficacy among educators; and</li> <li>• New parent networks and ways to engage parents in schools.</li> </ul>
System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New opportunities to foster continuity between ECE and elementary practices and professionals;</li> <li>• New district and regional policies;</li> <li>• New system-level campaigns promoting kindergarten registration; and</li> <li>• Preliminary acknowledgement of the value of early learning at the state level.</li> </ul>

Factors affecting implementation	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combination of highly-skilled staff and supporting organization to steer Linkages implementation;</li> <li>• Mature stage of community school development;</li> <li>• Opportunities for regions to learn from one another;</li> <li>• Proximity between ECE settings and community schools;</li> <li>• System-level responsibility for reforming kindergarten registration;</li> <li>• Resource availability and alignment;</li> <li>• Distributed expertise and multiple champions;</li> <li>• Opportunities for multiple organizations and role groups to collaborate; and</li> <li>• Access to a comprehensive ECE system that shares indicators with elementary education systems.</li> </ul>



## I. Project Overview

The Early Childhood Education and Community Schools Linkage Project (Linkages) is an initiative of the Coalition for Community Schools (the Coalition) at the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL); this report was funded by IEL with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Coalition initiated the project to demonstrate strategic linkages between Early Childhood Education<sup>1</sup> (ECE) opportunities and community schools that lead to better results for vulnerable children and lay a foundation for their success in school and life. A key assumption underlying the project was that community schools are in a unique position to facilitate Linkages because they tend to embrace norms and structures fundamental for developing connections with ECE centers and systems. These norms and structures include a culture of partnership and capacity to engage in collaborative relationships with community-based organizations; a recognition that promoting school achievement means meeting children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs; an acknowledgement that children do better when their families do better; and strategies to intentionally support family members of all ages. The Coalition designed Linkages on the premise that working more intentionally with ECE partners to systemically extend supports to the youngest family members is a natural and logical extension of what community schools are designed to do (Melaville & Pearson, 2009).

While the ultimate goal of Linkages was to improve the experiences and outcomes for children and families, the Coalition acknowledges that factors at the setting-level (e.g., school) and the system-level (e.g., district, region, state) shape these individual-level outcomes. In this way, the Coalition’s approach to change reflected a tri-level perspective that “assumes that changes in system-level factors will stimulate and support (or frustrate) changes in settings, which in turn will (or will not) lead to positive changes in youth outcomes” (Dukakis, London, McLaughlin, & Williamson, 2009). Linkages was therefore designed to improve the quality and continuity of practice across ECE and community school settings and systems, increase the scale of those efforts, and promote their sustainability.

In 2009, the Coalition identified three regions engaged in the community school movement (Multnomah County, OR; Albuquerque, NM; and Tulsa, OK) to deliberately work toward these goals.<sup>2</sup> Each region, in turn, identified between two and four elementary community schools (community schools) to serve as demonstration sites for a total of nine demonstration sites. These demonstration sites received a grant and technical support to improve linkages in their

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the phrase “early childhood education (ECE)” refers to the care and education children experience prior to elementary school. In most states, elementary school begins with Kindergarten; however, in Oklahoma, public elementary schools are required to offer a pre-K program. In addition, project participants in Tulsa define “early childhood” as the entire continuum of care and education that occurs between birth and age 8 and they refer to the stage prior to elementary school as “early care and learning” rather than “early childhood.” For the purposes of this report, references to “early childhood” refer to programs outside the traditional (K-12 or pre-K–12) public-school programming and include programs serving children ages 0-4.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix: Description of Participating Regions.



settings. To better understand the conditions that supported and hindered implementation within and across the demonstration sites and regions, the Coalition engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (JGC) as a research partner.

### **Important definitions**

- *Regions* refer to the three communities that implemented Linkages: Albuquerque, Multnomah County, and Tulsa.
- *Demonstration sites* and *community schools* refer to the elementary community schools that each region selected to implement Linkages.
- *Settings* refer to a classroom or school context. Settings include ECE classrooms and programs; demonstration site classrooms and programs; and, in some cases, co-located elementary community schools and ECE centers.

## **II. Research Overview and Methods**

### **Research Questions**

In partnership with the Coalition, JGC researchers designed the Linkages implementation study to examine practices, preliminary outcomes, and conditions that facilitate and hinder the building of smooth, effective, and sustainable linkages through a tri-level lens (individual, setting, and system). This report addresses the following questions:

1. What did demonstration sites and regions do when they set out to improve linkages? What were the promising practices?
2. What outcomes were visible at the individual (children, families), setting (community schools, ECE settings), and system (districts, regions) levels?
3. What factors facilitated and hindered Linkages implementation?
4. How do community schools lend themselves to smooth and effective linkages?

### **Research Methods**

The Linkages implementation study relied on qualitative data collected in three regions (inclusive of a total of nine demonstration sites) over the course of three years. The research team interviewed nearly 70 people representing more than a dozen role groups (e.g., principals, teachers, superintendents, ECE directors, ECE educators, parents, regional directors of family service agencies, Linkages coordinators) for a total of 135 interviews. Researchers conducted more than 100 hours of observation, including observations of site-level meetings, regional meetings, community school classrooms, ECE classrooms, professional development sessions,



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recess activities, and cross-regional convenings. JGC's team also collected and analyzed hundreds of pages of documents and web-based resources (e.g., meeting agendas, meeting notes, conceptual frameworks, grant proposal narratives, tools developed to facilitate the work of demonstration sites) that the three regions created while planning and implementing Linkages.

The team developed descriptive and analytic codes designed to identify implementation patterns and variations within and across sites and regions. Interview and observation data collected during year three were entered into qualitative analysis software to code for key concepts. The team achieved preliminary findings using coding queries and relationship analysis tools in *NVivo* 9.2 as well as additional content analysis of retrieved, coded data. Additional analysis, focused on the arc of implementation and the conditions that helped and hindered progress within and across regions, included data from years one and two. While the team entered analysis with preliminary propositions about the implementation process based on a preliminary theory of change, the core components of the implementation process were continuously refined through the analysis period, and the team's findings included and expanded upon the project's original framework (Melaville & Pearson, 2009).

The following sections detail the findings of this study and identify promising practices, preliminary outcomes, and factors affecting implementation. The efforts and experiences of each region are integrated throughout the report.

### **III. Findings: Promising Practices**

As part of Linkages, the Coalition expected each region to think more broadly and deeply regarding the practices and organizational arrangements that could facilitate closer ECE and community school relationships. The research team looked across the nine demonstration sites for practices and organizational arrangements implemented with the intention of improving the capacity of individuals, settings, and systems to facilitate smooth linkages. The practices highlighted in this report were most common and promising, but did not necessarily occur across all nine demonstration sites. The most salient practices included a number of efforts designed to build the capacity of: children and families to navigate the transition between ECE and community school; ECE and community school settings to promote smooth and effective linkages; and systems to support linkages.





## **Build the capacity of children and families to navigate the transition between ECE and community school**

In an effort to improve the capacity of children and families to effectively navigate the transition between ECE and community school settings, sites and regions implemented practices designed to:

- Familiarize children and families with the community school setting prior to the start of kindergarten;
  - Equip families of young children to support literacy development;
  - Provide a summer transition program for incoming kindergarten families who did not participate in a formal ECE program; and
  - Situate kindergarten in the context of K-12 education and equip parents to support and advocate for their children.
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- **Familiarize children and families with the community school setting prior to the start of kindergarten.** Demonstration sites implemented a number of practices designed to orient children and families to the community school setting prior to the beginning of kindergarten. Students who attended ECE centers adjacent to a community school visited the community school and kindergarten classrooms, met teachers and other key staff on campus, attended joint assemblies with kindergarteners, played on the kindergarten playground, attended story time in the community school library, and participated in the lunch line and cafeteria experience. Several kindergarten teachers attended ECE center parent nights to share information and answer questions regarding kindergarten registration and kindergarten readiness. Many parents of young children were included in community school family nights, family days (e.g., seasonal gatherings on a Saturday), and various kindergarten preview nights. Community schools were very thoughtful in their planning of these opportunities and even took steps to ensure that families would see familiar faces when they arrived. For example, in one demonstration site, the ECE teachers directed traffic and greeted families as they came for a kindergarten information evening at the community school. This was an effective way to communicate the relationship between the settings and to put families at ease as they began their transition. One community school principal expressed that these various strategies were intentionally implemented in order to “minimize the surprises that might happen in kindergarten.” The goal, she added was to “make [kindergarten] as predictable as possible.”
  - **Equip families of young children to support literacy development.** Demonstration sites implemented a number of practices designed to help families of young children learn what they could do to promote literacy development in their homes. One community school organized a monthly Principal’s Book Club where the school invited families throughout the community to join the principal as she read a book aloud and explained strategies for



promoting literacy skills with young children. The goal was for families and their children to develop a shared understanding of that month's book and for parents to feel equipped to read at home while incorporating strategies to promote literacy. Each family left with its own copy of the book, which helped grow a home library. Other sites organized a weekly story time in the community school libraries that, like the Principal's Book Club, were open to all parents and their babies, toddlers, and young children. These weekly gatherings included read-aloud time as well as interactive activities designed to engage parents and young children together in creative literacy-building activities. One demonstration site noticed that native-Spanish speaking mothers were not attending as regularly as native-English speaking mothers, and in response, it launched a Spanish-speaking story time in one family's home. This group, led by a parent paid by the district, quickly grew and is now meeting in a nearby community center, drawing parents and children from throughout the neighborhood.

- **Provide a summer transition program for incoming kindergarten families who did not participate in a formal ECE program.** One region implemented summer transition programs in a few of their demonstration sites. These programs were two to three weeks long (consistent with similar programs implemented in other states) and they included a child and parent component (approximately four hours each day for children and four hours per week for parents). Through the summer transition program, children developed relationships with kindergarten teachers and experienced classroom and school norms, routines, and practices. Parents met the teachers, administrators, community school coordinators, and other key staff. Parents learned about the kindergarten curriculum and specific strategies they could use to support their child's learning at home. Parents also learned about brain development, the developmental stages of writing, the developmental stages of mathematical thinking, and the importance of school attendance. Based on the success of these programs, summer transition programs were planned for additional sites and one additional region during the summer of 2013.
- **Situate kindergarten in the context of K-12 education and equip parents to support and advocate for their children.** Several district leaders were committed to equipping parents to support and advocate for their children throughout their K-12 education. One superintendent described his commitment this way: "[We are] trying to build mechanisms for educating parents about being parents. You might help them get the services they need, and we need to do that, but we need to help educate our own parents. That is in our board goals this year." More than half of the demonstration sites held various parent education events, including parent nights, a parent university, and a parent retreat to equip families to effectively support and advocate for their children. These events were intended to situate kindergarten in the greater arc of K-12 education, equip parents to support learning in their homes, and help parents understand the positive relationship between kindergarten success, a child's K-12 academic trajectory, a college education, and future income opportunities.



- In one demonstration site, a weekly “Homework Diner” provided families with the opportunity to meet with teachers and to receive help with homework; the evening also included dinner for the families which allowed the parents to focus on helping their children with homework rather than preparing a meal. The evening gatherings also created a setting where schools could provide parents with information about accessing a range of health, social, and occupational services to support children and families. At the heart of this approach was a time for families to be together with one another and with community school staff. A director of a community-based organization noted that this kind of opportunity is particularly important in an effort to improve linkages:

It’s really about the whole child, whole family, whole community approach. It’s not about working with community, but partnering with community. And remember that community is really people—individuals—real people. ... It has to be a real partnership. We have to be real careful with how we talk about and think about this work.

### **Build the capacity of ECE and community school settings to promote smooth and effective linkages**

The following three practices were designed to improve the capacity of settings to promote smooth and effective linkages:

- Provide professional development opportunities for community school and ECE professionals to learn about each other’s practice and improve continuity across settings;
  - Organize students in new ways in order to foster relationships among and between families and teachers; and
  - Create physical spaces within the community school that are welcoming and developmentally appropriate for families with children ages 0-5.
- **Provide professional development opportunities for community school and ECE professionals to learn about each other’s practices and improve continuity across settings.** Many setting-level leaders (e.g., principals, community school coordinators, Linkages coordinators) noticed that community and ECE teachers knew little about one another’s practice. Perhaps more importantly, teachers held many unexamined (and critical) assumptions about each other’s approach to teaching and learning. For example, prior to Linkages, ECE teachers in one setting assumed that kindergarten teachers were inappropriately structured in their curriculum, instruction, and classroom management; kindergarten teachers in that same setting assumed that ECE teachers were primarily caregivers who held few (if any) standards for classroom learning or classroom behavior. In response, site leaders created multiple opportunities for ECE and community school teachers to learn more about each other’s practice. In one setting, the ECE and community school teachers named these dialogues “Mythbusters.” In one region, teachers at ECE and



community school sites visited each other's classrooms and observed each other teaching. One district paid its kindergarten teachers a stipend to observe Pre-K students who would be matriculating into their classrooms the following year; the visit included classroom observations and a conversation with the Pre-K teachers. In another district, ECE educators partnered with kindergarten teachers to teach the summer transition program and, in so doing, learned about each other's practices. ECE and elementary practitioners (e.g., ECE leaders, principals, community school coordinators) also had the opportunity to learn about one another's practice in the context of leadership teams that guided cross-setting Linkages work.

Teachers and administrators in ECE and community schools also instituted specific changes to promote cross-setting continuity in teacher expectations, classroom discourse, and school routines. In one demonstration site, community school and ECE teachers attended training on a new framework for classroom management, developed a shared understanding of the framework, and implemented consistent practices and expectations—even using the same language with their students. About half of the sites created continuity by having ECE and community school teachers jointly review and align assessment practices between settings in order to obtain more consistent and more meaningful data on student learning. For example, in one setting, kindergarten teachers began using the observation-based GOLD system<sup>3</sup> for assessing children. Traditionally used only in ECE settings, but suitable for assessing kindergarteners, this change in practice provided pre-school and kindergarten teachers with common indicators of student growth across a number of developmental variables. There were also examples of ECE and community school teachers meeting to co-author students' kindergarten transition plans prior to the start of the school year which enabled the child and family to experience a smooth transition, inclusive of continuity of any services the child and family needed (e.g., social services or support from an educational specialists). These practices reflect a shift in how schools were thinking about linkages. One community school principal described the shift this way:

It used to be that working on the transition meant working on something formal such as kindergarten transition night. So we do that—a night where students, families, and kindergarten teachers get together, and there is ice cream. But now we also think about it in terms of the on-going support we need to provide to the students, the parents, and the teachers. Now we have the pre-school and kindergarten teacher meet to hand off the student files and discuss the academic, social, and emotional supports that the child and family may need. The students' plan is co-written by the head start teacher and the kindergarten teacher. This is a big change.

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<sup>3</sup> Teaching Strategies GOLD is an ECE assessment tool based on 38 research-based objectives that include predictors of school success and are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, state early learning guidelines, and the *Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework*. For more information, visit [www.teachingstrategies.com/page/assessment-early-childhood-overview.cfm](http://www.teachingstrategies.com/page/assessment-early-childhood-overview.cfm)



- Organize students in new ways in order to foster relationships among and between families and teachers.** Many sites acknowledged that long-term relationships between families and teachers foster a feeling of continuity and coherence. While school structures (e.g., changing teachers each year, reconfiguring or recombining groups of students to form new classes each fall) typically hinder long-term or multi-year relationships, two demonstration sites promoted improved linkages by implementing new approaches to organizing students and families within the structure of the existing school day: (1) multi-age classrooms (e.g., K/1, 2/3) where students remain with the same teacher for two consecutive years; and (2) a K-5 strand where children progress through a particular series of teachers. These practices are variations of “looping,” a practice that schools use to promote student-teacher relationships by keeping students and teachers together for more than one academic year. Within these new structures, demonstration sites made intentional efforts to improve linkages by nurturing the relationships between and among children, teachers *and* families. These efforts included evening and weekend family events as well as cross-classroom learning opportunities during the school day. The intention was that improved relationships across grade levels would promote smoother transitions for children and families not only in kindergarten, but also throughout their elementary experience.
- Create physical spaces within the community school that are welcoming and developmentally appropriate for families with children ages 0-5.** A few demonstration sites noticed that their classrooms and outdoor play areas were not developmentally appropriate—or safe—for families with young children. In an effort to ensure that young children and their families felt welcome in the community school setting, these schools created spaces designed specifically for young children and their families. They included a designated ECE room with a colorful rug for parent-child classes and a rocking chair for rocking or nursing infants, outdoor climbing structures appropriate for toddlers, and a designated parent room where parent volunteers could gather with their young children as they completed their volunteer tasks or simply met together to talk. Children and families utilized these spaces well. The availability of these spaces sent a clear message to both families and school staff that a smooth transition to community school begins well before kindergarten.



## Build the capacity of systems to support linkages

The following four practices were designed to build the capacity of systems to support linkages, including efforts to:

- Provide shared professional development for system-level leaders;
  - Create regional leadership for Linkages that includes a well-facilitated cross-agency team with the authority to inform the direction of the work and translate it into practice;
  - Provide opportunities for key stakeholders to engage with relevant education research; and
  - Position ECE educators and elementary educators as colleagues.
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- **Provide shared professional development for system-level leaders.** Each region acknowledged the importance of engaging systems-level leaders in shared learning regarding Linkages. While most efforts to foster shared learning occurred on a rather small scale (e.g., including a few leaders) or were accomplished through large one-time convenings (e.g., around a keynote address), one region created an opportunity for shared learning that was explicitly tied to ECE. This region brought together representatives from the city's ECE community, public school districts, and institutions of higher education to inform and support 20 community school principals in understanding how to better integrate ECE practices into their settings. In the two-day training, principals learned about child development, appropriate expectations and learning environments for 3-5 year olds, and the role of ECE in developing social emotional skills. The district superintendent and deputy superintendent attended the training and demonstrated their support.
  - **Create regional leadership for Linkages that includes a well-facilitated cross-agency team with the authority to inform the direction of the work and translate it into practice.** Regional leadership teams included ECE and community school staff as well as leaders from key intermediary and community-based organizations. In most cases, these participants had decision-making authority, which enabled them to translate their ideas and efforts into actionable steps. Furthermore, regional Linkages coordinators facilitated the regional leadership teams in a way that made members feel engaged, valued, and supported. Members of the leadership team also benefited tremendously from collaborating with their colleagues in a way that had not been possible before Linkages. For example, one district administrator noted, "I went to an ECE collaborative meeting and they were so glad that I was there. I never realized that we hadn't been at the table." A regional family service provider added, "Aside from the steering committee, I don't have any interaction or contact with ECE providers or sites. That has been more interesting and complex than I had ever imagined." These comments reflect statements made by team members in every region.

Regional leadership teams played a significant role in driving the direction of Linkages in each region, sharing and building knowledge, and often identifying opportunities for their



organizations to collaborate. For example, in one region, the Linkages leadership team garnered support for a campaign around chronic absence work, which led to new systems-level practices around attendance data that affected all schools in one district. In addition to valuing the impact they could have on children and families, members of the regional leadership teams found tremendous personal and professional value in being part of these cross-agency teams and planned to continue meeting after the conclusion of the Linkages grant.

- **Provide opportunities for key stakeholders to engage with relevant education research.** Regions united their systems-level leaders and broader communities around important and timely education issues that highlighted the importance of improving linkages, such as chronic absence and brain development in the context of child development (e.g., *Mind in the Making*). A director of an intermediary organization found it very helpful to connect Linkages to other relevant research-based efforts:

[It helps to] find an issue that can be a catalyst that everyone can get behind. Chronic absence was that for us. In earlier years, we had tried to learn about each other's system. That was helpful, but it was the chronic absence work that got us jazzed, got us some traction. We recognized the opportunity to do things differently in [our] own systems and settings.

Linkages leaders brought together key stakeholders, including parents, ECE educators, elementary educators, district administrators, leaders of intermediary organizations, and university partners not only to collaboratively engage with these ideas but also to think together about how to translate them into setting and systems-level changes.

- **Position ECE educators and elementary educators as colleagues.** One district employed both elementary and ECE teachers and administrators, thus positioning them as professional colleagues and peers. It is unusual for districts to employ ECE teachers; these professionals are generally employed by private or government-funded organizations outside the school district. This practice lent itself to shared professional development practices, district-level dialogue regarding linkages, and instructional coaching that focused on integrating developmentally appropriate practices in the early elementary grades.

#### **IV. Findings: Preliminary Outcomes**

The previous section described practices that broadened and deepened the integration between ECE and community schools. In this section, we turn to the preliminary outcomes of these practices. In the context of a tri-level perspective, each level serves as a lens through which to examine evidence of change. For an ambitious reform initiative like Linkages to be scaled and sustained over time, it is critical to see evidence of positive outcomes at all three levels. Disproportionately fewer outcomes in one area suggest that the work needs to be more



intentionally embedded in additional levels in order to transform the experiences and outcomes of children and families. For example, if the results of this work tend to cluster around the individual level, it suggests that children and families experienced positive changes but these effects might not be tied to transformed settings or systems and are therefore unlikely to be sustained or scaled.

Since the Coalition designed Linkages to improve the quality and continuity of practice across ECE and community school settings and systems, evidence of outcomes was most concentrated at the setting level. For large-scale initiative such as Linkages, it typically takes more than three years of implementation to yield individual-level outcomes. The research team did not systematically gather Individual-level data in the course of this study but through interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators, the team heard preliminary reports of positive outcomes for children and families. Although these individual level data are anecdotal, they are worth noting because they reflect variables known to have a positive impact on children's learning and achievement throughout elementary and middle school.

### Individual-level outcomes

Preliminary evidence suggests that children and families who participated in Linkages activities and practices demonstrated the following three outcomes:

- Comfort, belonging, and engagement;
- Competency and efficacy; and
- Leadership.

### Comfort, belonging, and engagement

- **Children had greater comfort with the community school setting and readiness to engage in the instructional program.** Teachers reported that children who participated in Linkages activities and practices (e.g., a summer transition program, visits to kindergarten classrooms) were more comfortable and less anxious when they began kindergarten. Children arrived knowing how to enter into the classroom setting (e.g., where to put their backpacks, how to enter into the morning meeting circle), were comfortable meeting their personal needs (e.g., using the bathroom, navigating the lunch line), and able to move very quickly into the instructional program. Teachers noted that this was a noticeable improvement from prior years when the first weeks of schools were marked by tears, difficulty separating from parents or caregivers, and classroom hours spent familiarizing students with kindergarten norms and routines. One summer transition program parent participant noted, "The staff took the time to make my son feel comfortable with the class, routines, and making the transition to kindergarten. He learned to spell his name and recognize letters. All because of [the summer transition] program." A kindergarten teacher





added, “If [children] are anxious about school, their brains aren’t in a learning place. They need to get comfortable with the transitions—know how to get to the bathroom, and where to get a drink. This really helps them move into full day kindergarten.”

- **Children and families had a stronger sense of family engagement and connection to school.** According to parents and teachers, children who participated in Linkages activities seemed to have a greater sense that the adults around them were connected to one another and supportive of their education (e.g., children were excited to see their parents talking to their teachers or volunteering in their school). Parents in one demonstration site said that their children felt more accountable for their schoolwork because they interpreted the parent-teacher interactions as focused on the child’s school experience. One teacher reported that children responded positively when teachers used their knowledge of the family or child to build stronger relationships with students (e.g., playing the child’s favorite song in the classroom). These connections are known to make a difference in student learning and achievement.

Many community school teachers and administrators observed that, after three years of implementing Linkages, parents seemed to be more comfortable in the school setting and more involved in various ways (e.g., volunteering in classrooms and on school-wide committees). The school-family liaison spoke to the shift she observed, noting, “The Spanish-speaking story time has formed a group. When they come in the hall, I see them talking. That didn’t happen before. [Spanish-speaking parents] are more comfortable.” One parent agreed about the increased comfort level and explained, “Before the summer transition program, I felt like an outsider, but now I feel like a partner. I now feel comfortable to talk to teachers and be involved more in school.”

### Competency and efficacy

- **Children showed improved attendance and academic achievement.** According to data collected by two demonstration sites, children who participated in a summer transition program showed early indicators of higher attendance and children in one of the sites showed preliminary evidence of higher academic achievement (as measured by kindergarten composite assessments and first grade benchmarks) than their peers who did not participate in Linkages efforts. Teachers and administrators noticed this outcome in the fall of 2010, following the first summer transition program; this pattern held for this cohort through spring 2011 and fall 2011. One community school coordinator noted, “We are seeing more readiness both academically and socially. Having that touch point [with the summer program] before the school year starts is helpful.”
- **Children showed improved attendance and academic achievement. Parents had increased capacity and efficacy to support their children.** School staff noted that parents who participated in summer transition programs and workshops were eager to support their children’s learning and they were grateful for the opportunity to learn specific and effective



strategies to navigate the elementary experience. Parents specifically mentioned that they learned tips and tools that helped them feel more confident working with their children on their homework. Following her participation in the summer transition program, one parent commented, “I am so grateful for this class. It has taught me so many ways to work, communicate, and interact with my child. This is the most comfortable, informative program I have been involved with.”

## Leadership

- **Parents and children took on leadership roles within the school setting.** Demonstration sites began to see parents not only as partners in the service of educating children, but also as effective leaders within the school setting. For example, one school hired a parent with prior teaching experience to lead a weekly story time for parents and their infants and toddlers. That same school invited a Spanish-speaking parent to host a Spanish-speaking story time in her home. In addition to inviting parents to lead various groups, one school began to groom current kindergarten parents to lead by serving as mentors for next year’s incoming kindergarten class and their parents. Children took on leadership roles as well. In another demonstration site, teachers observed that kindergarteners who had participated in summer transition programs demonstrated leadership skills by serving as effective role models and peer mentors for their classmates who had not participated in Linkages activities. In another demonstration site with multi-age classrooms, first graders helped kindergarteners transition into the K/1 classroom while their parents served as mentors and leaders to new parents.
- **Parents moved from learning and leading to system-level advocacy.** There were at least three examples where parents moved from learning and leading to system-level advocacy. One site brought together stakeholders to discuss chronic absenteeism, and parents drove sustained attention to the issues and ultimately helped change school policy. Another site helped parents form an advocacy group so that parents could support one another and learn to be effective advocates for themselves and their children in various settings (e.g., education, health and human services). In a third demonstration site, parents have begun to organize themselves, creating a parent advocacy group designed to advocate at the state level for policies that would promote developmentally appropriate practices in K-12 education. The school-community liaison described the group in this way: “[This is] not a PTO—this is about parents supporting parents, educating each other regarding how to be effective advocates for themselves, their children in the school, and the city.”



## Setting-level outcomes

Four indicators demonstrate that settings were shifting in ways that promoted improved linkages:

- A new vision for how ECE and community school educators, settings, and systems facilitate student and family transitions to kindergarten;
- Increased respect for colleagues and commitment to cross-agency collaboration;
- New practices and a greater sense of efficacy among educators; and
- New parent networks and ways to engage parents in schools.

- **A new vision for how ECE and community school educators, settings, and systems facilitate student and family transitions to kindergarten.** Linkages prompted project participants to shift from seeing the transition between ECE and kindergarten settings as something that a child and her family do to something that the ECE and community school educators, settings, and systems collaboratively facilitate and support. A director of ECE services in one region described the shift in this way:

We were getting [children] ready to take them to the door and then leaving them—and that is not what a good transition is. The key to a successful transition is that the receivers are ready, the travelers are ready, and the deliverers are ready—the schools, the families, and ECE settings.

For example, some kindergarten teachers, community school principals, and ECE educators described how, prior to Linkages, they had strongly believed that the key to a good kindergarten transition was making sure that children were “ready” for kindergarten. After three years of Linkages implementation, these same practitioners viewed readiness as one small part of the equation and saw their role in supporting children and their families through the transition process as equally important.

- **Increased respect for colleagues and commitment to cross-agency collaboration.** ECE and community school teachers developed a greater understanding of and respect for each other’s work and began to see how their expertise was relevant to one another’s practice. Many of the demonstration sites and partner organizations characterized their work prior to Linkages as operating within a silo of sorts, either defined by a domain of expertise (elementary teacher, early childhood, health and human services) or by the physical boundary of one’s work environment (e.g., county office, district office, elementary campus, ECE center). However, as participants reframed the adults in educational settings (e.g., teachers, community school coordinators, administrators) as active co-facilitators of a smooth and effective transition experience, they also developed a greater desire and capacity to partner with one another across traditional domains of practice. A member of a



regional linkages leadership team described the shift in the following way: “The [demonstration schools] have come to see part of their school’s role as reaching out to families with young children who are not yet part of the school as a strategy for helping ensure that the children are successful when they do come to their school.”

One first grade teacher commented, “We have cemented the partnership with the early childcare center next door. Before, we were kind of on speaking terms and now they are coming over all the time and they are coming to our events.” She was not alone. After three years, most project participants had a new appreciation for their colleagues in other settings and valued collaboration in the service of improving linkages. A regional director of ECE services described it this way:

A learning that comes from a grant like this is that it’s a collective charge and that education spans across multiple people and areas. The cross-table conversations are hard. But you can’t just concentrate on birth-3 or just 3-5. It’s one whole thing and each part affects the other.

As partnerships across organizations became more common, school-level practitioners started to notice other opportunities for improving linkages through cross-organization collaboration. In two regions, several school- and district-level leaders expanded the idea of linkages to include efforts to improve the experiences of youth and families as they transitioned into middle school. According to the community school principal in one of these sites:

We’ve taken it to a new level in that we are also beginning to look [at]...the transition from 6<sup>th</sup> grade into 7<sup>th</sup> grade. ... We’re actually planning two full days in June to work with our 6<sup>th</sup> grade students and staff—a two-day camp—so the 6<sup>th</sup> graders can meet their 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. [This is] a direct outflow of what is happening through Linkages. Making sure our [students] are taken care of all the way through.

- **New practices and a greater sense of efficacy among educators.** Community school teachers appreciated that Linkages expected them to integrate a developmental lens into their practice. As a result, they no longer had to choose between meeting standards and attending to children’s developmental needs in the early elementary grades. Near the end of the third year of implementing Linkages, a district administrator reported that the partnerships between the community school teachers and ECE teachers had been “instrumental” in helping the elementary teachers look at different ways of teaching and assessing students and gave them “permission to break out of the traditional K-12 box.”

Likewise, Linkages invited ECE educators to integrate elementary practices and standards into their practices, which enabled them to feel less isolated and more empowered in their work. As community school teachers experienced smoother beginnings to the school year,



they felt more effective in their practices and they became even stronger supporters of Linkages. One first grade teacher noted:

The positive results motivate us to keep going [on Linkages work]. For example, kids were not crying on the first day of school. We think this is in part because it was the fourth time we had seen the kindergarten students [from next door]—we had seen them at the spring night, late summer preview night, and when they visited our school.

- **New parent networks and ways to engage parents in schools.** In all three regions, there were examples of Linkages prompting new efforts to nurture parent networks and engage parents in schools. One site noticed that fathers were volunteering less often than mothers, and in response, it created a volunteer corps of fathers and uncles. This group had at least one representative on campus every day (identifiable by the group’s t-shirt) that supported everything from classroom instruction (e.g., reading groups) to construction or maintenance projects and sent a visual reminder to the students and school staff that the men of the school community were engaged partners. Demonstration sites created additional opportunities for parents to connect in the context of parent volunteer spaces, parent education opportunities, and parent-child events. Through these opportunities, parent communities and networks emerged where parents shared childcare and school pick up responsibilities, discussed parenting strategies, and organized opportunities for their children to connect outside of school. Sites even encouraged parents who participated in programs for infants and toddlers to create their own networks, even if they did not have a child enrolled in the community school.

### System-level outcomes

Three key changes occurred at the district or county level and one preliminary indicator was observable at the state level:

- New opportunities to foster continuity between ECE and elementary practices and professionals;
  - New district and regional policies;
  - New system-level campaigns promoting kindergarten registration; and
  - Preliminary acknowledgement of the value of early learning at the state level.
- 
- **New opportunities to foster continuity between ECE and elementary practices and professionals.** Some districts began rethinking the content and structure of professional development to allow for more integration between ECE and elementary practices. For example, one district restructured its schedule so that there was shared professional development for ECE educators and elementary teachers every Friday. In another district, the ECE training held for district principals evolved into a training that Linkages staff



delivered at a statewide conference for administrators, principals, and superintendents in summer 2012. Regions have also been intentional about drawing diverse audiences to events and speakers. For example, a regional event about chronic absenteeism drew audiences from elementary schools, ECE settings, and community-based organizations. Overall, systems-level leaders were noticing a positive shift. One district administrator described it this way:

It's getting better. We are building a common language, a common interest. Little by little it is beginning to weave better together. Like strips in a quilt, weaving better together. We are discovering that we are on the same path. That is new. That is different.

- **New district and regional policies.** Participating districts and regions implemented new policies in order to foster improved linkages. Prompted by extensive evidence of the relationship between school attendance, early learning, and long-term outcomes, one area of policy change focused on better and earlier indicators of chronic absenteeism and truancy (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Connolly & Olson, 2012; Sanchez, 2012). For example, one district implemented a new K-8 attendance policy to streamline how all schools in the district monitored and responded to student absenteeism. This particular district did not have demonstration sites, which illustrates how Linkages efforts permeated broader systems. Another district addressed the limitations of their data dashboards by adding new indicators of chronic absence to the data each site scanned and responded to daily. These efforts to provide schools with actionable data regarding attendance were central to promoting smooth and effective linkages.

A second area of policy change influenced curriculum and instruction. For example, one district acknowledged that lunchtime for young children is a critical time for learning and then implemented a new policy that required all Pre-K teachers to eat lunch with their students. The same district communicated its support for infusing ECE practices into elementary classrooms by disseminating a video message from the superintendent explicitly stating the expectation that elementary teachers incorporate developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms. The district furthered its support by providing all of the kindergarten teachers with sand and water tables and materials for dramatic play.

Creating a coherent strategy and framework emerged as a third area of policy change. For example, one region developed a framework and rubric describing setting-level Linkages practices and aligned it with the community schools framework. This helped schools understand how Linkages integrated with each stage of community school development. As a result of this policy, schools in the very early stages of community school development will approach community school work and Linkages as one integrated effort. Another region used a different approach to help its community schools system focus on early childhood. In this second region, an ECE expert developed a framework that depicted a cradle-to-career continuum in which both ECE providers and community schools were embedded as core components along a continuum of settings serving children and families.



A goal of the framework was to raise awareness about the importance of ECE and to demonstrate the relationship between ECE, community schools, and the region's interest in a cradle-to-career framework. There is momentum—and there are plans to sustain this work. As one regional Linkages coordinator noted:

We now consider the system we are building holistically. We are budgeting for an ECE coordinator—this is a sustainable system-wide position where someone is thinking about this and how to link the ECE networks that we have here in [our region]. It takes a long time, but folks do get the idea and the value of community schools with an ECE focus.

- **New system-level campaigns promoting kindergarten registration.** In two regions, districts and regional collaboratives coordinated efforts to 1) raise families' awareness about the importance of enrolling in and regularly attending ECE and kindergarten programs, and 2) increase the proportion of kindergarteners that register for school in the spring prior to kindergarten. Inspired by social networking theory and scholarship that describes the ways in which social networks can facilitate school reform (see Daly, 2010), one district redesigned its kindergarten registration campaign to encourage families to register for kindergarten with their friends. Another region built on an effective "9<sup>th</sup> grade counts" campaign and launched its kindergarten registration efforts with the branding of "Kindergarten Counts." Prior to Linkages, kindergarten registration efforts were largely the responsibility of each individual school. The shift to district-level support was a valuable outcome. One community school principal reflected, "I don't think that any of this would be possible without the district support we have received."
- **Preliminary acknowledgement of the value of early learning at the state level.** While state-level support for ECE fluctuated in all three regions in response to various statewide issues (e.g., budget cuts, election cycles, elected officials' prior experience or expertise with early learning), there were some signs that some state-level leaders understood the importance of ECE. A Linkages leadership team member in one region said, "There has been some [shift] at the state level that will help acknowledge the importance of a 0 to 20 continuum. Also, there is an ad hoc literacy committee and they recognize that ECE needs to be a component of that. The tiny sparks are there." While leaders in each region noted "tiny sparks" at the state level, most were cautiously optimistic, noting that while these signs were hopeful, the persistent challenge was sustaining state-level attention to ECE linkages long enough to affect resource allocation—particularly in the current fiscal context. The question for many was how they could elevate their work to demonstrate the value of ECE linkages and, in turn, encourage sustained funding and support for their efforts, as in the words of one community school coordinator who said, "Currently, our governor has made a shift to PreK-20. This puts us in a nice place to share our learning and to be a model."



## V. Findings: Factors Affecting Implementation

Although a number of promising practices and early indicators of positive outcomes existed at the individual, setting, and system levels across the three participating regions, the implementation outcomes and the process itself looked different within each region. The following section describes how nine factors facilitated and hindered Linkages implementation.

Across all three regions, nine factors affected implementation:

- Combination of highly-skilled staff and supporting organization to steer Linkages implementation;
  - Mature stage of community school development;
  - Opportunities for regions to learn from one another;
  - Proximity between ECE settings and community schools;
  - System-level responsibility for reforming kindergarten registration;
  - Resource availability and alignment;
  - Distributed expertise and multiple champions;
  - Opportunities for multiple organizations and role groups to collaborate; and
  - Access to a comprehensive ECE system that shares indicators with elementary education systems.
- **Combination of highly-skilled staff and supporting organization to steer Linkages implementation.** Each region hired a coordinator who was dedicated to steering Linkages. Coordinators had a variety of skills and knowledge that were essential to facilitating its implementation. Coordinators provided a coherent vision, helped work move forward, shaped discourse around early learning and community schools, held individuals and settings accountable to their commitments, brokered relationships and connections between individuals and agencies, and provided support and mentoring to participants. Researchers commonly heard remarks, such as, “Before Linkages, this work wasn’t done because it wasn’t someone’s job to facilitate it. Now that has changed. It seems small but it has been huge.” Across all three regions, the team also heard, “We strongly believe that if it’s no one’s job, it won’t get done. We say this all the time in our community schools work.”

A combination of skills and expertise facilitated coordinators’ efforts. Coordinators tended to lead effectively when they had prior experience working in the community and an understanding of the history and dynamics of personal and organizational relationships within the region. When this local knowledge was accompanied by a deep understanding of Linkages *and* the ability to communicate with stakeholders at the policy and practice level, then coordinators could effectively situate Linkages in the local context. In addition,





coordinators with expertise and experience in multiple domains of education (e.g., early childhood, elementary education, community school development and school change) were able to successfully navigate the change process in ways that sustained implementation. Coordinators were most effective when they served as thought leaders, skilled practitioners, and coaches to help guide constituents through the change process. For example, one Linkages coordinator noted that, “There was a lot of work in getting people to get it. I learned that I needed to do a lot more handholding and guiding of the process at the school.”

When coordinators were employed and supported by deeply rooted and respected institutions that had the capacity to support Linkages, as was the case in two regions, they could move through Linkages implementation stages more quickly and fluidly. In the third region, the coordinator was positioned in a newly formed organization that was still very much in the process of developing regional authority, an effective structure, and crucial supports for supporting Linkages. The combination of factors required this coordinator to focus on early stage implementation activities, such as building relationships, forming partnerships, developing communication channels and accountability structures, and fostering a shared understanding of Linkages. These activities were fundamental, but the effort they required hampered this region from moving into more advanced stages of Linkages implementation.

- **Mature stage of community school development.** Community schools in more advanced stages of development were better positioned to facilitate Linkages because they embraced norms and structures fundamental for developing connections with ECE centers and systems. Of the nine Linkages demonstration schools, five had stronger elements of mature community schools. These mature community schools were more systematic and intentional about focusing on the needs of the whole child, upholding the notion that schools are not just a place where children develop cognitively, but socially and emotionally as well. Staff at more mature community schools understood that learning also takes place outside the school and begins at birth. Through Linkages, sites advanced these beliefs into new policies and routines that emphasized the larger continuum of a child’s life and more intentionally prepared children for their school career.

Mature community schools also exhibited a stronger culture of partnership and technical capacity to engage in collaborative relationships. These schools viewed themselves as one of several interdependent settings supporting children and families and saw partnering with other organizations as a way to enhance their capacity to support families. Linkages provided sites with the impetus to translate the value of partnership into concrete practice. Through certain staffing and school structures, mature community schools also possessed the technical capacity to facilitate relationships with partner organizations. In two demonstration sites, community school coordinators received assistance from lead agencies, which provided an important layer of support that less mature community schools lacked.



In contrast, demonstration sites that did not have consistent full-time community school coordinators struggled to implement Linkages.

Finally, as demonstration sites operationalized Linkages and translated it into practices, they became stronger community schools. For example, through their participation in Linkages, sites developed new partnerships and deepened existing partnerships. Although regions and sites with more experience in community schools practices were better equipped to implement Linkages in a cohesive manner, schools in earlier stages of development still experienced some success in improving linkages by involving personnel and organizations skilled in school- and system-change processes.

- **Opportunities for regions to learn from one another.** Linkages afforded different role groups opportunities to visit sites within and beyond their region to learn about each other's work, which facilitated their Linkages implementation. An array of people participated in national conferences (e.g., the Coalition's National Forum and the Children's Aid Society Community Schools Practicum) and cross-region site visits, including teachers, principals, and superintendents. Each region's own unique strengths (e.g., Multnomah's well-established community schools) allowed visitors to experience systems and programs at various stages of development and build relationships with people engaged in similar efforts to improve linkages. Participants valued the opportunity to step outside their work, gained clarity about how to incorporate what they experienced into their own practices, and felt more confident approaching decision makers with ideas for incorporating linkages into their work. One teacher commented, "I got to see Linkages and the community school effort in places that have been doing it for so long. We came back [to our site] and figured out how to incorporate what we saw into new initiatives and get the staff energized about it." A teacher from one region with limited community schools experience was empowered to make changes in his school after visiting Multnomah's community schools. The visit made Linkages goals tangible and allowed him to envision ways in which he could deepen parent engagement and connections between grades in his school. He felt confident and well equipped to approach his principal with these innovative ideas and successfully piloted a new school-wide initiative.

Linkages also helped to form professional learning communities among regional coordinators who held unique roles within their organizations. Regional coordinators saw each other as valuable resources throughout the implementation process; they frequently shared information, resources, and materials that they developed or adapted in their efforts to improve linkages. For example, one regional coordinator learned about an effective summer transition program through conversations with her regional counterpart and started working towards adapting the program in her own region. The extent to which regional coordinators communicated with one another was largely a function of how aligned their work was; two coordinators had deeper and more frequent contact with each other than with the third coordinator.



- Proximity between ECE settings and community schools.** There was variation in the extent to which Linkages demonstration sites had co-located community schools and ECE centers; seven demonstration sites had co-located community schools and ECE sites and two did not. However, *existing proximity* was not the same as *existing relationships*. Some co-located sites had never interacted prior to Linkages or had a negative experience interacting with each other. Through this initiative, all co-located sites developed a number of ways to leverage their proximity to experiment with low-cost and low-risk practices that facilitated Linkages. For example, staff from co-located sites observed each other's classrooms and attended events at each other's school (or center). Although proximity was helpful, it was not necessary for Linkages implementation, as evidenced by two sites in that employed Linkages strategies that were not dependent on co-location.
- System-level responsibility for reforming kindergarten registration.** When system-level institutions took ownership for marketing kindergarten registration, demonstration sites were able to concentrate on their core mission of educating students and improving their site level Linkages practices. With the additional support in branding, messaging, and coordination from the district and community-based organizations, families received consistent and widespread messaging and schools saw an increase in early registration. Early registration allowed schools to communicate with incoming kindergarten families and connect them to appropriate Linkages activities (e.g., family events, summer transition programs) which therefore facilitated improved linkages.
- Resource availability and alignment.** All regions received Linkages funding that was essential for supporting a coordinator, travel expenses for cross-site convenings, food and materials for site level activities targeting families and children, materials and staff for summer transition programs, and shared professional development. Regions were able to translate small amounts of funding into significant initiatives that would otherwise have not been possible. For example, two sites in one region received a stipend to document their Linkages work and communicate it to the regional coordinator; this process was important for scaling and sustaining Linkages because it allowed the coordinator to manage multiple sites rather than be responsible for implementation at any one site. Another ECE site paid pre-K teachers and their assistants a stipend to spend time in the ECE classrooms during the summer, learn strategies for conducting observations of students in the ECE learning environment, and conduct observation-based assessments. One region's summer transition program was estimated to cost less than \$1,000 per student but appeared to make a significant difference to children and their families. When sites lacked funds, they were significantly hampered in what they were able to implement. For example, one community school coordinator mentioned that a reduction of her budget by a few thousand dollars forced her to terminate programs that were engaging bi-lingual families.

Regions were also able to leverage Linkages funds to secure other funding. For example, one region encouraged the city, county, and school district to pool funds in order to communicate to a broader audience (e.g., funders) that their missions and efforts were



aligned. Across regions, various role groups reiterated that the Linkages funds they received, although not significant, were absolutely necessary to create and sustain attention to Linkages. Participants were deeply concerned about their ability to sustain Linkages without grant funding, particularly in a time when districts and schools were experiencing unprecedented budget cuts concurrent with unprecedented needs among students and their families.

In addition to resource availability, alignment between regional- and district-level funds facilitated Linkages. Across regions, the timing of district-fund distribution hindered some new practices (e.g., summer transition program) that required mid-academic year confirmation of funds. One demonstration site had just received funding confirmation in early May for its summer transition program, which left little time to confirm staffing and register families. Even in some of the highest-functioning Linkages demonstration sites and districts, the existing district-funding cycle was out of sync with the planning and implementation cycles associated with improving linkages.

- **Distributed expertise and multiple champions.** In all regions, multiple Linkages experts and champions distributed across settings and systems supported Linkages implementation. Champions advocated for Linkages in a wide variety of contexts and made the connection between Linkages and other regional and setting-level change initiatives (e.g., Mind in the Making, Chronic Absence work, Campaign for Grade-Level Reading) which helped decision-making groups understand and support the initiative. Champions were skilled storytellers who shared compelling stories of Linkages efforts and successes wherever they went (e.g., staff meetings, district-level meetings, regional-level meetings), and in so doing, created a broad circle of support for Linkages. All sites had champions at national, regional, district, and site levels, although the combinations of supporters varied between sites.

National-level champions included organizations (e.g., Attendance Works, Families and Work Institute, Children’s Aid Society) and committees (e.g., the Coalition’s National Advisory Committee) that informed and supported Linkages’ direction and vision, provided technical assistance, contributed research and tools, and advocated for young children and their families.

Regional-level champions included individuals (e.g., regional Linkages coordinators, university partners, ECE experts) and organizations (e.g., ECE working groups) that introduced theoretical and conceptual frameworks for implementation to regional leadership collaboratives, situated Linkages in the context of larger regional priorities (e.g., new legislation regarding pre-kindergarten programs, state-level efforts to reduce chronic absence), and cultivated broader understanding of and commitment to Linkages.

District-level champions included ECE Linkages policy advocates, curriculum and pedagogy experts, and superintendents. For example, one district supported teachers to



integrate ECE practices into kindergarten classrooms by providing kindergarten teachers with early childhood materials and an instructional coach with expertise in developmentally appropriate practices. This district also funded early childhood positions which created the opportunity for ECE practitioners to serve as influential champions for Linkages.

Site-level champions included community school coordinators, parent and family liaisons, site-level Linkages coordinators, teachers, and principals. Linkages coordinators noted that sites with principal and teacher buy-in, particularly at the kindergarten level, were most successful in implementing Linkages. Principals were generally not involved in logistical aspects of Linkages implementation but they set the tone and explicit expectation that linkages were a priority and supported their staff to improve linkages. Several community-based organizations felt that they could only build partnerships with schools if the principal was supportive; one organizational representative noted, “there are barriers to getting in the schools unless there is a principal or other site leadership who says, ‘Yes, I want you there.’”

- **Opportunities for multiple organizations and role groups to collaborate.** It was crucial for leaders of multiple agencies to have opportunities to collaborate in a deep and ongoing planning process. This process included articulating a coherent vision for Linkages, situating Linkages in the context of existing priorities, anticipating and effectively navigating implementation challenges in the local and regional context, and garnering broader engagement in the implementation process. This planning process facilitated new and broader conversations that engaged a new combination of key constituents around a shared vision that, in turn, sparked changes in practices and policies. It was key for leaders (rather than other representatives) with decision-making authority to be at the table together. In contrast, when agencies were not able to collaborate and engage in a planning process, conversations stalled as various constituents struggled to move forward. In some cases, implementation was hindered by the absence of a shared vision.

One challenge in convening role groups, particularly at the site level, was finding a time and location when agency representatives (e.g., classroom teachers, afterschool providers, principals, ECE directors, school district administrators) could get together. Some teams were able to find a day and time that worked for their diverse participants, and others struggled with this. For example, one demonstration site was not able to align ECE and community school teachers’ availability in a co-located site because the school hours and teacher commitments before and after school precluded them from having a common day and time available to meet. In another demonstration site, kindergarten teachers were never able to attend on-site Linkages team meetings because the team meetings were scheduled during the school day to accommodate other members’ (e.g., after school providers, community school coordinators, interns, administrators, community-based organizations) schedules. Efforts to identify appropriate opportunities to engage multiple role groups and think creatively about ways to work around logistical challenges facilitated stronger Linkages implementation.



- **Access to a comprehensive ECE system that shares indicators with elementary education systems.** As regions made efforts to create strategic linkages between ECE and community schools, they found that a comprehensive ECE system—an integrated continuum of policies, services, and programs serving young children and their families—did not exist. Since it was difficult to identify all of the ECE settings or providers within a region, each region tended to focus its efforts on improving community school linkages with the ECE settings that were most accessible, such as those located adjacent to demonstration sites. Not only was there an absence of one comprehensive ECE system, but the various ECE lists and rosters that did exist within each region rarely included any information on the large numbers of young children who are in the care of family, friends, and neighbors, rather than in formal ECE programs. These children are most likely to experience difficult transitions into elementary school yet they are the most difficult to identify and reach. The absence of an inclusive list hindered system- and setting-level efforts to improve communication and collaboration between ECE and elementary settings. In addition, Linkages teams lacked an accurate record of the services young children were accessing (if any), which limited their ability to engage all of the organizations relevant to Linkages.

Another challenge regions experienced was that ECE and elementary education fields look to different indicators for evidence of effectiveness. A common set of indicators and the systems to collect these data would strengthen regions' capacity to cultivate a cradle-to-career system. Regions have begun taking steps to strengthen their data systems and develop shared indicators. For example, in one region, a university partner was inventorying educational data to create a social ecology of education, including indicators from ECE to adulthood. Another region was mapping students by zip code in order to understand the supply and demand of ECE services in different geographic areas. A comprehensive ECE system that shares indicators with elementary education will take time to develop. The study findings suggest that every effort to move toward this type of system facilitates improved linkages.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The Coalition designed Linkages to promote the creation of settings and systems that foster smooth and effective linkages for children and families who are most vulnerable during the transition between ECE and elementary settings. A key assumption underlying this project was that community schools are uniquely positioned to advance Linkages because they tend to embrace certain norms and structures that are fundamental for this work. New practices and preliminary outcomes at individual, setting, and system levels demonstrate that changes in discourse and practice are coming together to improve the experiences of children and families. The conditions enabling these changes suggest that the values and structures that tend to be prevalent in mature community schools do lend themselves to improving linkages with ECE programs. While community schools may be poised for facilitating improved linkages, sustaining and scaling this work will require continued attention and intention by both the



Coalition and the regions. Based on the findings, the research team identified five areas that are worth consideration by the Coalition and regions as they think about furthering Linkages.

1. **Kindergarten readiness.** Kindergarten readiness is a significant topic among policy makers, practitioners, and families, and how it is defined carries enormous implications for individuals, settings, and systems. A child’s readiness for kindergarten is a complex issue and the complexity and nuance are difficult to translate into policy. Formal policy defines readiness according to a child’s birthdate while informal policy suggests that readiness should also be based on a child’s performance against various lists of skills and knowledge believed to be prerequisite for kindergarten. Demonstration sites understand the complexity of kindergarten readiness and tend to consider *family* readiness as much as *child* readiness. *How might participating regions inform and reframe conversations, policies, and practices regarding kindergarten readiness? How might their regional-level learning inform cross-regional and national discourse regarding kindergarten readiness? How might these conversations inform and improve linkages?*
2. **Preparation of teachers and educational leaders.** Current approaches to preparing teachers and school leaders reinforce a stark separation between ECE and elementary education. Yet, when Linkages sites made efforts to cultivate shared knowledge and consistent practices across ECE and elementary settings, children, families, and teachers reported positive results, including improvements in teacher efficacy. Given the importance of teacher efficacy to retaining high-quality teachers, and the critical importance of high-quality teachers to the success of children in low-income and under-resourced communities, demonstration regions are motivated and poised to engage with those who are responsible for teacher and leader preparation. *How might participating regions expand their existing partnerships with local universities to explore how pre-service education programs could better prepare practitioners to promote smooth and effective Linkages?*
3. **Public discourse.** Although the public tends to value efforts to improve ECE, it is difficult to translate this value into policy and practice because it is not often grounded in a deep understanding of the relationship between ECE and various indicators of academic and social development. Consequently, public discourse tends to frame investments in ECE as an either/or proposition: *either* resources are allocated to ECE *or* they are allocated to another demographic. Educators who participated in Linkages found ways to renew this conversation by situating learning and development in a longer continuum (e.g., 0-8; Cradle-to-Career; Pre-natal–20). This new frame transforms the binary (either/or discourse) to a more inclusive frame that acknowledges the inextricable link between ECE and long-term growth and development. This perspective is particularly helpful in reframing and navigating discussions around resource allocation among diverse constituents. *How might participating regions build on this momentum and help transform public discourse regarding ECE in ways that cultivate a more informed and engaged public and, in turn, lead to policies and practices that support smooth and effective Linkages?*



4. **Race, ethnicity, and culture.** As regions worked to improve Linkages, they showed a deep understanding of the dynamics that are present in low-income and under-resourced communities, but they found it difficult to attend to the unique needs of different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Although some community-based organizations (e.g., Catholic Charities) offered services tailored to specific cultural groups, program budget cuts forced them to discontinue many of their school-based services. *How might participating regions better respond to the specific needs of children and families of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in the context of Linkages?*
5. **Research.** All regions expressed an interest in seeing additional research that demonstrates the effectiveness of community schools, and provides examples of effective Linkages practices. Leaders in all three regions noted that their efforts to champion community schools and Linkages have been greatly facilitated by the good will of their constituents. However, if they are to successfully advocate for resources and conditions that support community schools and Linkages, then they need additional evidence of impact. *How can further research and development regarding community school-ECE linkages be encouraged and supported?*

At the conclusion of three years of planning and implementation in three different regions, Linkages has catalyzed concrete changes in discourse and practice and set the stage for sustaining and scaling improved linkages within and beyond current demonstration sites. At the local level, there is increased will and skill to improve linkages. At a regional level, there is improved capacity for implementation. And at the national level, there is a call for efforts to knit communities and schools together in ways that serve the most vulnerable children and families (e.g., P-20 Councils, Race to the Top Fund, Invest in Innovation Fund i3). As the country turns to implementing the Common Core Standards and a host of other policies designed to promote coherence among and between educational programs, attending to key transitions and the needs of the whole child could not be more important. As this report suggests, there are also critical issues for national and regional stakeholders to consider in the next phase of implementation. The Coalition's attention to large-scale initiatives designed to sustain and expand Linkages (e.g., Mind in the Making, Chronic Absence), in conjunction with a thoughtful and comprehensive research agenda, has the potential to provide essential insight regarding the next phase of implementation as well as evidence of impact; both are critical to sustaining and scaling effective Linkages. Finally, as other large-scale national initiatives that hinge on collaboration (e.g., Collective Impact, Campaign for Grade Level Reading) consider their implementation strategies, they can look to Linkages for examples of what it takes to translate the vision of a large-scale initiative into practices and outcomes that improve the lives of children and their families.





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## Appendix: Description of Demonstration Sites & Regions

Region	Demonstration Site Name	School District	Grade levels	Ethnicity <sup>4</sup>					Enrollment in Free and Reduced Priced Meals
				African-American	Asian/Pacific	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	
Albuquerque	Manzano Mesa Elementary	Albuquerque Public Schools <sup>5</sup>	K-5	3.1%	9.4%	25.2%	55.8%	6.4%	69.5%
	Pajarito Elementary		K-6	0.5%	0.3%	5.7%	92.8%	0.8%	85.6%
Multnomah County <sup>6</sup>	Parklane Elementary	Centennial School District	K-5	6.7%	11.9%	44.4%	30.6%	2.5%	80.3%
	Woodmere Elementary	Portland Public Schools	K-5	6.3%	21.4%	41.3%	21.7%	2.0%	84.4%
	Siletz Valley Charter School	Lincoln County School District	K-8	0.5%	0%	35.2%	6.4%	47%	79.2%
Tulsa	Rosa Parks Elementary	Union Public Schools <sup>7</sup>	PreK-5	18.0%	7.0%	23.0%	46.0%	5.0%	86%
	Eugene Field Elementary	Tulsa Public Schools <sup>8</sup>	PreK-6	38.6%	1.1%	17.8%	23.3%	8.1%	97.1%
	Kendall-Whittier Elementary		PreK-6	9.6%	0%	17.3%	63.3%	4.8%	93.8%
	McClure Elementary		K-6	53.3%	1.3%	15.7%	15.8%	10.0%	90.7%

**Albuquerque, New Mexico:** The ABC Linkages Project is a partnership between Albuquerque Public Schools, Bernalillo County, and the City of Albuquerque. *Linkages coordinator: Jose Munoz, [jmunoz@bernco.gov](mailto:jmunoz@bernco.gov)*

**Multnomah, Oregon:** The Oregon Linkages Project is an initiative of Multnomah County Department of Human Services SUN Service System and the State Commission on Children & Families. *Linkages coordinator: May Cha, [may.p.cha@multco.us](mailto:may.p.cha@multco.us)*

**Tulsa, Oklahoma:** The Tulsa Linkages Project is an initiative of the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) in partnership with the Child Care Resource Center. *Linkages coordinator: Stacey Mwongozi, [smwongozi@csctulsa.org](mailto:smwongozi@csctulsa.org)*

<sup>4</sup> Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%

<sup>5</sup> Garcia, F., Research, Deployment, and Accountability Department at Albuquerque Public Schools. (Personal communication, August 18, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Oregon Department of Education. *2011-2012 Student Ethnicity and Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch*. Retrieved August 16, 2012 from [www.ode.state.or.us/data/reports/toc.aspx#students](http://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reports/toc.aspx#students)

<sup>7</sup> Union Public Schools, Education Oversight Board (2011). *2011 School Report Card*. Retrieved August 16, 2012 from [http://www.unionps.org/filesSite/EducationOversightReport\\_RP.pdf](http://www.unionps.org/filesSite/EducationOversightReport_RP.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Harley, I., Assistant Director / Schools Liaison at Tulsa Area Community Schools. (Personal communication, August 20, 2012).