



## MAKING THE EARLY GRADES MATTER

### Seven Ways to Improve Kindergarten Through Grade 2

*It's a sunny day in September—and the first day of a new school year for the children rushing into their elementary school classrooms eager to meet new friends and teachers. The children in kindergarten and the early primary grades (K–2) are about to embark on a learning experience that teachers and administrators at the school have carefully planned.*

*These teachers and administrators know that a rich preschool experience can set children on an early road to school success—but what happens in the years that follow can make the difference between a short-term “preschool boost” and ongoing progress and achievement. Teachers and administrators are also keenly aware of the critical role the early grades play in equipping children with the foundational skills and knowledge they need to meet grade-level expectations starting in third grade. So together, teachers and administrators are launching an ambitious and visionary plan to ensure their K–2 learners experience the aligned instructional practices, classroom environments, and curricula that are known to help students succeed.*

*Across the K–2 years, the children will be learning through a research-based curriculum specifically designed for the early grades, which addresses multiple domains of learning, actively engages students in rigorous and developmentally appropriate work, affirms their many identities and abilities, and provides play-based and joyful activities. At the same time, teachers will be supported through ongoing professional learning and coaching, and school leaders also will have access to important information about how young children learn and develop. The school leaders and teachers are off to a strong start and are looking forward to seeing positive results for their young students.*

The vignette above provides a visionary glimpse of the aspirations for teaching and learning in the early grades. It recognizes the great potential that exists within the K–2 years to give children a strong start and set them on a path for success in school and beyond. While this scenario provides an example of what may be the ideal, in reality there are real and significant barriers to ensuring that all young learners are afforded this same high-quality educational experience. While there is growing awareness of the unique potential that the K–2 years offer for increasing achievement and accelerating learning, there is more work to do. The following draws from a recent study conducted to gain a better understanding of the current K–2 landscape by elevating voices from the field as key informers of shaping what progress is needed and what it should look like. The brief provides an overview of where momentum exists, points out key challenges, and identifies important ways leaders and decisionmakers might catalyze change. The hope is that findings will provide a spotlight and necessary call to action for our young learners as they enter school and move through the early grades. There is a clear opportunity and sense of urgency to improve K–2 now, so that all students have the solid foundation needed to reach their fullest potential in the future.

## K-2 or pre-K-3? An idea to keep in mind while reading and reflecting . . .

While this work focuses specifically on the early primary grades spanning kindergarten through grade 2, it is best understood and interpreted as part of a more comprehensive preschool-through-grade 3 (pre-K-3) continuum. Conversations and efforts to create better connections across two distinct learning systems—early childhood education (the years preceding entry into formal education) and K-12 education—are ongoing. A targeted focus on K-2, as presented here, is intentionally designed to examine the unique role that the K-2 years play within the context of public school policies and practices (and is not meant to ignore the important role of those years in a broader pre-K-3 approach).

## A BIG OPPORTUNITY IN THE EARLY GRADES

**The kindergarten to second grade (K-2) years are an important part of children’s early development.** We know from [developmental science](#) that the years from birth to age 8 lay the foundation for all later learning. As part of that broader continuum, the K-2 years are important contributors to ensuring that children get a solid start. During these early primary years, young learners develop the [critical academic and social-emotional skills](#) that impact future outcomes and set children on a trajectory for ongoing school success. Uniquely positioned between early childhood and the grades that are part of state testing and accountability systems, the K-2 years can play a key role in scaffolding and aligning teaching and learning across the two systems.

“To give children the best possible path to success in the later grades, it is important to shine a light on teaching and learning in kindergarten and the early grades.”

[NEW AMERICA](#), 2020

“Getting kindergarten right has to be top of mind for all of us, because what happens there sets the stage for how a child learns and develops well into their elementary years and beyond.”

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION](#), 2023

**Within the K-2 continuum, kindergarten in particular is a pivotal year.** Because kindergarten offers the first opportunity for at-scale supports and interventions, it is considered an integral year within the K-2 continuum. It has been characterized as a “[sturdy bridge](#)” linking early learning and the early grades as part of a broader pre-K-to-grade-3 system. [High-quality kindergarten](#), followed by two years of aligned and appropriate teaching and learning, is particularly important to provide continuous and robust educational experiences that build on and extend important advances made before school entry.

**Yet, the importance of the K-2 years is not fully realized.** Current K-12 policy and practice are guided largely by accountability and school improvement efforts, which are in turn driven primarily by student testing programs starting at grade 3. **The result:** the years leading up to third grade have been largely overlooked and underappreciated for the role they play in children’s ultimate and ongoing school success. With scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) [continuing to fall](#), especially post-COVID, there is a growing awareness in the field that increasing proficiency and supporting learning recovery must start earlier than grade 3. We know, in fact, that children who are not proficient by the time they reach third grade [will not catch up](#)—even when they are exposed to high-quality support.

**There is an urgent need to develop strong and equitable systems of learning in K-2.** While the field is seeing some increase in awareness of the potential role the early primary grades can play, there is much to be learned and accomplished to ensure that children have access to appropriate, high-quality teaching and learning experiences across the K-2 continuum. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, School Readiness Consulting (SRC), alongside our partners at New America, conducted a comprehensive landscape analysis to inform a deeper understanding of current conditions, policies, and practices within the K-2 space. The landscape effort involved a review of recent research and reports, as well as a series of in-depth interviews with practitioners, local leaders, and other key experts in the field. The following brief outlines findings from that effort and offers a set of potential actions that could help elevate the importance of K-2 and support efforts to strengthen K-2 systems.

“The K-2 years are often a strangely orphaned period within the K-12 world, in part because they are the only years not subject to state accountability systems”

FORESIGHT LAW + POLICY, 2019

## SEVEN KEY WAYS TO DRIVE CHANGE FOR K-2

Through the landscaping process, a number of clear themes emerged, highlighting important progress and strengths as well as gaps and challenges affecting the early grades. Out of these insights, seven key opportunities were identified to leverage and improve K-2 policy and practice.

### 1 Focus on shifting minds.

Successfully strengthening K-2 starts with addressing [prevailing mindsets](#) that are keeping the current system in place. The importance of K-2 as foundational to achieving third-grade proficiency is generally well understood by those working in the early grades. However, targeted K-2 policies and practices will not be created in sustainable ways without broad-based acceptance of the notion *that K-2 should be a priority*. Shifting the thinking of leaders toward creating a high-quality and well-aligned K-2 continuum designed to prepare children to succeed in the third grade (and beyond) will require changing minds about the value of the early grades and motivating people to care enough to invest in K-2. Only then will the field be able to generate solutions that will lead to long-term systems change.

### 2 Consider the big picture.

To make real change, it is also important to consider the [many elements of teaching and learning](#) that impact teacher effectiveness and student outcomes in K-2. Taking a more piecemeal approach by tackling just one or two elements at a time will not be enough to ensure a strong K-2 continuum. As one contributor to the landscape analysis noted, *“It’s not just one fix. It’s not just professional learning, it’s not just curriculum, it’s not just assessment. You have to figure out how that all works together as a system.”* Beginning with efforts to [involve K-2 leadership](#) will help build capacity across multiple levels of the system. To that end, ensuring that leadership is sufficiently on board and equipped to leverage emerging opportunities in a more systemic way is an important first step.

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K-2 INTERVIEWEE

## 3

## Align teaching and learning across K–2 and with what comes before and after those years.

Years of research confirm that children need experiences in which new learning scaffolds and builds on what has come before. Today, researchers and other content experts focused on early learning and the early grades identify [alignment across learning levels](#) as a key to ongoing student success—reducing redundancy and building continuous learning trajectories across the K–2 grades. Accordingly, educators are calling for more intentional efforts to increase alignment “*in a thoughtful way where you are really building on what children know. Both at school entry, but then also what they know at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade and so on.*” Building coherent and aligned learning experiences for children across early learning and the early grades starts with a focus on creating more seamless transitions across preschool and kindergarten. To ensure ongoing alignment across the early grades and beyond, effective strategies include providing teachers with more access to training and coaching to build understanding of grade-level learning trajectories, as well as time and resources to work together in cross-grade teams to align standards, curricula, assessments, and instructional practices. Leaders can also play an important role in influencing overarching policy and practices at the state, district, and local levels that support and enhance alignment and coherence.

## 4

## Build educator and leader capacity.

Children’s success in the early grades also greatly depends on the [skills and knowledge](#) of their teachers and school administrators. Effective preparation and ongoing support for K–2 teachers and administrators will ensure that they are well equipped to support young learners. Content experts and educators note, “*there’s not a developmental understanding of what gets you ready for the third-grade test is actually the foundations that occurred in K, [grade] 1, and [grade] 2, not what you just learned in third grade. So, we seem to be losing a developmental understanding of what competencies [teachers and leaders] need to build.*” Input from the field further indicated broad consensus that without [adequate professional learning](#) opportunities and support, even the best curriculum and assessment tool will not have the greatest impact. As one district leader shared, “*So often folks look at curriculum and think [it] is the answer to impact student learning. And yes, to a certain extent it is, but allowing teachers to reflectively and continuously improve their teaching practices is the best way.*” Specialized preparation and certification programs, job-embedded coaching (“*the long-term coach piece and the professional development throughout the school year would be pieces that I would enhance*”), peer learning communities, and specialized training in child development (“*bring school leaders who are making decisions up to speed on what early learning looks like in K–2 and the importance of learning trajectories*”) were all emphasized as important ways to improve teacher effectiveness and educational leadership.

## 5

## Increase demand for high-quality curricula in K–2.

The current landscape for K–2 curricula includes a heavy focus on literacy and the [science of reading](#), leading educators and content experts alike to call for a greater focus on math, science, and approaches to learning as key contributors to later learning success. Some emerging themes with regard to expanding K–2 curriculum content development include a focus on “[whole-child](#)” curriculum—which integrates academic as well as social-emotional development, health, and well-being—and a reemerging interest in implementing [play-based curricula](#) aligned with findings on the science of learning and development in the K–2 years. Investment in providing more evidence and practical guidance on how best to implement play-based and whole-child curriculum in the early grades can support alignment across early learning and the early grades, as well as driving improvements in implementation across the K–2 continuum.

“There’s not a developmental understanding of what gets you ready for the third grade test is actually the foundations that occurred in K, [grade] 1, and [grade] 2 . . . not what you just learned in third grade.”

K–2 INTERVIEWEE

## 6

## Expand use of high-quality assessments in K–2.

In a similar way, most of the [K-2 assessments](#) are primarily focused on literacy and, to some extent, math and social-emotional development. In keeping with the growing interest in comprehensive curricula, there is also growing demand for assessments in K–2 that measure multiple [domains of learning](#), align with children’s developmental trajectories in K–2, and are administered in ways that are appropriate for young learners. With increased attention on third-grade reading proficiency and broad use of [literacy screeners](#) in the early grades, experts see an opportunity to develop “next-generation” screening tools aligned to evidence and best practice. The field is also seeing an increase in the availability and use of technology and [classroom observation tools](#) that are embedded in authentic learning experiences to measure student engagement and teacher-child interactions. These tools in particular are seen as important opportunities for linking assessment and evaluation to better inform classroom instructional practices.

## 7

## Increase and improve supports for diverse learners.

Teaching and learning specifically designed for diverse learners in the early grades can help ensure that all children have equitable access to the supports and resources they need to succeed in school. [Culturally relevant education](#) has been shown to increase academic achievement and participation, ultimately leading to higher graduation rates and [other important benefits](#). Yet, [existing curricula](#) and assessments are not being designed or implemented to fully support diverse learners in the K–2 space. Educators report that available curricula do not adequately provide content that is culturally responsive and developed for use with multilingual learners, stating that *“there could be a better job of ensuring that the curricula reflect the children and families in terms of race, ethnicity, and language. Some of the materials that we’re using, we have to supplement with others.”* Ensuring the appropriateness of [assessment tools](#) used to measure learning outcomes and progressions for diverse learners will also require further examination of how tools are designed and used and what skills and knowledge should be assessed. In addition, contributors to the landscape raised concern about possible [teacher bias](#) and called for more targeted examination of child-level experiences: *“Where you may look at the classroom quality overall and think, oh, this is good. But when you look at . . . the child-level experiences with some of the data, you’re finding much more variability. And that Black and Latino children are having a less than ideal experience and less access to high-quality learning opportunities, on average.”* Important opportunity exists to expand the availability and use of instructional materials and assessments that are culturally affirming, reflect young children’s family and community, support learning in multiple languages, and include equitable approaches aligned with what is known about learning trajectories for diverse young learners.

“There could be a better job of ensuring that the curricula reflect the children and families in terms of race, ethnicity, and language.”

K–2 INTERVIEWEE



## WHAT YOU CAN DO NEXT

Leaders in the education field—including those working in federal, state, and local governments; funders; policymakers; advocates; and other key decisionmakers—can be key contributors to driving significant change. It will take a collective commitment from all involved in influencing the direction of the current education system to contribute to transforming the K–2 space. There is important momentum that can be built upon, as well as great potential to take strategic action to further progress. Below is a synthesis of opportunities for concrete, meaningful action that practitioners, local leaders, and other key experts in the field brought to light as part of this landscape effort.

Considering the seven key ways to drive change for K–2, the following could be some important next steps:

### ✓ **Raise awareness and build engagement.**

Support for K–2 as an integral part of a broader system of teaching and learning will require an “all hands on deck” effort. Leaders in the field can play an important role in increasing awareness of the importance of the K–2 years that can ultimately drive change in policy and practice. Collaborative and targeted strategies designed to share compelling information, increase broad-based understanding, shift mindsets, and build momentum for advancing K–2 education are important first steps.

### ✓ **Convene and share best practices.**

Significant efforts are currently being made across local, state, and national settings to elevate successful K–2 models. Leaders can create opportunities, provide support, and offer additional resources for K–2 interest holders to come together to share successes and lessons learned. Convening working groups, facilitating communities of practice (CoPs) or other shared learning experiences, and publishing case studies or policy briefs are all examples of strategies that could go a long way to share and deepen our understanding of what it takes to improve K–2 education for young learners.

### ✓ **Support research and development.**

Teaching and learning in the K–2 years will be strengthened when there is more evidence to support what works in the early grades and more incentives to develop new tools and resources accordingly. Expanding research currently being conducted, encouraging new studies designed for K–2, and investing in research-to-practice partnerships are all ways to accelerate progress and contribute to an important knowledge base needed to further enhance K–2 education.

### ✓ **Incubate innovation and piloting.**

A number of successful small-scale efforts have been made in recent years to create innovative K–2 models. Schools and districts wishing to implement those promising models in their own unique communities and educational contexts recognize that it will take more than a “plug and play” approach. Leaders are in a unique position to support efforts to expand these pilot programs and initiatives that foster new thinking and ideas in order to facilitate dissemination, adaptation, and scale-up.

**Now is the time.** By actively addressing what happens in the years prior to third grade, we can turn our attention to bolstering academic outcomes and setting students on a path toward long-term school success. What that will take is a collective and concerted effort to strengthen and align teaching and learning across K–2, ensuring that all children reach grade 3 equipped with the important foundational skills and knowledge they need. Leaders in the field can play a critical role in advancing this important and urgent work. The great opportunity that exists to refocus priorities and create robust learning experiences for all young learners cannot be ignored, and the impact could last a lifetime.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This landscape effort and the activities that informed its development were supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in partnership with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) and with consultation from New America. Particular thanks go to the Gates Foundation Early Learning and K–12 Education teams for their guidance and thought partnership throughout the project.

SRC also appreciates the following national K–2 experts and leaders for sharing their important ideas and perspectives, which contributed key insights to this work (in alphabetical order):

- **Swati Adarkar**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Early Learning, U.S. Department of Education
- **Jessica Baghian**, President, Watershed Advisors
- **Caroline Ebanks**, Research Scientist at Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education
- **Dale Farran**, Professor of Education, Vanderbilt University
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- **Deb Stipek**, Professor of Education and Psychology, Stanford University
- **Chris Weiland**, Professor of Education and Public Policy, University of Michigan

Finally, SRC thanks the K–2 educators, school administrators, instructional coaches, and district leaders from across the country who participated in interviews. We are grateful for their willingness to share their experiences and expertise and to imagine with us the policies, practices, and mindsets that could transform the K–2 grades, especially for diverse learners. Their voices provided nuance and understanding of the K–2 landscape, and their stories informed our recommendations for meaningful investment and change.

## About School Readiness Consulting

This brief was prepared by School Readiness Consulting. As a consulting firm focused exclusively on the years from birth through third grade, SRC partners to develop and implement strategies that improve outcomes for children in school and life. SRC believes that improving early childhood and affirming the right for all children to thrive represent the greatest opportunity to create a just society.

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