

# STARTING STRONG

PRE-K THROUGH 3RD GRADE  
SUCCESS STORIES FROM  
ACROSS MINNESOTA

A MINNCAN REPORT



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MINNESOTA

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please contact MinnCAN:  
[info@minncan.org](mailto:info@minncan.org)

**MinnCAN: The Minnesota Campaign  
for Achievement Now**

2800 University Avenue Southeast, Suite 202  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414  
[www.minncan.org](http://www.minncan.org)

*Design & Layout*  
[house9design.ca](http://house9design.ca)

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# Foreword

At The McKnight Foundation, we have a long tradition of investing in education. Through years of research and on-the-ground experience, we've determined that the developmental span from pre-K through third grade offers the best opportunities for us to focus our efforts. We're not alone: According to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, "Improving early learning programs for children birth through third grade is critical work...[and] one of the most cost-effective investments America can make in its future."<sup>1</sup>

Reading by the end of third grade is a huge milestone in a child's learning process. And ensuring proficiency means starting support for early literacy skills long before grade three. To significantly increase third-grade literacy for all Minnesota kids, we must begin by aligning PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade literacy standards, instruction, assessments and professional development. Such alignment ensures that students enter each successive grade with the skills they need to succeed—and that educators across the continuum share common goals, language and strategies.

With a central focus on early literacy and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment, McKnight partners closely with Minnesota teachers and school leaders to pilot and strengthen evidence-based strategies. Many of our philanthropic colleagues, such as the Blandin Foundation and the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, are doing the same. We're encouraged by the progress we're seeing, such as achievement gaps narrowing in Deer River and teachers collaborating more purposefully in Brooklyn Center, both documented in this report.

Once again, we're not alone: more and more, educators are placing a renewed emphasis on the early grades, including how best to implement alignment efforts at school and district levels. Our state policymakers are also moving in the right direction on early education, with recent investments in early learning scholarships for low-income kids, all-day kindergarten and an expansion of the Parent Aware<sup>2</sup> quality rating system.

Our work is far from over. Too often, the hard-won gains students make in Minnesota's high-quality early learning settings aren't sufficiently strengthened or sustained throughout their early elementary years. Even earlier, 40 percent of Minnesota children still begin kindergarten not fully prepared;<sup>3</sup> a recent national report ranked our state at the bottom of the barrel for pre-K access.<sup>4</sup> And in K-12, Minnesota's achievement gaps persistently rank among the worst in the nation.

It doesn't have to be this way—some schools across Minnesota prove that every day. And to systemically tackle our state's persistent achievement gaps, it's time to leverage those pockets of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade success. That's why we've decided to take this closer look at Minnesota's leading PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment initiatives—both those McKnight directly supports and those we don't—to learn which strategies and systems are working, and how our policymakers and educators can take successes to scale.

To create this report, we looked to our colleagues at MinnCAN, who work with local leaders and educators statewide to improve our schools, and have a track record for bringing people together around common advocacy goals. MinnCAN has a practice of traveling the state to learn from high-quality district and charter schools, and sharing their stories with teachers, parents, community leaders and legislators—making them the right partner to help us unearth PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment best practices and policy opportunities.

This report only scratches the surface of important PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade efforts under way in Minnesota. There are many more strong initiatives we weren't able to document here, such as the expansion of Child-Parent Centers in St. Paul and the Promise Neighborhoods. Nonetheless, we're pleased to share stories of some of the communities collaborating to coordinate and connect young children's earliest learning experiences.

We hope this report's findings and recommendations will be a call to action for Minnesotans to help our youngest learners get the best possible start in school and life.



Kate Wolford  
President  
The McKnight Foundation



# Executive summary

From deep in the Arrowhead to the bluffs of the St. Croix, some of Minnesota's pioneering early childhood educators are scaling up successful pre-K models and moving toward comprehensive alignment of the early grades.<sup>5</sup> They're doing this because they've seen success: a child learning how to read thanks to a targeted intervention, or teachers using data to improve and gain confidence in their literacy instruction.

These educators know, too, what's at stake if we don't make high-quality early childhood education available to all kids: achievement gaps—for kids of color, English language learners and children living in poverty—will persist, and perhaps even widen.

In spring 2014, the MinnCAN team hit the road to meet with teachers and schools leaders who are embarking on comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment to close these gaps, and we were inspired by success in their classrooms that demonstrates what's possible. These educators are now leveraging laser-focused collaboration across grade levels, intentional and differentiated instruction informed by effective assessments, innovative parent engagement strategies and more to increase student achievement. These schools are thrilled by the results they're seeing, and we hope that this report will pollinate these seeds of success across the state.

## ***Our approach***

When we set out to find inventive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment strategies, we asked Minnesota teachers, community leaders, philanthropists, researchers and others: Who's doing great work in this space? We received many recommendations from these trusted early education experts, and decided to visit the following schools and districts:

- King Elementary School in Deer River
- Winona Area Public Schools
- Community of Peace Academy in St. Paul
- Earle Brown Elementary School in Brooklyn Center
- Viking Elementary School in Pelican Rapids
- Proctor Public Schools

Through site visits, classroom observations and conversations with dozens of teachers and school leaders, we found that evidence of success comes in many forms, from a shift in school culture to improved test scores, increased attendance at family nights to more robust professional development opportunities for teachers.



This report features six profiles that share these communities' successes, anecdotal and quantitative, and the alignment strategies that helped them get there. We used a rubric—which we developed with help from leading early learning experts<sup>6</sup>—to guide our conversations with educators. During our site visits, several key ingredients emerged again and again, and you'll see them highlighted throughout the report:

*Vision.* In many of the communities we visited, leaders rely on clear goals and strategies—both long- and short-term—to guide their alignment work. These visions are often shared, emerging from diverse PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade committees or multi-organization partnerships.

*Community collaboration.* PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment is most successful when a wide variety of stakeholders—like private childcare providers, public school elementary teachers, district administrators, funders and social service providers—are at the table working together.

*Leadership.* Leadership at the top, from the principal, superintendent or school board, is crucial to launching and sustaining many of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment initiatives we explored. These leaders help translate the vision and keep early learning at the top of the local agenda.



*Continuity.* Educators are working collaboratively, across schools and programs, to ensure that all kids—especially those with the greatest needs—have access to a seamless continuum of high-quality PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade education. Administrators are working internally to coordinate across teachers and across grades, and externally to coordinate with the full range of public and private stakeholders. They're also often getting creative with their dollars, securing private grants, using temporary resources and/or reallocating existing funds to make sure they're reaching as many kids as possible.

*Tools.* As teachers are aligning standards, curricula and assessments across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum, they're often using homegrown tools to bring clarity and reliability to the process. From transition forms to parent checklists, these tools not only help the educators who developed them, but also represent an easily replicable element of alignment.

*School culture.* From fostering an environment in which pre-K teachers describe feeling more valued (e.g., competitive pay and access to professional development) to structuring more opportunities for teacher collaboration, many of the featured schools and districts are improving school and staff culture as a means to increase student achievement. Educators hold high expectations for themselves and their students, and with the right supports and tools, they're helping all kids—regardless of their background—succeed.<sup>7</sup>

*Data-driven improvement.* Educators are using data to drive their instruction and improve interventions and enrichment. To do this effectively, they've received robust, job-embedded coaching on data literacy and interventions.

*Engaged families.* PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment leads to stronger family engagement. When educators communicate more candidly with each other and with families, and when they have meaningful data to guide their instruction and conversations, families are more likely to get (and stay) involved.

*Teacher effectiveness.* The teachers leading successful alignment efforts say the initiatives help them work smarter, not necessarily harder. They're refining and improving their instruction, collaborating more efficiently with colleagues, communicating more intentionally with parents and more.



The schools and districts we visited prove that focused, intentional efforts in these areas can have huge impacts on student achievement and school culture. The educators leading this work demonstrate that a high-quality PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade education can make all the difference for kids—and that such instruction is possible for every child, here and now.

The above ingredients and specific strategies we saw across the state translate directly into our recommendations. To build off of what's already working in the featured communities, we offer next steps—for state administrators and policymakers, as well as educators and school leaders—to better align and communicate standards, increase teacher collaboration and leadership, recruit and retain talent in our schools and more.

Whether you're a parent, a teacher, a student, an elected official or simply a Minnesotan who cares deeply about education, we hope the following stories and ideas will motivate you—to believe in the value of high-quality and aligned PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade instruction, to believe in our early childhood educators and to believe that all Minnesota kids can succeed.



Daniel Sellers  
Executive Director  
MinnCAN



Ariana Kiener  
Communications Associate  
MinnCAN



# School profiles

# King Elementary School, Deer River

It's no secret: King Elementary School posts tremendous academic results for its 525 students, and ranked third in 2013 for Native American student performance among all elementary schools in Minnesota.<sup>8</sup> Educators at the North Central Minnesota school, which neighbors the Leech Lake Reservation, have been laser-focused and disciplined in helping students succeed. And now, focusing heavily on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, King teachers are changing the odds for their youngest learners, too. See figure 1.

King is achieving this success in the face of changing demographics in the community. In the past six years:

- Free or reduced-price lunch rates have jumped roughly 15 percentage points—to 77 percent.<sup>9</sup>
- The school's mental health services have quadrupled, in response to increasing student needs.
- Teachers have heard increasing concerns from students and families about incarceration and drug use in the community.

Educators attribute much of the school's remarkable success to robust academic and behavioral interventions. Upon joining King six years ago, visionary Principal Amy Starzecki<sup>10</sup> aimed to boost oral language skills among kindergarteners by starting these interventions even earlier and increasing results-oriented teacher collaboration across grade levels.

From day one, Amy has been intentional in her messaging, stressing that high-quality language instruction and interventions in pre-K set students up for greater success in later years. To demonstrate how important early learning is, she often looks to Itasca County's nearly 20-year-old needs assessment, which called for increased quality, frequency and intensity in early childhood education.

Amy's been purposeful about developing teacher leaders and community partnerships—all to ensure continuity. "If I get hit by a bus, this keeps rolling," she says. Amy established close partnerships with the regional Invest Early<sup>11</sup> initiative, Head Start,<sup>12</sup> Minnesota Reading Corps,<sup>13</sup> Indian Education<sup>14</sup> and Community Education.<sup>15</sup>

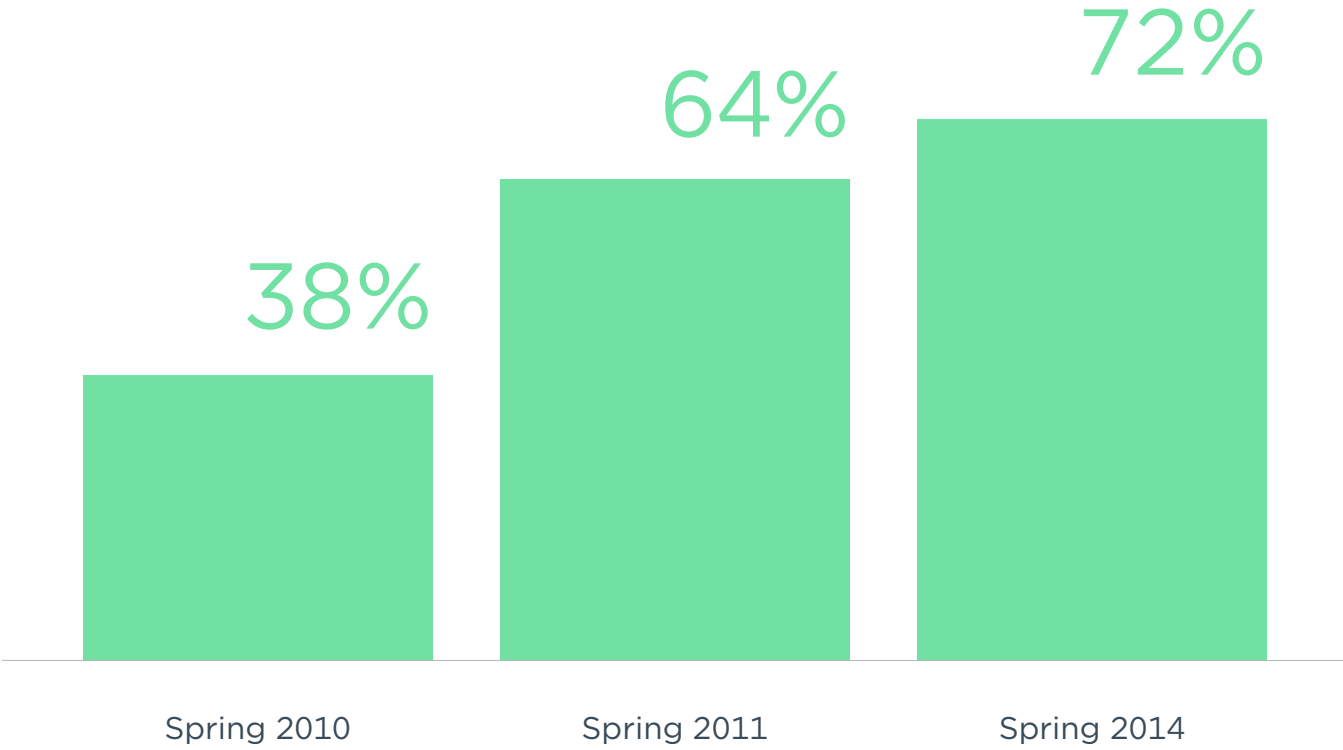
## **1** *Data-driven improvement*

For years, teachers saw tremendous results with the Response to Intervention<sup>16</sup> model and use of data-driven instruction in K-5<sup>th</sup>.

**"I look forward to data—I do. It really informs my instruction."**

—King Teacher Rebecca Collins

**Figure 1** Percentage of Deer River four-year-olds on target in their language skills



**SOURCE** "Deer River Invest Early Language Data 2013-2014," Invest Early handout presented at a personal meeting with the staff at King Elementary School, Deer River, Minnesota, May 27, 2014. For more information on Invest Early, please visit <http://www.investearly.org/>.

In 2010, they brought those strategies down to pre-K. “You have to be school-wide and systematic,” Amy says of using data. Teachers and interventionists now rely on data to shape instruction across the continuum, and communicate regularly on their progress:

- Pre-K teachers meet monthly to review student data—not just aggregated, but by the individual—and make adjustments to intervention groups, as needed; in grades 1–3, teachers meet bimonthly solely to review data.
- King has all-staff and multi-grade meetings each year, during which PreK–5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers analyze school-wide benchmark data, identify which kids are exceling and which are struggling and develop an individualized instruction plan for every child.
- Every teacher has access to—and uses—the school’s data system, which includes individual student intervention history, attendance, behavioral notes and more.
- King makes a conscious effort to keep all kids in the classroom during instruction time. “We do not pull out of core instruction for any interventions,” one teacher reports. Instead, King created a school-wide master schedule that includes intervention blocks.

## **2** *Teacher effectiveness*

Amy asked her team to add a lot of new strategies to their tool belt—from leveraging data to drive instruction to purposeful collaboration. Teachers say these strategies have helped them advance professionally, while accelerating student achievement:

- At their request, teachers receive ample peer observations within and across grade levels. One teacher explained that if a class is doing exceptionally well, teachers want to work with that instructor and “get up there with her.” Amy admits, “We’re really critical of ourselves. Every year, we’ve changed our systems,” stressing their commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement.
- Educators are eager to learn from other successful districts: all King teachers drove to Pine City, Minnesota to observe a school’s data meeting, and some observed math interventions in high-performing Anoka-Hennepin public schools.

**“We set the bar really high for ourselves.”**

—King Teacher Deanna Hron



- Professional development is so critical that students leave school one hour early every Wednesday so that teachers can participate in professional learning communities<sup>17</sup> regularly, as part of their contract day.

Photo: King Principal Amy Starzecki

### 3 *Continuity*

Thanks to pre-K scholarships, Race to the Top grant money, Head Start and Invest Early, almost 100 percent of Deer River kids attend some sort of formal pre-K—and all programs collaborate around curriculum and instruction, ensuring that kids come in with similar skills and knowledge. To help kids from various programs transition to the only kindergarten in town, King hosts monthly events to get all area three- and four-year-olds up to speed and ready for school—even those who don’t attend pre-K in the building. Moreover, King gets creative about creating a streamlined system. Amy reports that if a program is important enough, King can find a way to make it work—especially if it serves kids who most need extra help:

- With Pathway II funding,<sup>18</sup> King developed a backpack system—an inexpensive, homegrown intervention model in which teachers send kids home with appropriate instructional activities so that they can do additional work in areas where they need more practice. Parents report progress in a journal, which teachers track.
- Low-income families can apply to a variety of pre-K funding opportunities—such as Head Start and Pathway I early learning scholarships<sup>19</sup>—but, typically, must complete a separate application form for each

**“We’re very creative.”**

—King Principal Amy Starzecki

funding source. Upon hearing that families struggled with redundant and lengthy applications, King worked with the Minnesota Department of Education to create one simple application form for all pre-K support—easing families’ access to these critical funds.

- To better serve all students, King works with local and state organizations and agencies to provide students with the support they need in the classroom and beyond. For example, the school co-hosts family nights with Indian Education, works with Minnesota Reading Corps members to get more adults in pre-K classrooms—reducing the teacher-student ratio—and collaborates with Invest Early to conduct home visits for incoming kindergarteners.

#### **4** *School culture*

King intentionally cultivates a positive, supportive school culture, built around high expectations for all kids. And King teachers know that they generally don’t reflect the high-poverty, highly diverse community they serve. So they do all they can to meet their students—and their families—where they are:

- King teacher Deanna Hron believes that families send “their best child” to school, and that it’s then up to the school to help kids—regardless of their circumstances at home—get where they need to be. “We have to take them where they’re at,” she says. Educators are also committed to ramping up rigor and student achievement for all kids.
- With its increasing Native population (teachers report that Native student enrollment, now at 47 percent,<sup>20</sup> has risen steadily over the last decade), King has made great efforts to better partner with Indian Education for family nights and other activities, and hired a full-time Indian educator in the school.
- A few years ago, King adopted a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports “pride paw” system, through which kids receive a small paw printout any time they exhibit laudable behavior; then, the school hosts celebrations when students reach a milestone volume of paws. At one such celebration, “fancy dining,” teachers dress up in old prom outfits, dim the lights in the school cafeteria and serve kids a sit-down dinner, fine-dining style. This event brings fun into the school and fosters excitement about good behavior and positive school culture.

**“We have to take them where they’re at.”**

—King Teacher Deanna Hron



# Winona Area Public Schools

For the Greater Winona community, the tipping point came when Rollingstone Community School Principal Marianne Texley and Director of Winona Area Public Schools Community Education Margaret Schild attended an early literacy conference in 2011, hosted by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association. Upon hearing experts and peers acknowledge the huge impact early childhood education can have on students' success in K-12<sup>th</sup> grades, they decided to start a comprehensive birth-to-grade-three (or BG3) alignment initiative back home. And in just a few years, they have made significant progress:

- Rollingstone has been a reward school<sup>21</sup> for the last two years.
- “We’ve come a long way,” says kindergarten teacher Natalie Mehling, who reaffirms that she’s already seen improvements in terms of kindergarten readiness.

## ***Before the BG3 initiative:***

- Rollingstone was not making adequate yearly progress, and was required by MDE to enact a school turnaround plan.

The turnaround efforts—at Rollingstone and across all of Winona—began in October 2011, when Margaret, Marianne and other educators and community leaders formed a BG3 Committee. The group’s vision: unify curriculum and school-readiness programs across area schools—district, charter and private—so all students are academically proficient by the end of third grade. “It was really essential that we strive to serve all children, regardless of what system they go into,” says Margaret of this unique, community-wide approach.





Meeting quarterly and reporting to the school board once a year, the BG3 Committee works to increase purposeful learning, quality and consistency of practice across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum. Committee members' commitment to high-quality instruction, data-driven decisions and collaboration reflects their larger attitude: to help kids achieve, they must go beyond preparing all kids for school—they must also prepare schools, providers and educators for all kids.

Photos: Winona Area Public Schools Community Education Director Margaret Schild

Winona Community Education and School Readiness Coordinator Anne Hayes

### **1** *Community collaboration*

The BG3 Committee includes teachers, school and district administrators, childcare providers, social service providers, the United Way of the Greater Winona Area and others:

- BG3 members value the critical role each provider and educator plays in a child's literacy and learning, and has therefore been steadfast to include private and home-based providers in its efforts. "Childcare providers feel really important in this," says Winona Community Education's Linda Jacobs.
- The local United Way granted \$44,000 for technology in childcare centers and resources for pre-K providers.
- "Our collaboration between every agency we can think of will help our cause," Marianne says of BG3's unique approach. The committee is genuinely inclusive, and also shifting the conversation in Winona. She reports that within school walls and across the community, "People are talking to each other more about education and discussing students' progress in a more meaningful way."

**"We see the kids as our kids, not your kids."**

—Winona Community Education Coordinator Connie Blackburn-Lowery

## 2 **Teacher effectiveness**

If the BG3 initiative is going to be successful, all educators—from childcare providers to licensed classroom teachers—must be involved. That’s why the committee works hard to invite educators from across the BG3 continuum to the table, to help them collaborate and share best practices:

- BG3 has partnered with the Children’s Center at Winona State University to develop an early childhood professional development resource center, steeped in academics, high standards and research to help home-based pre-K providers infuse literacy and rigor into their programming.
- Through Winona’s Partners in Education project—funded by the United Way and the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation—licensed early childhood teachers visit home-based childcare providers once a month, donating free books and offering literacy coaching. Providers also receive individualized mentoring and coaching on topics like child development, behavioral issues and parent education.
- BG3 also meets educators where they are and accommodates their schedules by organizing regular weekend meetings for providers to socialize, ask questions and share insights on topics that they choose.
- Early Childhood Family Education<sup>22</sup> instructors visit kindergarten classrooms to learn more about how they can better prepare their kids—and families—for elementary school.
- The district revamped professional development for K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers, who now participate in the same sessions at the beginning of the year on reading and math interventions, ensuring that educators have common language and strategies. In 2014–15, for the first time, pre-K teachers are also participating in PLCs.
- Educators formed the Achievement Team: a formal group of K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers who, working in tandem with their colleagues, design and execute interventions for kids across the continuum. This team empowers teachers to become intervention specialists, and helps create a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility across the district. After a team member completes an intervention with a child, the team tracks the student for six weeks to monitor progress.

**“They were ready to do this but didn’t know how.”**

—United Way of the Greater Winona Area Board Chair Justin Green

### 3 **Tools**

BG3 is creative in developing inexpensive tools that can improve their efforts and get teachers, providers and parents talking in more meaningful ways:

- Kindergarten and early childhood teachers developed a transition form for pre-K providers to complete and share with them and parents. The form, which piloted in 2012, captures information about each child’s learning style, literacy level and personal needs. Now, kindergarten teachers can better help students with individualized instruction—immediately—and participating pre-K teachers and homecare providers better understand what skills their kids should master before kindergarten. BG3 is encouraging all area providers to use this form.
- BG3 created a pre-K checklist for parents. The committee distributes the checklist—designed to stress the importance of basic developmental milestones, and the impact these have on classroom learning—at kindergarten screenings, health clinics, libraries, and elsewhere in the community.

### 4 **Engaged families**

BG3 recognizes the importance of engaging parents and families beyond the transition form and pre-K checklist, and has worked to make schools more responsive to families:

- Between school conferences and home visits, teachers meet with families of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students four times a year, and regularly report on students’ assessment results.
- The committee has been deliberate about better communicating expectations and standards to families, and making it clear that parents can support their kids’ academic success in a variety of ways, from helping with homework to making sure their kids know to tie their shoelaces.
- Educators recognize that parent engagement tends to be stronger in pre-K, and later decreases once programming like ECFE classes drops off. BG3 is committed to engaging parents across the continuum and not just during the pre-K to kindergarten transition. For example, the district’s Friday Fun Night is open to all families—regardless of where their kids attend K-12<sup>th</sup> grade. “We’re going to see the results of that down the line,” one teacher believes, confident that parents who feel welcome are more likely to stay engaged.

**“Understanding the child’s temperament and personal interests helps with a smooth transition into kindergarten.”**

—Winona Area Public Schools Teacher  
Natalie Mehling

**“Responsivity of the system is huge.”**

—Winona Community Education and School Readiness Coordinator  
Anne Hayes

# Community of Peace Academy, St. Paul

Launched 20 years ago as a K-5<sup>th</sup> grade charter school, Community of Peace Academy on the diversity-rich East Side of St. Paul has found success with its whole-child approach to education, serving students and families who have not always thrived within the traditional public school setting. The community has noticed, so much so that parents asked for the school to expand—and it did: CPA now serves roughly 800 PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

In 2013–14, educators focused on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment in literacy, seeing this as an opportunity to increase student performance and make the school even stronger. Now, student achievement is off the charts, in pre-K and beyond:

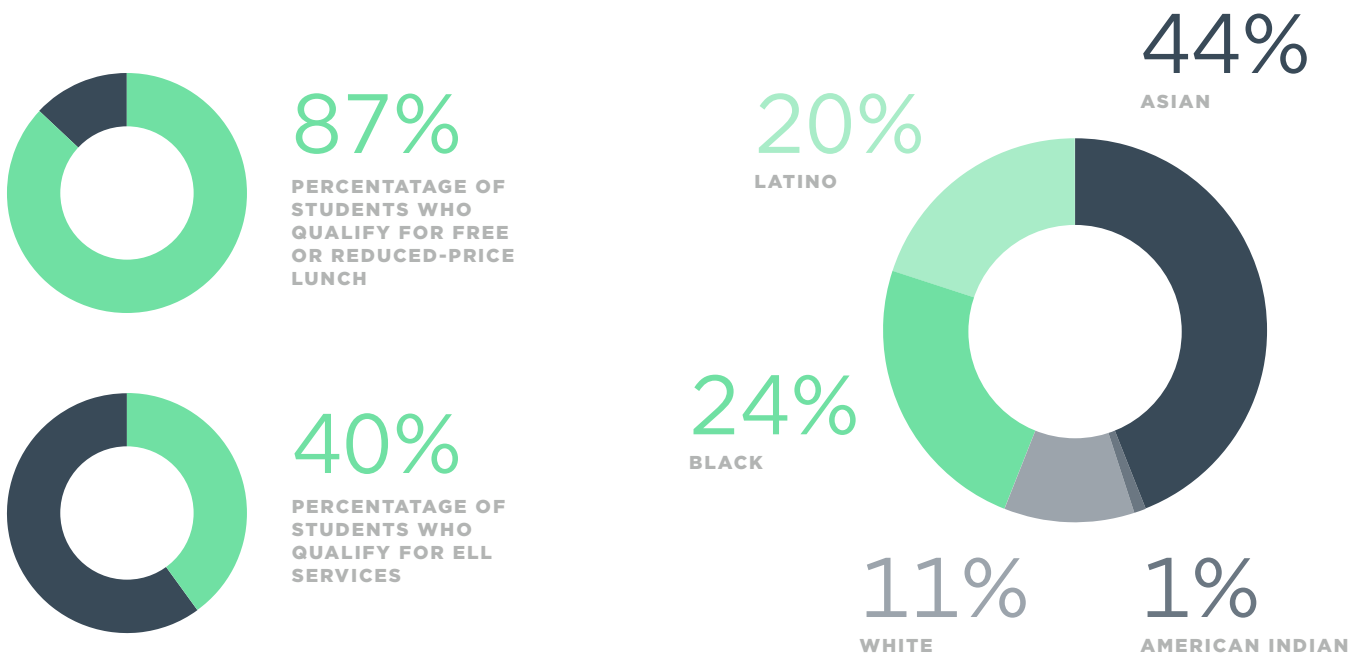
- In spring 2014, all but one pre-K student achieved CPA’s literacy goals.<sup>23</sup>
- In 2013, all racial and ethnic student groups at CPA boasted a higher graduation rate than the overall rate for Minnesota.<sup>24</sup>

“There’s no reason our students can’t be performing as well as all kids across the state,” says Cara Quinn, executive director of CPA. See figure 2.

One teacher reports that, just a few years ago, “kids were arriving to kindergarten with huge needs.” So, to ensure incoming kindergarteners were better prepared for success, CPA launched its own pre-K program in 2007. At first, everything about pre-K, from curriculum to professional development, was separate from the rest of the school—until CPA began working with The McKnight Foundation to think more intentionally about alignment.

In 2013, CPA applied for and received funding from The McKnight Foundation’s Pathway Schools Initiative<sup>25</sup> to align and improve the quality of instruction and leadership in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The initiative provided the school with a powerful tool for driving this improvement: the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) Assessment,<sup>26</sup> an early literacy and data management system. CPA teachers receive intensive training on how to implement this assessment and use it to drive instruction. Having seen the initial results of their new focus on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, educators now feel empowered to achieve their “big picture goal”: all students reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

**Figure 2** CPA student demographics



**Figure 3** CPA high school graduation rates in 2013



**SOURCE** "State Report Card 2013-14."

## 1 **Data-driven improvement**

When CPA received McKnight funding to implement their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment plans, teachers finally had the tools, resources and confidence they needed to be more deliberate in their instruction. And, according to Cara, “The year was phenomenal.”

- STEP is a diagnostic and instructional tool, designed around key literacy milestones. With STEP, CPA’s PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade educators now conduct formative assessments four times a year and get real-time data on students’ literacy levels.
- But data alone isn’t enough: teachers need to know how to use it. That’s why the McKnight Pathway Schools Initiative includes more than just funding for the STEP assessment. McKnight also provides professional development and coaching, helping teachers identify exactly what every student needs: more time or frequency (if they’re struggling) or more intensity (if they’re already excelling). “Every single kid is getting intervention,” one pre-K teacher reports. “It’s removed the guesswork,” says another teacher, confirming that the STEP assessment—and the training they’ve received to use it—has empowered teachers to be more effective in literacy instruction. Moreover, teachers now know when to send additional weekend activities home with a student, and how to communicate those activities (and their underlying literacy value) to parents.
- CPA has been so pleased with STEP assessments and interventions, teachers are currently developing a similar, homemade system for math instruction.

## 2 **Teacher effectiveness**

CPA has long been successful in retaining great teachers and developing homegrown leaders (Cara, Elementary Director Bao Vang and Literacy Coach Melissa Jackson all began teaching at the school more than ten years ago), but PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment has increased professionalism at the school—getting teachers to talk more candidly and regularly about student performance and best practices:

- Through their McKnight grant, teachers now receive professional development from specialists at the University of Chicago, and get feedback from both STEP and the school’s more traditional professional evaluations. Cara, too, receives regular feedback and leadership coaching.

**“Teachers get very excited about the data.”**

—CPA Literacy Coach Melissa Jackson

**“It’s about the adults having the collective will.”**

—CPA Executive Director  
Cara Quinn



- Every Wednesday, teachers are encouraged to do a 20-minute peer observation and complete a reflection form on what they saw and learned. In 2014–15, CPA also launched common planning time and data meetings to make collaboration and communication among teachers even stronger. Teachers are excited to share data and best practices, and appreciate that STEP gets them to think about the PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum, giving them shared language, terms and strategies. “You need to go across grade levels,” says one elementary teacher. “With time, collaboration will be even greater.” To that end, CPA also has vertical literacy and leadership cohorts, through which educators share teaching strategies with peers across grade levels.
- School leaders know that teacher buy-in is critical to the implementation of PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment. “When I think of success, I think of success for teachers, as well as students,” says Bao. Administrators know that results like those they saw in 2013–14 increase educators’ confidence, as well as their commitment to ongoing improvement.

**“What’s most important is partnership and buy-in.”**

—CPA Executive Director  
Cara Quinn

### **3 Family engagement**

CPA leaders know that buy-in from parents is important, too, which is why they’ve used the past year—and the data it’s provided—as an opportunity to revamp family engagement:

- Cara describes CPA as “a very relationship-based organization,” but is quick to point out that honesty and trust are critical to those relationships. “We’re still positive with parents, but positive doesn’t mean sugarcoating,” she says.

Photos: CPA Executive Director  
Cara Quinn

CPA Elementary Director  
Bao Vang



- Bao stresses that family engagement will improve if CPA is, “honest and transparent with parents.” That’s why CPA has been deliberate in communicating metrics and standards to parents, creating a sense of urgency around literacy and rigor, and establishing that the school is accountable to families and kids. Cara adds, “We owe it to parents to be honest about their children’s academic progress, to say, ‘Here are the areas where your child is behind but guess what—here’s what we’re doing to address it.’”
- CPA conducts home visits at the beginning of the school year to better understand a child’s home environment and learning style. In 2013–14, CPA also began sharing STEP parent guides with families, explaining the goals and strategies their kids’ classrooms would use that year. In 2014–15, CPA plans to host a parent night every month.

#### **4** *School culture*

CPA has long been known for its focus on character education, and has twice received the National School of Character Award. But with PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment, CPA educators have learned that they can have both a relationship-based, values-driven organization and academic rigor:

- With CPA’s recent focus on high-quality early childhood education, teachers believe that every moment in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade counts, so they’ve found new ways to infuse rigor into games and transitions. “Every single moment of our day, we’re doing something academic, something to keep their brains moving,” a pre-K teacher reports. Teachers lead students in counting and rhyming activities as they transition from one activity or classroom to the next. This increased rigor and structure have also improved student behavior, cutting down on opportunities for kids to get distracted.
- High expectations extend to all students—regardless of a child’s background. “We have got to move all kids forward,” says Cara. “We don’t want to use any excuses.” Cara knows, though, that “no excuses” schools are not for every family. That’s why CPA focuses on establishing trust and a sense of shared responsibility. If a child doesn’t meet a literacy milestone, their teacher proactively communicates that to the child’s family, and maps out clear next steps—for the teacher, family and child.

**“When we say  
the whole child,  
we really mean  
the whole child.”**

—CPA Elementary Director Bao Vang

# Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center

There's a reason families in the metro area line up to get their kids into Earle Brown Elementary School in Brooklyn Center: school culture is strong, as is student achievement in pre-K. And the school's relatively new PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade focus is only increasing demand: 40 percent of Earle Brown's 1,200 PreK-5<sup>th</sup> grade students now open enroll—up from 20 percent just a few years ago.<sup>27</sup>

PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment—which Earle Brown launched in 2011—is increasing student success, too:

- In 2011, when educators piloted new pre-K standards and curriculum aligned to K-3<sup>rd</sup> in just one section of 20 students, all kids reached the STEP “pre-reading” milestone.
- In 2014, 99 percent of pre-K students—including those receiving ELL and special education services—entered kindergarten ready, and more than half had already achieved their first STEP reading milestone.<sup>28</sup>

Earle Brown's pre-K has become increasingly popular, so the school decided to reserve all slots for kids living in the district, focusing on creating educational pipelines for the school's local and diverse student body. See figure 4.

For years, Earle Brown Early Learning and Community Education Director Michelle Trelstad knew that more rigorous and intentional early childhood education could make all the difference for the school's high-needs students, setting them up to need fewer academic interventions in later grades. And in 2011, after a decade of campaigning, Michelle finally received sufficient funding and teacher buy-in to not only increase rigor in her pre-K program, but also to better align that program to the elementary school.

With support from The McKnight Foundation's Pathway Schools Initiative, Earle Brown completed its third year of comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment in 2013–14, and teachers and school leaders are encouraged by the results. Moving forward, administrators feel even more determined to craft a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum that is developmentally appropriate, academically rigorous and aligned and successful for both kids and teachers.

**Figure 4** Earle Brown student demographics



**82%**  
 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO QUALIFY FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH

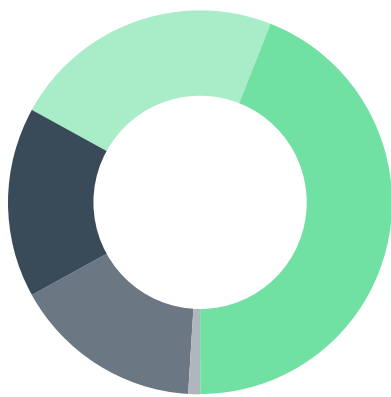


**31%**  
 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO QUALIFY FOR ELL SERVICES

**23%**  
 LATINO

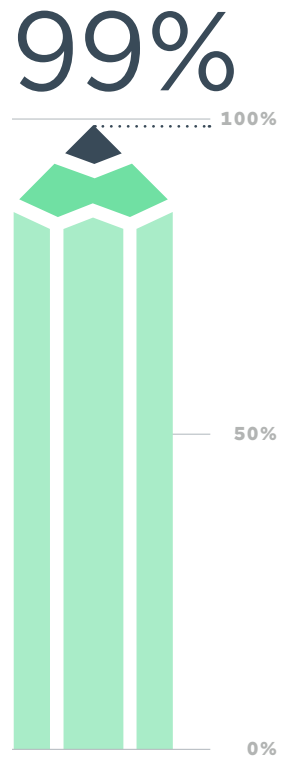
**16%**  
 WHITE

**16%**  
 ASIAN



**44%**  
 BLACK

**1%**  
 AMERICAN INDIAN



Percentage of pre-K students who enter kindergarten ready

**SOURCE** "State Report Card 2013-14."

**SOURCE** Michelle Trelstad, interview by Ariana Kiener, Earle Brown Elementary, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, June 4, 2014.

## 1 **Leadership**

School leadership now focuses heavily on communicating the value of early childhood education and teachers, and to implementing PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade initiatives responsibly:

- Administrators like Michelle and Assistant Principal Katie Mahoney are committed to trying new initiatives—and to giving them ample time to roll out and evolve. That’s why Michelle campaigned for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment for years, shoring up support and funding. It’s also why Katie, an experienced educator with a background in looping—having a consistent teacher with the same group of students across multiple years—will pilot the concept next year with a few elementary teachers.
- To attract and retain top talent—and also treat pre-K educators as the fully fledged teachers that they are—Michelle hires only licensed pre-K teachers, and pays them on the same scale as their K-6<sup>th</sup> grade peers.
- Michelle attributes much of the pre-K’s success to the fact that she’s handpicked her team, focusing on candidates with high expectations for all kids and a commitment to team goals and aligned curriculum. Michelle knows that, regardless of which classroom a child enters, they will learn the same skills from a trusted and well-supported teacher.

## 2 **Data-driven improvement**

Teachers at Earle Brown use data and assessments to improve classroom instruction and monitor progress toward the shared goal of third-grade reading proficiency:

- Michelle knows that kids need fun, developmentally appropriate early education, but she also realized years ago that her pre-K needed more rigor and to match up academically with the school’s K-6<sup>th</sup> grades. That’s why Earle Brown applied for support from The McKnight Foundation’s Pathway Schools Initiative. Like Community of Peace Academy, Earle Brown educators use the STEP assessment to focus their literacy instruction, and receive intensive support, coaching and other job-embedded professional development opportunities through their grant. Now after its third year with STEP and McKnight support, teachers across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum are using data to drive instruction and boost student literacy and achievement.
- Earle Brown’s funding from McKnight covers coaching and professional development for educators, as well as the cost of STEP, the literacy

**“Kids were entering kindergarten behind—and it’s so hard to catch up. Our responsibility as professionals was to look at what we could do.”**

—Earle Brown Director of Early Learning and Community Education  
Michelle Trelstad

**“Every time teachers get new student data, they see opportunities to further individualize their instruction.”**

—Earle Brown Literacy Coach  
Chellie Sebald



tool the school has chosen to use. With STEP, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers assess kids every six weeks on literacy milestones. And thanks to their aligned professional development, Michelle says that “teachers know exactly where their students are and how to get them where they need to be.” Katie agrees, confirming that STEP data, along with the training, strategies and common language teachers now share, have dramatically improved PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade literacy instruction.

- The STEP assessment is a “curriculum-neutral” tool, which helps teachers determine if a curricular approach is reaching students, and empowers them to then tailor instruction more personally to fit a student’s developmental literacy needs. Teachers therefore believe that STEP data actually enhances their creativity in the classroom, revealing what’s working for students and what’s not, and then granting them tremendous autonomy to craft their lessons and interventions. “There are still so many choices you can make as a practitioner,” says Literacy Coach Chellie Sebald.

### **3** *Engaged families*

Earle Brown’s revamped focus on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade has created ample opportunities to engage parents more regularly and meaningfully. “I saw a really big shift in parents’ understanding of where their kids could be and should be,” says Michelle:

- With STEP data, teachers can now discuss student progress in more detail with families, and provide them with tangible literacy activities for them to complete at home with their children.



Photos: Earle Brown Early Learning and Community Education Director  
Michelle Trelstad

Lee-Ann Stephens, MinnCAN board member and 2006 Minnesota Teacher of the Year

Earle Brown Assistant Principal  
Katie Mahoney



- Six-hundred-plus parents regularly attend family nights, where community partners donate food and prizes, and attendees do educational activities with their children. With attendance on the rise, Earle Brown is planning to incorporate PTA agenda items into family nights to engage more parents in school policy.
- It takes time to build trust with parents—especially those who are relatively new to the U.S. school system. That’s why Michelle is so committed to hiring educators who share students’ and parents’ backgrounds. To build a more diverse and culturally competent team, she has recruited parent volunteers and program aides to become classroom assistants—and, in one case, a licensed teacher!
- The school hosts regular ECFE classes (including some in Spanish, taught by a bilingual parent liaison), where parents learn school readiness tips and literacy strategies. Earle Brown staff report that these ECFE classes have been so successful, parents now independently share best practices among themselves.

**“We started being honest with parents about where their kids are, and where they could and should be.”**

—Earle Brown Director of Early Learning and Community Education  
Michelle Trelstad

**“Success is children wanting to come to school.”**

—Earle Brown Director of Early Learning and Community Education  
Michelle Trelstad

#### **4 School culture**

Earle Brown’s environment fosters teacher collaboration; the culture empowers both kids and educators to take more calculated risks in the classroom:

- Michelle considers student and teacher empowerment a measure of success. She and her teachers share a goal of “classrooms abuzz with learning” and seeing children working together in small groups, learning on their own.
- “We can’t be fearful of kids directing some of their learning,” says Katie. At Earle Brown, a teacher’s role is to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and ask students questions, helping students learn how to direct their own education.
- In an effort to increase collaboration and innovation among teachers, Earle Brown is setting aside more time in the workday for training and PLCs. For example, teachers recently completed training on classroom management, learning strategies to better utilize transition times between activities. “We are a collaboration with a capital ‘C,’” Michelle says, explaining that teachers are eager to work together and learn best practices from each other.



# Viking Elementary School, Pelican Rapids

When Viking Elementary School, a PreK-6<sup>th</sup> grade public school in Pelican Rapids, 20 miles north of Fergus Falls, was identified as a focus school<sup>29</sup> by MDE, educators decided to completely revamp PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade instruction. Why? Because as kindergarten teacher Cindi Strand explains, if you want to improve literacy in third grade—when students first take the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments<sup>30</sup>—“You have to start way back.”

Under Principal Sheila Flatau, Viking educators have done just that, launching school-wide PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment. And they’re seeing results:

- Thanks to improvements in student achievement, after just two years, Viking is no longer on MDE’s list of focus schools.
- In 2014, 55 percent of Viking students were proficient on the reading MCAs, up from 47 percent in 2013.<sup>31</sup>
- Cindi reports anecdotally that she has “absolutely” seen improvements in kindergarten readiness.
- Several teachers explain that they have felt a shift in their professional climate, with more support from their peers and instructional coaching from trained experts. Although hard to quantify, teachers and school leaders view changes in school culture, as well as an increasing sense of shared responsibility, as evidence of success.

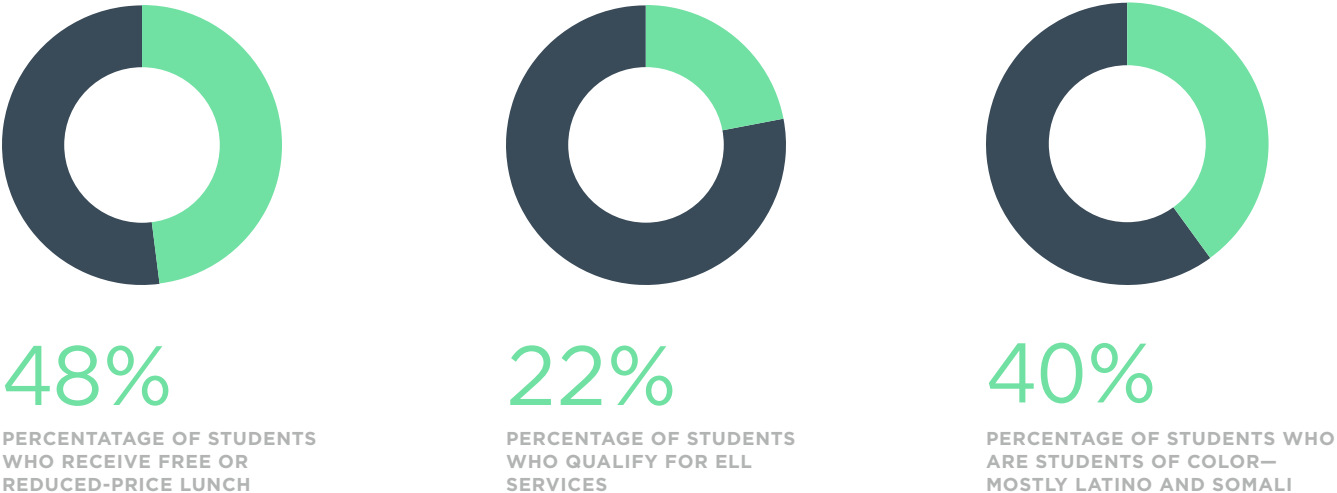
Teachers have embraced changes to the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum, all to better serve their diverse students. See figure 5.

Early childhood education has always been a priority at Viking, which hosts the district pre-K and local Head Start program—meaning that roughly 95 percent of the school’s kindergarteners attend pre-K in the Viking building.<sup>32</sup> But, until recently, these two programs weren’t aligned to each other, nor to the elementary levels. Funding from West Central Initiative ten years ago sparked some conversations around PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment, but it wasn’t until 2012, when Viking was identified as a focus school—and began receiving instructional coaching and resources as a result—that alignment really started.

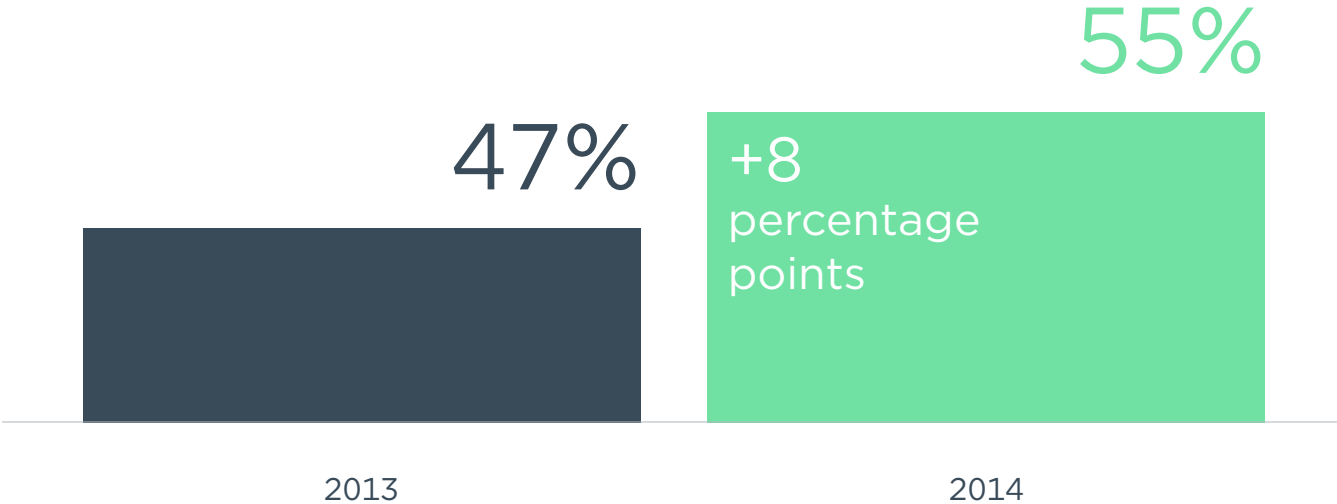
Cindi, who’s lived her whole life in Pelican Rapids and has taught in Viking’s kindergarten for decades, is proud of Pelican’s increasing diversity, as well as Viking’s PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade work. “We’ve come a long way, baby!” she claims.

**Figure 5** Viking student demographics

SOURCE "State Report Card 2013-14."



**Figure 6** Viking student proficiency on the reading MCAs



## 1 *School culture*

Sheila and her team are dogged in their work to create a culture that is welcoming to all families and supportive of every kid. Viking educators do this not just to increase students' academic achievement, but also to help them develop social and emotional skills that will help them in school and beyond:

- Viking educators attribute much of the school's positive climate to "The Leader in Me" curriculum they adopted two years ago. Pelican Rapids Superintendent Deb Wanek saw this curriculum in Owatonna public schools, and was so impressed, she decided to bring it back to Pelican school board members. They were impressed, too, and Pelican became one of the first school districts to adopt the curriculum across K-12<sup>th</sup> grade. At Viking, teachers post the program's seven habits—stressing, for example, creativity, leadership and responsibility—throughout the school, and also weave leadership opportunities into the school day, from classroom lessons to school assemblies. "The idea is that everyone is a leader," in their academic achievements and behavior, Sheila explains. "This has really shaped our climate."
- "There are complete misconceptions that our kids are harder to handle," Sheila reports, pointing to many neighboring towns' concerns about Pelican Rapids' diversity and mixed socioeconomic demographics. Within Viking's walls, however, teachers view their students' varied backgrounds as an asset, recognize and celebrate student diversity and embrace opportunities to better meet their students where they are. "Help me understand these kids," Tanya says. "How do they learn? What can I do to help them?" District pre-K teacher Terra Fitzsimmons

**"We get complimented a lot on how positive the environment is."**

—Viking Principal Sheila Flatau



Photo: Tanya Johnson, Viking third-grade teacher, and Sheila Flatau, Viking principal

shares a similar attitude, noting that her intercultural experiences with students and parents—like a powerful, eye-opening home visit she had with a Somali student’s family—have made her career (and life) richer. “Those are the things that I wouldn’t give up for the world,” Terra says with confidence.

## **2** *Data-driven improvement*

As a focus school, Viking received coaching from MDE’s Regional Center of Excellence, which Sheila has leveraged to develop a comprehensive PreK-6<sup>th</sup> grade balanced literacy plan, and to initiate a school-wide shift in the use of data. And now that teachers have seen results of this new approach—Viking is no longer a focus school—they’re committed to using rigor and data across PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade:

- “With MCAs in third grade, the work has to start earlier,” Tanya says. Sheila agrees, and knew that if Viking wanted to improve student literacy, they had to increase rigor and interventions in the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade years. That’s why she decided to implement differentiated, data-driven instruction, hiring nine interventionists and setting aside 30 minutes each day for math and reading interventions for all kids. Every student at Viking receives interventions, and teachers assess data once a month to adjust intervention groups, if needed.
- Interventions aren’t just for the elementary levels—pre-K educators use them, too. The district pre-K housed at Viking became a Minnesota Reading Corps site two years ago, and pre-K teachers use MRC’s model for assessments and interventions.
- Viking teachers don’t just rely on interventionists to improve their instruction. The Regional Center of Excellence coaches have provided all teachers with job-embedded professional coaching on data literacy, and Sheila has set aside funds to train educators in teacher-child interaction. Because teachers are gaining confidence in their own skills and teaching, Sheila is confident that Viking’s progress will continue even after support from the Regional Center of Excellence winds down. “It’s been a wonderful support but I’m very confident we can do it without them,” she confirms.
- Sheila acknowledges that teachers were nervous to make the leap to data-driven instruction. “The fear is that everything will become so technical,” she explains. But now that they’ve seen results, teachers see the value of data. “We feel like we know our kids better than ever,”

**“I personally feel a lot more confident in my teaching and what my students know.”**

—Viking Teacher Tanya Johnson



Photo: Terra Fitzsimmons, Pelican Rapids pre-K teacher, and Cindi Strand, Viking kindergarten teacher

teachers now tell Sheila, saying that data gives them information they need to better meet student needs and communicate with kids’ families. In fact, Terra, a pre-K teacher and lifelong believer in play and age-appropriate instruction, now also believes that when it comes to PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment, “Success looks like data-driven decisions.”

### **3** *Family engagement*

Because most kids in Pelican Rapids attend one of the two pre-K programs housed at Viking, and progress to the school’s K-6<sup>th</sup> grades, it’s critical that families—nearly 40 percent of whom are immigrants—feel welcome at Viking from day one:

- To make families’ transition into kindergarten more seamless, and to “blur lines” between Head Start (which has a reputation of serving low-income students) and the district pre-K (which has a reputation of serving more affluent families), the two programs now host joint parent nights.
- Viking holds a fall and spring event for students and parents. With a Latino parent liaison (who is a graduate of Pelican Rapids public schools), translators at school events and a packed annual “family fun festival,” Sheila and her staff are excited about the progress they’re making to engage more families.

### **4** *Continuity*

Because Viking hosts many different levels and programs—Head Start, district pre-K and K-6<sup>th</sup> grades—and serves an increasingly diverse community, it’s essential that educators align their curriculum

**“We want people to feel comfortable coming in to the school, so they’ll know that this is a place that wants them here.”**

—Viking Teacher Terra Fitzsimmons

across programs and levels, and ensure that they provide stable support to the students who need it most:

- Sheila initiated monthly early childhood collaboration meetings for Head Start and the district pre-K, realizing that it just made sense for these two programs—which can’t officially merge—to align their learning goals and strategies, and to host joint parent nights. The point of this alignment is to make things more academically and socially seamless for kids as they transition into kindergarten.
- To increase stability, transparency and collaboration within and across levels, Viking teachers post their classroom goals and standards in a Google Doc that is available to teachers and parents.
- Sheila reports that Viking has spent the last three years focusing on horizontal alignment—that is, getting educators within a grade level to work more collaboratively, on everything from standards to curriculum. The next step, she says, is to align vertically, encouraging teachers across the whole PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade spectrum to work together. And after that? Align all the way up to grade six, and eventually, high school. “That will feel like success to me,” Sheila says.

**“[Full, vertical alignment] will feel like success to me.”**

—Viking Principal Sheila Flatau

# Proctor Public Schools

Minnesota’s early childhood educators and advocates have likely heard of Proctor. Why? Because, through the Northland Foundation’s Early Childhood Initiative, Proctor—and neighboring Hermantown—helped develop the popular “Getting School Ready in Minnesota” guide. Now, ten years after its release, half a million copies have been distributed, and the guide has been endorsed by MDE and translated into Spanish.

But Proctor’s early childhood educators know that it’s not enough for kids to be ready for school: schools also need to be ready for kids. In 2013, after participating in the Northland Foundation’s Early Childhood Summit,<sup>33</sup> Proctor educators launched a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade working group, which is making swift, well thought-out changes to better align curriculum and programs:

- In summer 2014, Proctor launched two summer pre-K programs: one for four-year-olds who need extra help before kindergarten, and one for three-year-olds entering pre-K.
- In the 2013–14 academic year, Proctor and Hermantown public schools distributed a revamped transition form for kids exiting pre-K and entering kindergarten.
- Educators report that the renewed focus on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade has already increased collaboration and commitment among teachers. “Suddenly it clicked and now everybody’s serious about it,” says Proctor Community Education Director Molly Johnson.

In making these changes, educators have adopted a refined approach to helping all kids succeed—regardless of their situation at home, or how the system has served them in the past. “We need to be the best we can for all kids,” says Proctor Superintendent John Engelking:

- 33 percent of Proctor students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>34</sup>
- Proctor’s Bay View Elementary School is currently in its third year as a priority school.<sup>35</sup>

Bay View Principal Diane Morin has embraced opportunity to redesign her school and initiate conversations across the greater community. And her timing was just right: many Proctor teachers and providers had just joined the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade Leadership Institute<sup>36</sup>—a relatively new collaboration between MDE, the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association, the Northland Foundation, five other Minnesota Initiative Foundations and more. Through the Institute’s events,

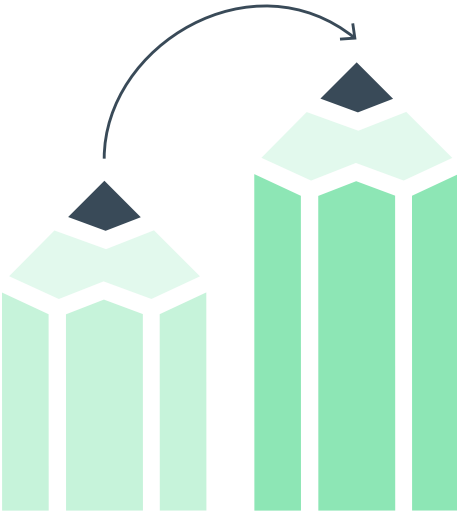
**Figure 7** Focus on kindergarten readiness

## Summer pre-K programs



Proctor recently launched two summer pre-K programs, for both four- and three-year-olds

## Strengthening pre-K to K



Proctor and Hermantown Public Schools have developed and started distributing a revamped pre-K to kindergarten transition form



resources and network, many Proctor educators were just starting to have conversations about PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment.

“Every single grade counts,” Molly learned. And to make those grades count the most, former Proctor and Hermantown Early Childhood Programs Coordinator Lucy Carlson notes, “Alignment is crucial—absolutely crucial.”

## 1 **Community collaboration**

Between Bay View’s priority status—and subsequent school improvement grant and turnaround plan—and so many local educators’ new appreciation for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment, Proctor teachers are eager to collaborate in new ways across the continuum and schools, and to partner with Hermantown, too:

- The Leadership Institute crystallized the importance of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum, and fostered relationships among participating local educators. Between the institute and Bay View’s turnaround, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers, administrators, early childhood staff and Head Start educators decided to start a Proctor PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade working group in 2013. “It feels like we’re all coming together,” says Proctor and Hermantown Head Start Manager Barb Fedora.
- Proctor’s two new pre-K summer programs are a result of that working group, and also proof of its community-wide focus. Thanks to state early learning funds, the programs (along with busing) are free and open to all Proctor three- and four-year-olds. Proctor also runs a free summer program for elementary students who need extra help. Three teachers (from Bay View and Pike Lake Elementary), design and run this together, sharing curriculum and best practices across their schools and grade levels.

**“Teamwork  
needs to be a  
part of what we  
do.”**

—Proctor and Hermantown  
Community Education Director  
Molly Johnson

Photos: Proctor Community  
Education Director Molly Johnson  
and Bayview Principal Diane Morin

Proctor and Hermantown Early  
Childhood Coordinator Lucy Carlson



- Thanks to the revamped transition form that launched in 2013–14, Proctor and Hermantown pre-K and kindergarten teachers are making kids’ transitions to school smoother, and giving kindergarten teachers information they need to hit the ground running with incoming students. Pre-K teachers complete an individualized form on every child—detailing literacy progress and behavior history—and share it with the child’s future kindergarten teacher, no matter where that teacher works.

## 2 Leadership

Proctor benefits from strong leadership across the board, from the superintendent to principals and classroom teachers. Area educators recognize that Diane’s leadership at Bay View has been especially transformative, both for her school and the larger education community:

- Diane is on a mission to change Bay View’s culture for teachers, parents and kids. “You have to change practice first,” she emphasizes. And now that her school is posting results,<sup>37</sup> “everyone is becoming a believer.” But Diane knows that a true culture shift takes time (three to five years, if you ask her), as well as the right people. “I want to find teachers who believe all students can learn,” she says. If teachers leave—and some have—Diane sees that as an opportunity to grow and groom the team she knows she needs.
- Diane’s disciplined leadership and emphasis on teachers’ professional growth have motivated teachers to take more ownership of their classrooms. One Bay View kindergarten teacher, for example, sent a survey to his students’ parents—without anyone telling him to—simply because he wanted even more feedback. To Diane, that’s a sign that teachers are starting to own and believe in the school’s turnaround.

## 3 Teacher effectiveness

Bay View’s designation as a priority school has also sparked new conversations around teacher quality, encouraging Diane and other school leaders in Proctor to reassess how they develop the best teaching force possible:

- Through their school improvement grant, Bay View teachers receive robust instructional coaching on data literacy, interventions and more; and have started weekly, after-school 90-minute PLCs. But under Diane, Bay View has gone above and beyond the required professional development: to foster teachers’ commitment to ongoing feedback and

**“Success breeds success.”**

—Proctor Superintendent  
John Engelking

**“They’re having to come out of that room and really work together.”**

—Bay View Elementary Principal  
Diane Morin

professional growth, she conducts more evaluations than are required and has also established peer observations.

- Moving forward, the working group hopes to create opportunities for teachers to learn across grade levels and schools, and to create systems to better assess student progress. In select schools, teachers are piloting a new assessment model, and using student data to drive interventions and enrichment. “For the first time, we have data we can use, and it’s lovely,” Molly says. The hope is to expand this opportunity to other schools to increase teacher effectiveness and student achievement.
- By providing teachers with more opportunities for professional growth, as well as the assessment tools they need to do their jobs well, Diane hopes Proctor’s teaching force will naturally become more prestigious and competitive: “It should be the field everyone wants to enter because it’s the most important thing you can do.”

#### **4** *School culture*

Proctor educators have redoubled their efforts on the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade years not only to boost literacy and academic achievement, but also to set high expectations for all kids as soon as they start their school careers. “Everyone can learn,” Diane affirms. And it’s at school, she believes, that kids’ mindsets—and futures—can change:

- Diane is dogged in shifting Bay View’s culture so that everyone in the building—kids and adults alike—believes in each child’s potential. Through what she calls an “I can campaign,” and efforts to have students direct their learning by setting their own goals, Diane is working to empower kids to believe in themselves. “We’re trying to develop in kids this belief about their destinies,” she explains, recognizing that this has been a shift. “Our students set their own goals,” Lynn explains. And when they succeed, “It feels like, ‘I can do this.’”
- John knows that mental, social and emotional health is also “really, really important,” which is why he’s so proud of the district’s close relationship with Range Mental Health, through which area elementary schools provide individual counseling for kids—and their families. Early childhood teachers also focus on social and emotional skills in their classrooms, teaching the community’s youngest learners how to name and recognize their feelings.

**“This isn’t just about the kids. This is about the adults.”**

—Bay View Elementary Family Advocate Lynn Peterson

# Recommendations

# Ideas for policymakers

This report shows schools and districts at their best—testing innovative strategies to serve kids, from the classroom level up. Policymakers can look to these models, and build smart state policies to replicate them. By initiating purposeful conversations, supporting classroom innovation and teacher leadership—and learning from what’s already working in pioneering initiatives—the following policy recommendations can improve early education in Minnesota:

## *Add PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment goals to school plans*

Currently, public elementary school principals submit Local Literacy Plans to MDE, outlining how they plan to boost student literacy by the end of third grade. To highlight the role early childhood educators can play, principals should include pre-K in this vision. By submitting a comprehensive plan for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment—with input from early childhood educators and providers, both public and private—school administrators can spark community-wide conversations about alignment and create opportunities for educators across the continuum to take on leadership roles.

## *Expand early learning scholarships*

Thanks to early learning scholarships, thousands of low-income three- and four-year-olds across Minnesota are accessing high-quality pre-K that will set them up for success in kindergarten and beyond. Our State Legislature should sustain and advance this scholarship model, which enables families to choose the best program for their child.

## *Support high-quality pre-K programs*

To make high-quality early learning available to every child, Minnesota must increase the number of quality options and support existing programs that are committed to excellence and growth. One critical way to do this is to increase state funding for Parent Aware, which provides ongoing trainings to participating early childhood providers and helps families find the best early learning option for their child.

## *Streamline pre-K support applications*

Scholarship funding for early learning can be hard to access in Minnesota, oftentimes requiring families to complete multiple lengthy and redundant applications (for Head Start, early learning scholarships, etc.). MDE should develop a single application form for all pre-K support dollars, and make this available to all schools and providers.

### *Clarify and promote funding opportunities*

Many of the schools we visited are cobbling together private dollars or temporary federal resources (such as support from the Regional Centers of Excellence) to make their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment efforts work. However, there is no centralized resource or guide to help communities understand how they can reallocate, blend or braid funds for this purpose. To help schools and districts fund and execute their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade visions, MDE's Office of Early Learning should release a comprehensive guide on what funding streams are available (Title I, Pathway II, integration dollars, etc.) and provide trainings and webinars on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment financing. Staff at the Regional Centers of Excellence should also receive training on funding and budgeting so that they, too, can provide assistance to the schools they support.

### *Align and communicate standards*

Strengthening the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum begins with bringing practitioners to the table and articulating what standards their kids should meet before kindergarten. MDE is already updating the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress,<sup>38</sup> aligning them to kindergarten readiness measures. To ensure that these standards—once updated—are used in a meaningful way, MDE, the Office of Early Learning and other appropriate agencies should then promote them widely and embed them into trainings for providers—private and public.

### *Promote data literacy*

Educators in local changing-the-odds schools use data to drive and improve instruction—skills some of them first learned in select teacher licensure programs or through intentional professional development opportunities. To increase teachers' expertise and confidence in this area, all of Minnesota's accredited teacher licensure programs should include significant coursework and opportunities to practice data literacy, focusing on how data can inform instruction. Veteran teachers and administrators should also receive job-embedded opportunities to use and interpret data.

### *Increase diversity*

Minnesota teacher preparation programs should make a concerted effort to recruit more teacher candidates of color, replicating best practices (incentives, etc.) from programs that are already supporting high numbers of diverse educators.



### *Strengthen cultural competency training*

To help our teachers best serve all kids and families, in-state accredited teacher licensure programs should train aspiring educators in cultural competency. Additionally, teachers and school leaders need ongoing, on-the-job professional development around intercultural awareness and communication, awareness of one's own culture, code-switching, and culturally relevant teaching and curriculum.

### *Encourage ongoing improvement*

Focus and priority schools cite MDE's Regional Centers of Excellence as instrumental to their turnaround efforts—especially on literacy, data and intervention coaching—and have helped educators confront their schools' challenges and embrace opportunities for improvement. Minnesota should provide targeted, specialized job-embedded professional coaching and support—from well-trained and supported coaches—to even more schools that need help.

### *Harness teacher leadership and expertise*

As this report demonstrates, classroom teachers are leading PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment initiatives across the state. Minnesota can create more opportunities for highly effective teachers to pursue new career pathways—as instructional coaches, school improvement leaders and curriculum specialists—by reforming Q Comp. We should also ensure that highly effective educators train our newest teachers during their clinical experiences. Such reforms could keep the best teachers in the classroom and also strategically capitalize on their expertise to benefit students and teachers.





# Ideas for practitioners

It's important to bring more teachers voices to the policy table, but we also can't afford to wait for changes at the Capitol. So, below, we provide concrete ideas that stem from conversations with teachers, leaders and community partners in some of the state's innovative PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade programs. We developed these recommendations in close partnership with Holly Kragthorpe, a Minneapolis Public Schools teacher and MinnCAN teacher policy fellow, and Lee-Ann Stephens, a MinnCAN board member and 2006 Minnesota Teacher of the Year.

## *Foster collaboration*

- Make professional learning communities a priority. To make it more feasible for teachers to attend and participate, schedule late starts or early outs, or provide substitute teachers if PLCs must be held during the school day. Structure PLCs so that teachers learn with and from peers across grade levels, including pre-K. This will not only enhance teacher learning and expertise (improving teacher effectiveness more than makes up for any instructional time lost), but also increase educators' commitment to each other and the school.
- Educators should share standards, lesson plans, PLC notes, teacher-developed assessments, and student data school-wide with colleagues as a means to strengthen collaboration and communication among educators across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum.
- Have regular continuum-wide data and benchmarking meetings. By analyzing student data multiple times a year, schools can better understand kids' progress and needs, and also foster stronger collaboration and shared responsibility with peers. These meetings—complete with the sharing of data and the development of next steps for individual students—can be particularly helpful in easing kids' transition from grade to grade, and establish greater, proactive communication among teachers.
- Develop and distribute a transition form to foster dialogue between educators—both public and private—and parents as kids move from one grade level to the next across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum.
- Establish creative partnerships. By framing early learning as critical to a community's future—and the vision to execute alignment as comprehensive and effective—schools can compel local foundations, busi-



nesses, agencies and others to get involved. For example, Earle Browne recruits local restaurants to sponsor dinner at family nights, Proctor partners with Range Mental Health and Winona's BG3 Committee works with the local United Way to fund alignment programming, as well as private childcare providers to increase the impact of the Committee's efforts.

#### *Meet students and families where they are*

- School districts should consider adopting cultural standards to establish common language among teachers, administrators, students and families, and to elevate the importance of cultural sensitivity and relevant curriculum.
- Creating an inclusive school means more than classroom decorations or diversity days. Teachers should receive training and support in developing culturally-relevant lesson plans, strategies for engaging with parents from all backgrounds, and support in holding high expectations for all students.

#### *Support talent*

- To attract and retain high quality pre-K teachers, schools should treat them like their K-12<sup>th</sup> grade peers. For example, many of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>

programs we visited compensate their pre-K educators on a pay scale similar to their K-12<sup>th</sup> grade peers and include them in PLCs.

- Whether you're a teacher, administrator or childcare provider, observations help hone your practice. Observations—coupled with meaningful and regular feedback—help create a culture in which educators can identify their own strengths and areas for growth, and want to learn from each other. This can build trust and a sense of shared responsibility, and also create opportunities for educators to take on greater leadership.

*Help all students succeed*

- Instead of pulling any kids out of core instruction, use trained tutors, classroom aides, etc. to create differentiated instruction stations for enrichment, allowing classroom teachers to work closely with kids who need intervention. The schools we visited highlight the importance of keeping kids connected to regular, core instruction. Staggered schedules and differentiated instruction can help kids stay on track with their peers—and help educators eliminate any stigma attached to interventions.
- Treat kindergarten screening as an opportunity for intervention or enrichment, not just a snapshot test. Because many kids complete this screening when they're three or four, pre-K teachers have time to review the results, and—when necessary—take steps to get their kids fully ready for kindergarten.
- Balance developmentally appropriate, differentiated instruction with rigor in every level across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum—it's not either or. You might use data to group students, and then work with teaching assistants, mentors and other support staff to bring each child up to their potential.

We hope the featured stories and strategies from diverse and pioneering communities across the state highlight what's already working for many of our youngest learners. We hope, too, that our recommendations offer actionable next steps—for policymakers and practitioners alike—to make a high-quality, consistent and aligned PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade education available to every child, an important and attainable goal.

# Acknowledgements

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## ENDNOTES

- 1** Sec. Arne Duncan, "A National Commitment to High-Quality Early Learning," *Huffington Post*, November 5, 2011, accessed September 16, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arne-duncan/a-national-commitment-to\\_b\\_1077682.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arne-duncan/a-national-commitment-to_b_1077682.html).
- 2** Parent Aware is a voluntary one-to-four-star rating system for pre-K programs, designed to help parents find the best program for their child. Participating programs must demonstrate that they employ certain best practices for early childhood education, and staff must participate in unpaid, in-depth Parent Aware training. Some publicly accredited programs—such as Head Start and public school pre-K—receive accelerated Parent Aware approval.
- 3** In 2010, according to MDE, 59 percent of Minnesota kids entering kindergarten met the readiness threshold in language and literacy, and 52 percent met the readiness threshold in mathematical thinking. The state also created a composite measure of readiness (including physical development, personal and social development and the arts), which 60 percent of kids met. "Minnesota School Readiness Study: Developmental Assessment at Kindergarten Entrance," Minnesota Department of Education (2011): 5, accessed September 18, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/educ/documents/basic/005512.pdf>.
- 4** W.S. Barnett et al., "The state of preschool 2013," National Institute for Early Education Research (2013): 13, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.
- 5** For the purposes of this report, PreK-3rd grade alignment refers to the intentional planning and collaboration of educators working to use resources and coordinate curriculum across the pre-K to third grade continuum.
- 6** Before embarking on site visits, we developed a rubric—organized by the themes now found in this report—to help us evaluate what we saw and heard, and pulled from "Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches" by Kristie Kauerz from the University of Washington and Julia Coffman from the Center for Evaluation Innovation. The framework can be accessed here: [http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd\\_Framework\\_Legal%20paper.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/pthru3/PreK-3rd_Framework_Legal%20paper.pdf). We also consulted with leading PreK-3rd grade experts: Tim Knowles from the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago and Ruby Takanishi, senior researcher at the New America Foundation. We found this rubric to be extremely helpful, and have therefore used its themes to organize the profiles that follow.
- 7** The schools and communities we visited have high numbers of students on free and reduced price lunch and/or students of color—and are posting impressive results for all kids.
- 8** "Top 10 Schools of 2013: Minnesota Best Schools in 2013," The Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now (2013): 10, accessed September 16, 2014, [http://minncan.org/sites/minncan.org/files/report\\_cards/MinnCANTop10Schools.pdf](http://minncan.org/sites/minncan.org/files/report_cards/MinnCANTop10Schools.pdf).
- 9** "State Report Card 2013-14," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://rc.education.state.mn.us/>.
- 10** In summer 2014, Amy transitioned from her position at King to become superintendent of the Floodwood School District.
- 11** Invest Early is a collaborative between four Itasca area school districts (including Deer River), Head Start, Itasca County Human Services/Public Health, the Blandin Foundation and others, which partners with families and early childhood programs to provide all area kids with high-quality early learning opportunities.
- 12** Head Start is a federally funded program that provides early childhood education and other services to low-income kids and families.
- 13** Minnesota Reading Corps is a state-wide, AmeriCorps program that provides trained literacy tutors for children from age three to third grade.
- 14** According to the Deer River school district (Independent School District 317) website, the community's Indian Education Department "complement[s] the service and education objectives of the Deer River ISD 317 by; providing educational support services, cares and nurturing for the students of IDS 317; utilizing culturally and developmentally appropriate practices; and serving as a role model of educational support services for the community at large." "Deer River Indian Education," Deer River Schools, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://www.isd317.org/page/2724>.
- 15** "Community Education is an opportunity for local citizens and community schools, agencies and institutions to become active partners in addressing education and community concerns...The statewide Community Education delivery system serves 1.7 million school age youth, nearly 300,000 children age 0 to 4, and over 900,000 adults each year." "Who We Are," Minnesota Community Education Association, accessed September 16, 2014, [http://www.mn-mcea.org/who\\_we\\_are.aspx](http://www.mn-mcea.org/who_we_are.aspx).
- 16** Response to Intervention is a method of academic intervention. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, RTI "helps to ensure the provision of high-quality instruction and interventions that are matched to the needs of students requiring additional academic and behavioral supports. After initial screening of all students, changes in instruction or goals can be made according to the level of student need. Student progress is monitored frequently and instruction is then differentiated and modified, as necessary." "Response to Intervention," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/BestPrac/Resplnterv/>.
- 17** Professional learning communities, or PLCs, are groups of educators that meet regularly to share expertise and work collaboratively in recurring cycles to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of their students.
- 18** Pathway II funding is awarded directly to early learning programs that serve low-income communities and have received a four-star Parent Aware rating.
- 19** Pathway I early learning scholarships are awarded directly to low-income families. The scholarships can then be used at any 3- or 4-star rated early learning program.
- 20** "State Report Card 2013-14."
- 21** A reward school is in the top 15 percent of Minnesota Title I schools, based on the Multiple Measurement Ratings (MMR) accountability system. "Priority, Focus and Reward Schools," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/justparent/esea/priorityfocusrewardsch/index.html>.
- 22** Early Childhood Family Education is a program offered through Minnesota public school districts, for families with children who are pre-kindergarten age. ECFE focuses on strengthening families and enhancing the ability of parents to support their child's learning and growth. "Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EarlyLearn/ECFE/>.
- 23** Cara Quinn, interview by Ariana Kiener, Community of Peace Academy, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 2, 2014.
- 24** "State Report Card 2012-13," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://rc.education.state.mn.us/>.
- 25** The Pathway Schools Initiative is a grant program through which The McKnight Foundation provides schools with funding to implement new or refined initiatives to improve early literacy.
- 26** The Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress Assessment is an early literacy assessment and data management system developed by the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute, and often used to increase PreK-3rd grade literacy and alignment. "STEP," UChicagoImpact: Tools for Reliably Excellent Schooling, accessed September 16, 2014, <https://uchicagoimpact.org/step>.
- 27** Michelle Trelstad, interview by Ariana Kiener, Earle Brown Elementary, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, June 4, 2014.
- 28** Michelle Trelstad.
- 29** According to MDE: "All Minnesota schools receive a Focus Rating (FR) that measures their contribution to the state's achievement gap. The 10 percent of Title I schools with the lowest FR are identified as Focus Schools and must work with MDE and the Regional Centers of Excellence to implement interventions aimed at improving the performance of the school's lowest-performing subgroups." "Priority, Focus and Reward Schools," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/justparent/esea/priorityfocusrewardsch/index.html>.
- 30** The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments are statewide tests that are used by districts to help measure student progress toward Minnesota's academic standards.
- 31** "State Report Card 2013-14."
- 32** Sheila Flatau, interview by Ariana Kiener, Pelican Rapids High School, Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, June 5, 2014.
- 33** The summit featured Kristi Kauerz, who co-developed the "Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches, supra note 6."
- 34** "State Report Card 2013-14."
- 35** According to MDE, priority schools "are the 5 percent most persistently low-performing Title I schools based on the MMR. Just less than half of these schools are identified through their participation in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program... These schools must work with MDE and the Regional Centers of Excellence to implement turnaround plans to make drastic improvements for increased student achievement." "Priority, Focus and Reward Schools," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/mde/justparent/esea/priorityfocusrewardsch/index.html>.
- 36** "PreK-3rd Grade Leadership Institute," accessed September 16, 2014, <http://mnprek-3.wikidot.com/leadership-institute>.
- 37** According to the MCAs, overall reading proficiency at Bay View increased from 55 percent in 2013 to 59 percent in 2014. "State Report Card 2013-14."
- 38** The Early Childhood Indicators of Progress are Minnesota's early learning standards, developed (and currently being reviewed) by MDE. There is one set of standards for birth to age three, and another set for age three to kindergarten. "Early Learning," Minnesota Department of Education, accessed September 16, 2014, <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EarlyLearn/>.

# About MinnCAN

Launched in 2011, MinnCAN: The Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now is an education advocacy nonprofit. MinnCAN is a movement of 11,000 Minnesotans—and growing—dedicated to creating the political will to enact smart public policies to ensure that every Minnesota child has access to a great public school.

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