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COMMENTARY
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Strong Communities, Thriving Children

The Power of School—Early Childhood Zones and Hubs to Drive Change

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Key Takeaways:

- Children's long-term educational, economic, and social outcomes are shaped not only by family circumstances, but also by the strength, cohesion, and connectedness of the communities where they grow up.
- School–early childhood zones and hubs connect schools, early learning providers, health agencies, and family services—replacing fragmented systems with aligned support, smoother transitions, and shared responsibility.
- Extending school partnerships upstream—from kindergarten into children's earliest years—builds educator capacity, family trust, social capital, and stronger developmental pathways from birth through elementary school.

Introduction

A new approach to improving outcomes for children and families is emerging at a time when the need is clear. Across the United States, indicators of child and family well-being are sending a strong signal. Rising youth anxiety and depression, declining reading achievement, parental stress, and growing social isolation suggest that the challenges are systemic.[1]

Seminal research points to two guideposts for improvement. First, start early. The years from birth through elementary school represent a uniquely important developmental window, yet parents of young children tend to have less flexible schedules, fewer social ties, and weaker informal support than parents of older children—all the more so if their incomes are low.[2]

Second, take "place" seriously and treat communities as critical units of change. Children's long-term outcomes are shaped not only by family circumstances, but also by the strength, cohesion, and connectedness of the communities in which they grow up.[3]

Yet many communities are organized in ways that make it difficult to act on these principles. Early childhood programs, elementary schools, health providers, and family-serving agencies often operate side by side yet in isolation. As a result, families experience disjointed transitions, inconsistent expectations, and complicated service systems. Even strong individual programs struggle to reach their full potential when they are disconnected from one another.

Much of the policy response to challenges facing children and families focuses *solely* on individual programs or isolated interventions. Efforts to improve early childhood education and elementary schooling emphasize expanding access and improving program quality, standards, curricula, and workforce development and compensation. These investments are important and necessary. But on their own, they are insufficient.

Improving outcomes at scale requires attention to how institutions function together within a community: How do schools and early childhood programs that *serve many of the same children and families* share information with each other? How do they work together with health and social service agencies to address needs that extend beyond education? How do they align their programs and services to best serve children and families, how do

they *take action* together, and importantly, how do they learn from each other? Or put differently, how do they *learn how to improve outcomes for children and families together*?

These questions have implications both for the individual effectiveness of the child- and family-serving organizations in a community as well as for their cumulative, overall impact. Answering these questions calls for a significant shift in strategy. **School–early childhood zones and hubs,** detailed later in this paper, are a place-based strategy[4] with great potential to significantly improve outcomes for children and families. Four converging streams of research frame the case for this transformative potential.

Why School-Early Childhood Zones and Hubs: Converging Research

Communities Shape Child Outcomes

Using large-scale data sets and innovative analytic methods, the Opportunity Insights project at Harvard University, led by economist Raj Chetty, conducted a seminal series of studies from 2015 to 2025. The studies demonstrated that children's long-term outcomes—educational attainment, earnings, and social mobility—vary dramatically across neighborhoods, even when family income and background characteristics are held constant. Where children grow up matters profoundly for how they fare later in life.[5]

In Chetty's words, "What matters really ... is the strength of the community in which you are growing up, even holding fixed your parents' income ... The community unit is really crucial, we think, for restoring the American Dream."[6]

Opportunity Insights researchers further concluded that it is not only the economic aspects of communities that are influential, but also "social communities," the people the child's family interacts with in their neighborhood and in their lives, an idea that resonates with the long history of child development theory and research.[7] They found that social support and connections to others and to resources may be as important as financial capital in influencing child outcomes. They recommend that social mobility should be tackled at a local level by "improving childhood environments" and "target[ing] child development programs to communities with low levels of economic mobility."[8]

Social Cohesion, Trust, and Institutional Infrastructure Matter

The Opportunity Insights findings regarding the significance of the community unit, and in particular, the significance of the social aspects of communities, dovetails with a rigorous research stream within sociology and criminology. Sociologist Robert Sampson has shown that—holding family income and other factors constant—neighborhoods and small communities characterized by higher degrees of social cohesion (mutual trust and a sense of "we") and where neighbors are more willing to get involved and take local action together have much better outcomes for their residents along an extraordinary range of measures: *lower crime rates, improved child health outcomes, fewer teen births, improved civic engagement, and even greater altruism on the part of individuals*.[9] Relatedly, important research has also found that the social cohesion and connectedness of a neighborhood or community are significant resources for improving schools.[10]

Sampson finds that the "institutional infrastructure," and *especially community organizations*, play a key role in supporting creating cohesion and the willingness to take action for the common good. Based on these findings, Sampson suggests that his research makes the case for "intervening holistically at the scale of neighborhoods, communities, and cities themselves" and for "linking investments in early child development with community context," that is, for place-based early childhood efforts.[11]

Early Learning Communities and Early Opportunity Zones

The Early Learning Community action guide from the National League of Cities and the Center for the Study of Social Policy offers a strong example of a comprehensive community approach aligned with Opportunity Insights and Sampson research. Structured around four building blocks—community leadership, quality services, thriving neighborhoods, and family-responsive policies—the guide outlines goals and actions that support cross-sector collaboration, continuity of experience for children and families, and stronger early childhood–elementary school connections.[12]

Relatedly, Joan Lombardi proposes "early opportunity zones" that bring together four "threads:" maternal and child healthcare, family economic security and social connections, two-generation early care and education services, and community economic development. Lombardi suggests four outcomes that early opportunity zones can track along the developmental continuum: healthy pregnancies and births; thriving at three; curious, engaged, and ready at school entry; and successful in school and well-rounded at eight.[13]

Early Childhood Programs Can Build Social Capital

> “Sometimes we find adults are pretty lonely out there, and this work helps bring those people together. So it's a very good thing.”
>
> **- Susan Inman, Principal, Sanford Pride Elementary School**

A study of preschools in New York City provides a clear demonstration of how organizations that serve young children and their families can positively influence the social context children grow up in along the lines that both the Opportunity Insights researchers and Robert Sampson recommend. In doing so, it has far-reaching implications for the impact of school-early childhood zones and hubs.

In his 2009 book, *Unanticipated Gains*, the Columbia University sociologist Mario Small focuses on how preschool programs can build "social capital." Social capital is perhaps best known through the work of *Bowling Alone* author Robert Putnam, whose definition of the term includes trust, norms of reciprocity, and connections among individuals. Based on his extensive review of the research literature on social capital, Small includes in his understanding of social capital, "the obligations that people who are connected may feel toward each other, the sense of solidarity they may call upon, the information they are willing to share, and the services they are willing to perform."[14]

The NYC preschools Small studied intentionally fostered parent interaction through meetings, celebrations, volunteer activities, and joint tasks. The preschools also acted as brokers, connecting families to services and resources beyond the school.

The effects were striking. Parents who formed social connections through preschools were more likely to experience improvements in financial stability and reductions in mental hardship. Even parents who did not develop close friendships benefited from improved access to information and services.[15]

Fragmentation and Siloing Significantly Constrain the Impact of Elementary Schools and Early Childhood Programs

Schools and early childhood programs can play critical roles in the kinds of community-focused efforts that follow from the Opportunity Insights and Sampson research findings. As Mario Small suggests, they can also help build social capital and promote shared belonging. Yet their ability to fulfill their educational missions and realize their potential to strengthen communities is significantly constrained by fragmentation and siloing within local systems, creating a lack of continuity for children and families.

The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council's landmark 2015 report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Ages 0 to 8: A Unifying Foundation*, highlights a central tension.[16] On one hand, decades of research underscore the importance of continuity in children's development—stable, connected learning experiences across days, years, *and settings*. Continuity fosters predictability and security, allows children to build on prior knowledge, and enables educators to scaffold learning progressively from foundational skills and concepts to more advanced ones.

On the other hand, most local early childhood "mixed-delivery systems"—which include early childhood programs, family childcare, elementary schools, afterschool programs, and community agencies—are fragmented. Relationships among early childhood providers are often marked by gaps and weak coordination.[17] A longstanding divide separates "care" in the first five years from "education" in the elementary years as though learning does not occur in early childhood or care is no longer essential once children enter school. Additionally, coordination between schools and health and social service agencies is typically limited.

This tension between continuity and fragmentation defines a central challenge in improving early childhood care and education. How does Pre-K prepare children for kindergarten in elementary schools, and how does kindergarten explicitly build on the experiences of nearby Pre-K programs? How are the experiences in a 6-hour Head Start program supported by the nearby afterschool program? Early childhood programs of all types know less than would be ideal about the routines, expectations, and teaching approaches of kindergarten; elementary schools know less than would be ideal about the "feeder" programs that send them many of their kindergartners. Apart from programs like Head Start and full-service community schools, families in early childhood centers and elementary schools often cannot fully access the health and social services they need.

Continuity, Cohesion, and Community

In "From Program to Place: A Community Systems Approach to Supporting Young Children and Families," Joan Lombardi ties together these four research streams as she makes the case that children's development is shaped by the interplay of family, community, and policy, and that families thrive when communities provide strong social ties, coordinated health and education services, and supportive neighborhood conditions.[18]

When elementary schools and early childhood programs align their work to promote continuity for children and families, they begin building the relationships and collaborative capacity that in turn can support broader community-based improvement efforts of the sort suggested by the Chetty/Opportunity Insights, Sampson, and Small research findings. In doing so, they both improve instructional coherence and strengthen the relational fabric that undergirds healthy communities. School–early childhood zones and hubs formalize and deepen this coordination, creating durable structures for shared responsibility and aligned action.

Momentum Builds: Cross-Sector Collaboration for Education

Over the past two decades, cross-sector partnerships have begun building the community infrastructure needed to connect fragmented systems and expand pathways to mobility. In education, these efforts have focused both on bridging early childhood and elementary schooling and on integrating education with health and social services.[19]

Birth–Grade 3 and P–3 approaches have sought to create greater continuity across early childhood's mixed-delivery system and the early grades.[20] Research indicates that collaboration between early childhood programs and school districts—particularly around the transition to kindergarten—improves child outcomes.[21] Professional associations, including NAEYC and NAESP, have emphasized continuity across the early years[22] while federal initiatives such as the Preschool Development Grant Birth–5 program have supported system-building and school–early childhood collaboration.[23]

Concurrently, cradle-to-career collective impact initiatives, full-service community schools, children's cabinets, and state and local early childhood partnerships have advanced more comprehensive approaches to supporting children and families.[24] The Harlem Children's Zone, for example, illustrates a place-based, holistic approach that coordinates a pipeline of educational and developmental supports within a defined

neighborhood.[25] These efforts reflect a common understanding: siloed programs cannot adequately address the interconnected challenges facing children and families, especially in low-income communities.

School-Early Childhood Zones and Hubs: A Powerful Place-Based Strategy

Rather than treating early childhood and elementary education as separate domains—or relying solely on program-level improvements—communities need structures that enable coordinated action across institutions. They need ways to organize relationships, align practices, and build shared responsibility for children and families.

School–early childhood zones and hubs offer a powerful approach to addressing this need. When communities intentionally organize their early childhood and elementary institutions around shared geographic boundaries and shared aims, they create a new and powerful locus of action: a close-to-the-ground partnership able to coordinate, implement, and learn in ways that individual organizations cannot. In this way, they strengthen communities around their youngest children.[26]

A **zone** brings together *multiple* elementary schools, feeder early childhood providers, and community partners within a district, neighborhood, or town. A **hub** centers on a *single* elementary school and surrounding early childhood programs and community partners. Defined by school and district boundaries, zones and hubs function as close-to-the-ground implementation partnerships. Zones and hubs can include representation from the full gamut of early childhood providers in a community, including faith-based and family childcare providers in addition to Head Start, state-funded PreK and other larger centers. And the family supports they provide address the needs of all children in the community, including those with stay-at-home parents and those in formal care.

Zones and hubs are designed to carry out three roles:

1. **Coordinate and align systems and practices** across early childhood, elementary education, and family-serving agencies to best serve children and families.
2. **Jointly plan and implement strategies** that directly support children and families.

3. **Build cross-sector communities of practice** among early years educators to improve the quality of early learning and care.

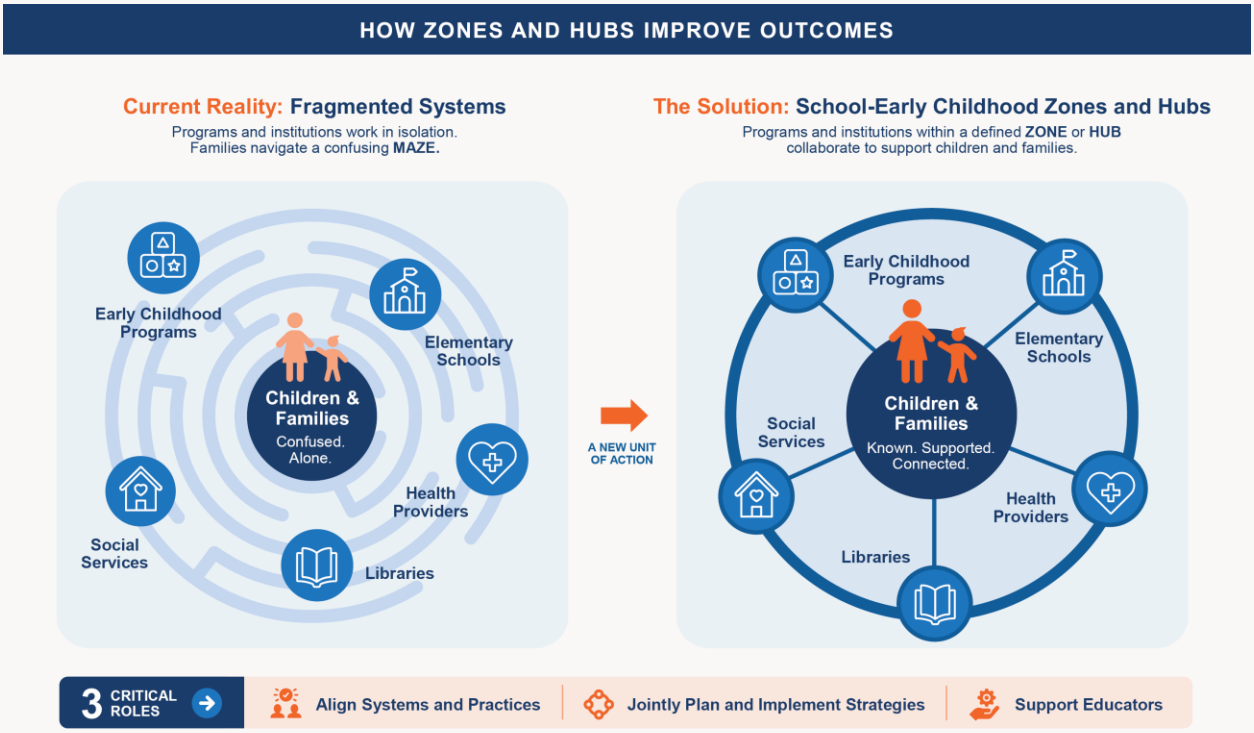


Figure 1. How zones and hubs improve outcomes

Several models of school-early childhood zones and hubs are underway in Nebraska, Oregon, and Midwest cities. These models were important influences on First 10[27], the specific model that I lead.[28] First 10 is still a young network of communities. We have had significant successes (see, for instance, these evaluations,[29] this case study,[30] and this three-part webinar series[31]), and we have our challenges and growth areas. The experiences of First 10 communities and other models' communities serve as proof of concept for this place-based strategy.

Zones and hubs hold significant promise for advancing four critical goals:

- Improving the effectiveness of elementary schools and early childhood programs.
- Supporting families as children's first teachers and promoting family stability.

- Strengthening communities by building local capacity, connecting families to each other and to resources, and fostering an *Our Community* culture.
- Ensuring all children learn and thrive.

The potential of school-early childhood zones and hubs to strengthen communities merits underscoring. In addition to improving outcomes for children and families directly, zones and hubs are powerful structures to address parental loneliness, build social capital among families and among organizations, and deepen the capacity and will of residents and local organizations to take positive action in their communities.

School–early childhood zones and hubs build on the momentum of cross-sector collaboration for education but constitute a distinct form of collaboration. They can operate as stand-alone partnerships or complement broader initiatives. Their distinctive contribution is a close-to-the-ground structure that brings together district and school administrators and teachers, early childhood program administrators and teachers, and health and social service leaders within defined school, neighborhood, or district boundaries. These boundaries create a critical locus of action, enabling partners to tailor strategies closely to local school and community contexts.

Zones and hubs give children's cabinets and regional partnerships local structures for implementing concrete strategies. They complement community schools by extending their reach to nearby families with young children ages 0-4, connecting schools with nearby early childhood programs, and strengthening transitions and collaboration across grade levels. They complement cradle-to-career initiatives by concentrating on continuity between early childhood and elementary education and on joint professional learning among early-years educators.

Typically convened by districts and schools—sometimes with anchor early childhood programs or social service agencies—zones and hubs are particularly well positioned to:

- Improve transitions to kindergarten and across the early grades.
- Provide direct supports to families with young children.
- Connect children and families to one another, to services, and to schools and programs.
- Create joint professional learning and cross-sector communities of practice that strengthen teaching, learning, and care.

By focusing partners on a defined population, geography, and set of actionable challenges, zones and hubs make cross-sector collaboration tangible and help build the commitment needed to sustain it.

By Way of Illustration: The First 10 Example

First 10 communities illustrate one approach to school-early childhood zones and hubs and the types of strategies they use. Since 2019, 60 communities in six states have used the First 10 Framework shown in Figure 2 below to improve outcomes for children and families.



Figure 2. First 10 Framework

Beginning at the center of Figure 2 and working outwards, First 10 starts with a commitment that all children learn and thrive. By "learn and thrive," First 10 seeks to improve children's physical and mental health, social-emotional learning, and cognitive and academic outcomes. With these outcomes in mind, First 10 communities convene partnerships of elementary schools and school districts, early childhood providers, and community health and social service organizations, including libraries.

Supported by a First 10 facilitator, these partnerships begin by assessing assets and needs and then develop a focused First 10 strategic plan. First 10 teams implement the three

broad strategies on the left side of the graphic across the early childhood--elementary school continuum. Most communities begin with a set of starter practices tied to the three broad strategies. These include designing and carrying out a comprehensive transition to kindergarten plan, bringing early childhood and elementary school educators together for joint professional learning, providing school-connected play and learn gatherings for families with young children, and leading community-wide parenting education campaigns.

Evaluations of First 10 in Michigan and Rhode Island have found positive results, and related materials—including a brief video, a case study, and articles—provide further information.[32]

Three Roles, Four Goals

As First 10 teams implement the starter practices mentioned above, they carry out the three defining roles of school-early childhood zones and hubs: coordinating and aligning systems and practices; jointly implementing strategies; and supporting early years educators in local communities of practice. In practice, these roles often overlap. The examples below illustrate the kinds of strategies that zones and hubs make possible to improve elementary schools and early childhood programs, support families, strengthen communities, and help all children learn and thrive.

Coordinating and Aligning Systems and Practices

Sharing Information About Children. One very clear benefit of school-early childhood zones and hubs is the ability to improve coordination and alignment of services and supports across institutions that serve the same children and families. In many communities, early childhood programs, elementary schools, and family-serving agencies operate with limited awareness of one another's practices. Zones and hubs create structures and relationships that help close these gaps.

A common entry point for this work is the transition to kindergarten. In typical systems, information about children's learning, development, and needs does not consistently flow from prekindergarten settings to elementary schools. Even when data are collected, they may not reach the educators who need them, or they may be limited to narrow indicators (e.g., assessments of foundation literacy skills) that miss important contextual knowledge.

Through zones and hubs, early childhood and kindergarten educators often develop information-sharing practices. Structured transition meetings, jointly developed child information forms, and cross-program conversations allow educators to share observations about children's strengths, challenges, and learning approaches. Kindergarten teachers report that this information enables them to better support students from the first day of school, while early childhood educators value seeing their knowledge inform practice and promote students' success beyond their classrooms.

The Sheepscot Valley Regional School Unit 12 is a rural district in central Maine that serves seven towns and has five elementary schools. Two regional Head Start providers manage the Pre-K classrooms in the district's elementary schools. The Sheepscot Valley First 10 zone identified gaps between Pre-K and kindergarten both in instructional alignment and in communication about rising kindergarten students. In response, the First 10 team expanded the use of transition meetings from serving only children identified as having disabilities to serving all the pre-K children moving up to kindergarten.

Sheepscot Valley's educators found that the qualitative information shared in these conversations was an especially valuable addition to the quantitative data typically shared with kindergarten teachers. The district paired the conversations about individual students with a program of classroom visits between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers, leading to a broader effort to incorporate Pre-K more holistically into the leadership structures and general systems of the elementary schools.[33]

As principals and administrators from early childhood centers work together on school-early childhood partnership activities in zones or hubs, they develop relationships and feel much more comfortable calling each other to discuss individual children—a more informal but nonetheless important outcome of the collaboration.

Connecting Families to Resources. Zones and hubs connect families to resources by creating health and human services resource lists, training trusted messengers to connect families to services, and forming relationships with families through school-connected play and learns and other activities. Without these connections, many families find it difficult to access and navigate support services that are spread across multiple agencies. Families may lack information or face logistical or trust barriers.

East Providence, Rhode Island is a community of 48,000 residents located between the Seekonk River and the Massachusetts border. In 2021, the school district partnered with

the East Bay Community Action Program (EBCAP) and local early childhood providers to launch a First 10 zone. EBCAP, a large social service agency, provides a wide range of supports including serving as the local Head Start agency, operating the Parents as Teachers home visiting program, and coordinating a coalition of healthcare providers.

Through its planning process, the First 10 team introduced a new strategy: placing an EBCAP family navigator at Hennessey Elementary School—where many families have low incomes—one day per week. The navigator helps families access health and social services, drawing on EBCAP's extensive network of community resources. The model is so successful that it has been expanded to three more schools. The team also launched a school-connected Play and Learn series for families with children ages 0–4. These six-session programs combine guided child activities with caregiver learning and build connections to peers, community resources, and local elementary schools.

In East Providence, family navigators also serve as play-and-learn facilitators, often alongside librarians or Pre-K teachers. This dual role makes it easier for families to connect with services and fosters trust through familiar relationships. Families are reassured by seeing a known navigator at events, helping them feel safe, welcomed, and supported as they engage with the school community.[34]

"…we know our kiddos before they even step into our school, in some instances we've been able to mitigate, and we've been able to provide some supports for issues that may lead to chronic absenteeism. So we catch it early. We get in that preventative proactive mode. We get the right supports. So by the time they walk through the door the first day of school, we've already put the layers around the family to ensure success for that individual student.

– Jill Koser, Assistant to the Superintendent, Conestoga Valley Public Schools in Pennsylvania, First 10 Zone

Coordination around Instructional Practices. Zones and hubs play a pivotal role in bringing Pre-K and kindergarten teachers together to improve child outcomes. Most Pre-K teachers have not had the opportunity to study kindergarten standards and learn about kindergarten colleagues' routines and instructional strategies. Similarly, most kindergarten teachers are not familiar with Pre-K standards and may sometimes hold misconceptions about Pre-K instructional practices. When kindergarten teachers understand the routines,

terminology, and instructional approaches used in prekindergarten classrooms, they are better able to build on students' strengths. Conversely, when Pre-K teachers understand kindergarten expectations, they can better prepare students—especially towards the end of the year—while using developmentally appropriate practices for four-year-olds.

First 10 teams have used several mechanisms to coordinate practices, including vertical joint professional learning, cross-classroom visits, shared priority texts, and curriculum alignment. In West Warwick, RI, the transition-to-kindergarten team adopted a common social-emotional learning program across community-based and district Pre-K and kindergarten classrooms, ensuring consistent terminology and school readiness skill development. In Johnston, RI, the First 10 team not only aligned phonological awareness instruction across Pre-K and kindergarten, but also created a community of practice to support effective implementation.

In Russellville, Alabama, Misty Terry spent 10 years as a community-based Pre-K lead teacher without ever visiting a nearby kindergarten classroom and no district Pre-K or kindergarten teacher visited her classroom. After Russellville received a grant to support early childhood and K–12 collaboration, Misty and her co-teacher visited kindergarten classrooms, taking careful notes on the songs, rhymes, routines, and materials. They felt valued as members of the broader early childhood community when district kindergarten teachers visited their high-quality, state-funded Pre-K program.

Misty later moved to a Pre-K position at Russellville's primary school and quickly became a teacher leader on the First 10 team. She spearheaded annual reciprocal classroom visits between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers and organized ongoing joint professional learning for community-based, Head Start, district Pre-K, and kindergarten educators. For the first time, teachers across settings analyzed standards together, identified teaching challenges, and aligned strategies across grade levels.

Jointly Planning and Implementing Strategies to Support Children and Families

School-Connected Play and Learns. School-connected play and learns engage families in social, developmentally appropriate activities such as interactive reading, singing, crafts, movement, and free play. They also connect children and families to one another, schools, and health and social services while building relationships with educators and facilitators.

Through the East Providence First 10 zone, the school district, public library, and EBCAP's Head Start and Parents as Teachers programs jointly developed a model combining First 10 lesson plans, The Basics principles and tools (see below), and elements of Head Start "socializations" and Parents as Teachers "group connections." Partners braided funding, pooled their family recruitment efforts, and shared responsibility for sessions held at an elementary school and the public library. The play and learns thus served as a successful "starter" strategy that also strengthened the partnership's collaborative capacity.

In Johnston, RI, Head Start and community-based preschool teachers facilitated play and learns alongside a high school intern studying education. Educators valued the opportunity to collaborate across programs. Johnston also scheduled the sessions next to—and concurrently with—child screenings, enabling facilitators and screeners to refer families to both offerings.

> "…play and learn sessions gave us a chance to meet their teacher and the environment. And it's built a trust and the familiarity, because this is the first time that we left our child to the school …And from the kids' sides, that's the first time that they will play and learn something outside the home, you know…the first time that they see someone else can take care of them. [At] the end of the sessions, we made the quick chats with the teachers. They asked some questions to us about their personalities. Probably they ask these questions to find the best way to approach them, because … this is the beginning of their education life, and it should be good.
>
> **—Ecem Ciklaiblikci, a parent participating in Conestoga Valley First 10 Zone's Play and Learns**

Supporting Parenting. School and early childhood partners in zones and hubs collaborate to strengthen family engagement and better serve families through strategies such as connecting families to resources, school-connected play-and-learns, supporting Kindergarten entry, and cross-sector work to align vision, strategies, and approaches. An additional promising area for collaboration is sharing a common framework regarding families' roles as children's first teachers. A community-wide framework can reinforce how families support learning at home, engage with schools and early childhood programs, advocate for their children, and access helpful resources.

Many First 10 teams use **The Basics** model,[35] a public health approach organized around a set of simple, evidence-based parenting principles developed by Ron Ferguson at Harvard's Kennedy School: Maximize Love, Manage Stress; Talk, Sing, and Point; Count, Group, and Compare; Explore through Movement and Play; and Read and Discuss Stories.

"Maximize Love, Manage Stress" is the foundational principle. The core strategy at the heart of The Basics model is to mobilize trusted messengers across child- and family-serving organizations to consistently promote the five principles—an approach Ferguson calls "socio-ecological saturation." The Basics toolkit offers videos, posters, tip sheets, workshop activities, and text messaging supports to reinforce this shared language.

First 10 zones and hubs often begin by introducing The Basics to early childhood educators and early-grade teachers. Many incorporate The Basics' resources into school-connected play-and-learns, dedicating time for caregiver learning while children engage in free play. Home visitors, librarians, WIC offices, faith-based organizations, pediatric providers, and early intervention programs also help amplify the messages through family engagement activities and community events.

In Woonsocket, RI, the First 10 team partnered with the city's primary pediatric practice, Thundermist, to promote The Basics during well-child visits and integrated the messages into Welcome to Kindergarten events. Lancaster County, PA and East Providence use the Parents as Teachers home visiting program to expand outreach and share The Basics messaging. In Sanford, ME, the First 10 team features The Basics on family-friendly websites and social media, adds QR codes to flyers, and extends outreach through in-person Play and Learns, virtual pajama party Play and Learns, and "bus stop pop-ups," meeting families where they naturally gather.

Sue Gallant, the First 10 Community School Specialist at the Maine Department of Education, captures how Maine's six First 10 hubs are incorporating The Basics as follows:

"The other piece that's really growing across our sites is the implementation of The Basics as a parenting framework. It's really a critical piece of the work that the teams are leaning into and leveraging their community networks to support. This is helping to provide families with actionable information about how to support their child's development, so that we are able to leverage those critical and sensitive periods of development to maximize opportunities for children rather than needing to focus on remediation later on."[36]

Extending the Welcome: Rethinking the Kindergarten Transition. Research shows that well-designed transition-to-kindergarten activities improve school readiness and achievement by the end of kindergarten.[37] Rather than relying on a single orientation event, zones and hubs develop coordinated sequences of welcoming activities that begin earlier and give families multiple touchpoints with schools. These efforts help children meet teachers, visit classrooms, and ease anxieties about the transition, while helping educators build relationships with families, share strategies for learning at home, identify needs, and connect families with services and summer opportunities. Early childhood partners often play an important role in designing and carrying out this work.

First 10 communities offer several examples. In Conestoga Valley, the district streamlined a confusing set of school-specific events into a "Kindergarten Express," a coordinated train-themed series of transition "stops" with a kick-off, showcase, screening, summer meet-and-greet, camp, and orientation. In doing so, they made entry into school more welcoming and coherent for families. The team has elevated the transition to kindergarten and made it as celebratory and coordinated as senior graduation—an important community milestone and families' first experience with the district.

Sanford, Maine adapted this idea as Hike the Trail to Kindergarten and paired it with play-and-learns, parenting supports, and collaboration with a nearby early learning center, whose staff helped introduce families to school personnel and routines before school began. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, transition events reinforce the community's Basics parenting campaign, creating more consistent messages across settings. At Newton-Lee Elementary in Virginia, child-focused welcome events are paired with parent workshops on topics such as managing big feelings, building empathy, and setting boundaries. Together, these examples show that when communities treat the kindergarten transition as an extended, collaborative process, they strengthen parent confidence, deepen relationships, and help children begin school with greater support.

"And so this year we thought, you know, what if we revisited this whole idea of kindergarten orientation and thought about it outside of just a one night thing, and could we really engage parents and connect with them and build up some relationships, so that, like we could arm them to feel more capable with their kids and maybe give them a little network of folks that they could lean on and rely on in the weeks and months leading up to kindergarten, so that they, you know, they have a community to do this with—the community being us, but also some of the new friends that they meet in our events."

— Shawn Lyons, Principal, Newton-Lee Elementary School, First 10 Hub, Loudoun County, VA

Supporting Early Years Educators in Local Communities of Practice

The third role of zones and hubs impacts children and families more indirectly than the other two but may have the most lasting effects. Zones and hubs build communities of practice among early years educators within schools and across nearby early childhood programs that support educators' professional learning and strengthen how teaching, learning, and family support are structured. Through ongoing joint professional learning, cross-site visits, and collaborative planning, zones and hubs create cultures of exchange that improve continuity from Pre-K through the early elementary grades.

As discussed, in the Russellville, AL First 10 zone educators began organizing cross-site Pre-K and kindergarten visits and joint learning after realizing these teachers had never formally collaborated. In Maine's Sheepscot Valley zone, leaders addressed the isolation of a Head Start Pre-K program by expanding transition meetings, cross-classroom visits, and revising leadership structures to fully integrate Pre-K. Similarly, when Detroit's Leadership Academy became a First 10 hub, leaders institutionalized a year-long collaboration between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers, including aligning standards, reviewing data, planning transitions, and engaging families together.

Extending collaboration beyond district classrooms to include Head Start and community-based early childhood teachers is more challenging but central to the First 10 model. The York City, PA First 10 zone offers a strong example. York serves 6,000 students—many multilingual and almost all eligible for free or reduced lunch. The First 10 teams deepened collaboration within schools and across sectors by regularly convening Head Start, community-based, and district Pre-K and kindergarten teachers for joint professional

learning; holding vertical Pre-K to Grade 2 early grades team meetings in schools; working with kindergarten teachers to develop and implement playful learning centers;[38] and supporting data-driven professional learning communities among Pre-K teachers.

This foundation made York City an ideal site to integrate the Young Mathematicians (YM) program.[39] YM has over 55 math games for classroom and family use, supported by family-friendly directions and videos in multiple languages. York City First 10 led the adoption of YM in Head Start, community-based Pre-K, and district Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms.[40] Educators use YM in professional learning, family engagement, summer institutes, public libraries, and classroom playful learning centers. YM aligns with York curricula, and educators receive extensive professional development in using the math games. Teachers report the games build children's confidence and math skills and strengthen trust and communication with families across languages. Interim evaluation findings show statistically significant growth in teachers' knowledge, confidence, and beliefs about early math and family engagement.

The York example illustrates a key point. Zones and hubs provide a cross-sector, cross-grade platform to advance community-wide priorities—whether instructional initiatives, family engagement strategies, parenting campaigns, or playful learning approaches. They cultivate educator communities of practice across districts, Head Start, and community-based programs, support effective implementation, and enable consistent practices, shared language, and aligned expectations for children and families.

"I'm extremely thankful to be able to serve such a diverse population of students and just their home languages and everything that comes with it. But sometimes that means the families don't feel as comfortable building relationships with the teachers, or even just having a simple conversation at the door. It can be very intimidating for the parents. So using these math games has really been a great way to kind of build that bridge of trust across all of my students and all of their home languages. Using the math games in kindergarten has grown not only my students' confidence with math …, but also the family's confidence with communicating with the staff and playing math games at home with their kid."

—Airiana Kibbler, Kindergarten Teacher, Ferguson School Hub, York City, PA

Strengthening Communities: Ecologies of Trust and Social Connection

School–early childhood zones and hubs have significant potential to improve outcomes for children, support families, and strengthen communities. By aligning institutions, enabling joint implementation, and cultivating communities of practice among early-years educators, they deepen the promise of full-service community schools. Hubs connect schools with families and early childhood programs, while zones extend this infrastructure across neighborhoods, towns, and small districts. Both foster belonging during a particularly vulnerable stage in the life course of families.

Consider a community in which elementary schools, early childhood programs, libraries, health providers, and home visiting programs promote a common approach to partnering with families. They promote a common framework about parenting, perhaps beginning with a foundational principle like The Basics' *Maximize Love, Manage Stress*. Beginning before birth, families participate in coordinated group supports such as Centering Pregnancy and Centering Parenting. Play and learns support child development while families form friendships and connect with schools, libraries, and health and social services. Home visitors, educators, librarians, WIC offices, early intervention providers, and family navigators use stronger referral systems and share an understanding of available resources.

As children approach prekindergarten and kindergarten, families are welcomed through coordinated activities such as Conestoga Valley's Express to Kindergarten, Newton-Lee Elementary School's parent workshops, and Sanford, Maine's open house and school-bus tours. They receive books and materials for playful early learning. Behind the scenes, early childhood and elementary educators align expectations, share strategies, and collaborate to strengthen teaching, learning, and care. These efforts strengthen educator practice, support teacher retention, and further reinforce continuity for children and families. As children move through the grades, transitions become smoother, information flows more reliably, families remain engaged, and connections to community resources are sustained.

When zones and hubs are embedded within broader cradle-to-career or early learning community initiatives, complementary efforts to expand access, build public will,

strengthen community infrastructure, and promote family well-being can amplify their impact.

The cumulative effect sends a powerful signal: institutions are connected, communication is consistent, and families are valued partners. With zones and hubs, families experience a coherent child- and family-serving ecosystem. Through this coordination, communities build trust, social capital, and shared responsibility for children and families.

Consistent with Sampson's research on social cohesion, communities that implement coordinated packages of strategies may also strengthen residents' willingness to act for the common good. Participating organizations build social capital as well—deepening trust, improving their capacity to work together, and creating the conditions for new ideas, norms, and collaborations to emerge.[41]

Conclusion: Shifting Mindsets and the Final Vertical Leap

"Recognizing that education truly begins at birth, not when students enter kindergarten, that has been a mindset shift for our community, our school committee, and our city council…. When we approached our school committee about wanting to join this initiative, one of their first questions was sustainability. And I think they were skeptical in the beginning. In regards to, "we're not sure we want to get into the birth to age 4 [space]. That's not our responsibility, [which] starts when they enter our schools." We did a lot of education with them. You know, "this is important." "This is important in terms of our partnerships that are going to help us as a school system." As they started to see the work unfold, they started to hear from parents, hear from families, hear from community providers, and they're all in.

— Steve Bussiere, Assistant Superintendent, Sanford School Department

School districts and community organizations must make two key mindset shifts for zones and hubs to be successful.

First, school districts must adopt a long-term view of soon-to-be-students and recognize the opportunity and responsibility to collaborate with early childhood programs and community partners before children enter kindergarten. They move from "waiting for children to arrive" to "helping communities prepare and support children and families."

Second, local, regional, and state leaders and funders must see that when elementary schools, early childhood programs, and communities come together into zones and hubs they become powerful units of change with enormous potential to improve outcomes for children and families.

There are signs of progress toward these shifts. The federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five program emphasizes transition-to-kindergarten planning and state and local system-building. NAESP's *Leading for Learning* competencies for elementary school principals also reflect this long-term, forward-looking perspective.[42]

Thinking vertically about student learning trajectories is already common practice at other levels of education. When a district notices that ninth graders are struggling, it may adjust the structure of ninth grade—but it also looks upstream to middle school, particularly the eighth-grade experience. Community colleges regularly align coursework and standards with feeder high schools to ease student transitions, especially within career pathways. Businesses think vertically as well, partnering with high schools and community colleges to strengthen workforce readiness.

Yet the traditional divide between early childhood education and K–12 schooling has made it difficult to think vertically about elementary schools and the feeder early childhood programs where their kindergarteners come from. The diversity of early childhood settings—Head Start, state-funded Pre-K, community-based programs, family child care—can feel overwhelming to principals and district leaders who may not be familiar with the early childhood landscape.

Collaboration between elementary schools and early childhood programs, then, represents the final vertical leap. School–early childhood zones and hubs provide the structures and strategies—the enabling "technology"—that make this leap possible.

Zones and hubs are designed to implement concrete strategies to improve teaching, learning, and care in ways that schools and early childhood programs cannot accomplish on their own. In doing so, they build peer connections, trust, access to services, and social capital. They foster engagement, volunteerism, family leadership, and shared commitment—strengthening communities in multiple, lasting ways.

Zones and hubs can operate effectively on their own or amplify their impact by working in conjunction with cradle-to-career collective impact initiatives that bring together broader coalitions of community leaders, government agencies, school districts, and nonprofits. Through this work, zones and hubs drive the development of "Our Community" cultures that support thriving babies, children, and families.

"York City is a small community. It's very urban. It's a small urban community with big urban situations, right? Like, so being able to build community trust is paramount to get anything done. Our parents' experiences with school often impact how they feel about school with their kids, so building their trust early on and providing activities and situations where there's sustainable impact, that when they leave pre-k and go to kindergarten, or even before pre-k, you know there is a fold of support that's sustainable, and the community begins to trust us. Long before the kids come to our school district. That concept of bearcats from birth [the district mascot]. As soon as they are born into our community, we're ready to be a part of their village."

—Andrea Berry-Brown, Superintendent, School District of the City of York

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