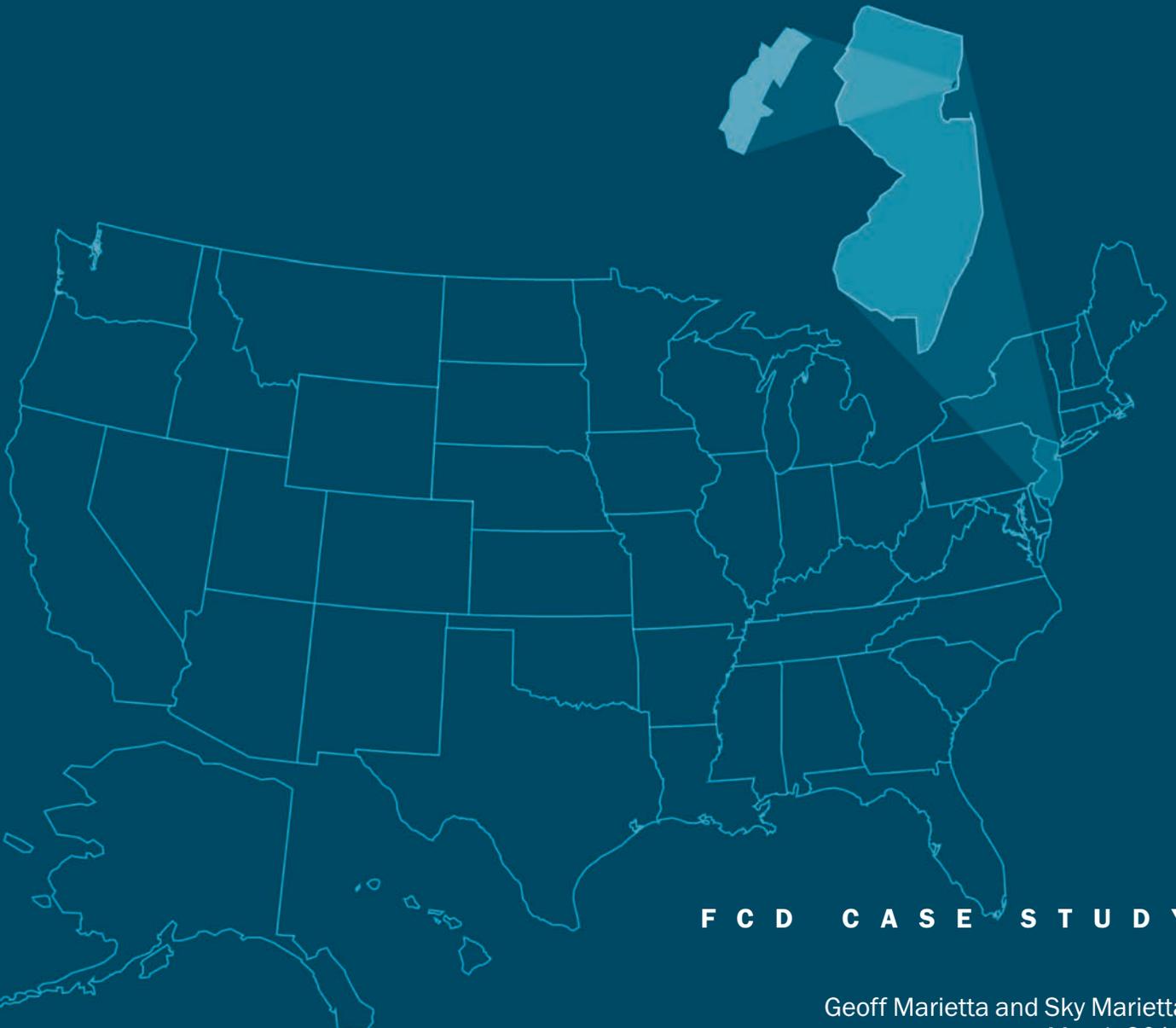


PreK-3rd's Lasting Architecture:

Successfully Serving Linguistically and Culturally
Diverse Students in Union City, New Jersey



F C D C A S E S T U D Y

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March 2013

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Introduction

A densely populated borough situated above the Lincoln Tunnel is home to a school district that accomplished what some education experts believed impossible. With a strong focus on PreK-3rd, Union City Public Schools has overcome the crippling effects of poverty and prejudice to close the achievement gap between its low-income Hispanic students and their wealthier peers across New Jersey.

For anyone familiar with the challenges of larger, high-poverty school districts in the United States, the performance of Union City students is staggering. In a district with nearly 11,000 students—96 percent Hispanic and 85 percent low-income—language arts and math proficiency nearly matched or outperformed statewide averages in 2011 (see **Figure 1**).¹ Compared to other Hispanic and low-income students in New Jersey, Union City children had double-digit leads in academic proficiency (see **Figure 2**). In addition, the district boasted a high school graduation rate of nearly 90 percent, more than six points higher than the statewide average in 2011 (see **Figure 3**). Union City has even been used as a model program in state legislature that provided key guidelines and recommendations on PreK education programs and staffing (see **Sidebar** on Abbott rulings).

However, Union City wasn't always a model for the state. In fact, in the late 1980s the district faced a state takeover due to poor performance. In 1989,

Union City failed 44 of the 52 categories New Jersey used to evaluate school districts.² Low student attendance, high dropout rates, and declining achievement scores plagued Union City schools.³ Community, district, and teacher leaders responded to the crisis. A committee of 11 teachers and 3 administrators developed and implemented a five-year strategic plan to turn around the failing school system.⁴

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In the process, the district established two belief statements: *Every student is college bound* and *No student is unteachable*.⁵ The district overhauled its curricula to emphasize critical thinking and reasoning, extended class-times, and increased teacher training. Reforms targeted the early grades first. The efforts paid off and through the 2000s Union City closed the gap with middle-class New Jersey districts in Eighth Grade math and language arts achievement by 25 and 20 points, respectively.⁶ Reflecting on those times, veteran Union City Superintendent Stanley Sanger shares:⁷ “The

word *change* is often a word that is feared...One of the most important ingredients is to realize that when there is going to be successful change, everyone in the community buys into the change, and everyone has ownership into the change—students, staff, administration, parents, board of education members, and the community at large.”

The Abbott Decisions and Union City. The New Jersey Supreme Court has played an incredibly important role in shaping education in Union City. In the early 1980s, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of children attending school in poorer, more urban districts contending that New Jersey had failed to provide a “thorough and efficient system of public schools” as specified in its state constitution.⁸ The New Jersey Supreme Court eventually heard arguments in the famous *Abbott v. Burke* case and ruled that the state education funding system was unconstitutional.⁹

In an initial move, the Supreme Court ordered that a designated group of “Abbott Districts,” which included Union City, receive per-pupil funding that matched the wealthier suburban districts in the state. A series of “Abbott” decisions followed attempting to improve equity and achievement for the Abbott Districts. However, performance was inconsistent across the districts and improvement tended to plateau after Fifth Grade. Union City and two other districts were the exceptions. Through the 1990s, Union City outperformed all other Abbott Districts but one, and spent much less per pupil doing so.¹⁰ The leaders in Union City during its early success, such as Fred Carigg and Thomas Highton, emphasized intensive early literacy, integration of PreK and Kindergarten, and continuous assessment of students’ learning needs.¹¹

In an Abbott decision in 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court emulated the Union City approach in its mandate that all Abbott Districts provide high-quality early education and Full-Day Kindergarten.¹² In addition, the Supreme Court required that districts integrate PreK with K-3rd using an “Intensive Early Literacy” strategy.¹³

Rulings that followed established a number of policies and practices that supported PreK-3rd education in Union City and other Abbott Districts; these included: 1) Certified teachers with a college degree in every PreK classroom earning equal pay of K-12 public school teachers; 2) Research-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum;¹⁴ 3) State-developed early childhood standards and assessment system that integrated the needs of Dual Language Learner (DLL) students.¹⁵

The success of Union City has not gone completely unnoticed. The school system has been profiled by the *New York Times*, *60 Minutes*, and in several books and reports.¹⁶ More than 15 years ago, President Bill Clinton called attention to the district’s success, saying “This school system is undergoing a remarkable transformation. I want the rest of the country to know about it, and I want everybody in the country to be able to emulate it.”¹⁷ Yet few reformers, researchers, or practitioners outside of New Jersey know about Union City and its success.

This is partly due to the modest and understated nature of Union City’s leader, Superintendent Stanley Sanger. Another reason is that Union City eschews the latest fads or publicized solutions prevalent in the education sector. Instead, the leaders in Union City have developed systems and structures focused on long-term investments in the community, students, and staff. Teachers are active in developing locally responsive curricula and assessments focused on literacy and aligned with college readiness. Teachers are called upon to provide leadership in implementing and aligning curriculum and instruction. District and school leaders created a blueprint for effective practices and continuously monitor implementation at the school level. Most importantly, the district has managed to bridge the all-too-common divide between home and school for children, particularly for young Dual Language Learner (DLL) students who are learning English even as they are still acquiring their native language.

Much can be learned from the sustained high performance of Union City. To find out how things worked in Union City, the authors used a case study design that incorporated interviews, participant observation, field notes, and document review. In all, they observed 12 classrooms and interviewed 10 people, including the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, supervisors, and master teachers.

Figure 1 Union City and New Jersey Third-Grade and Eighth-Grade Language Arts and Math Proficiency in 2011¹⁸

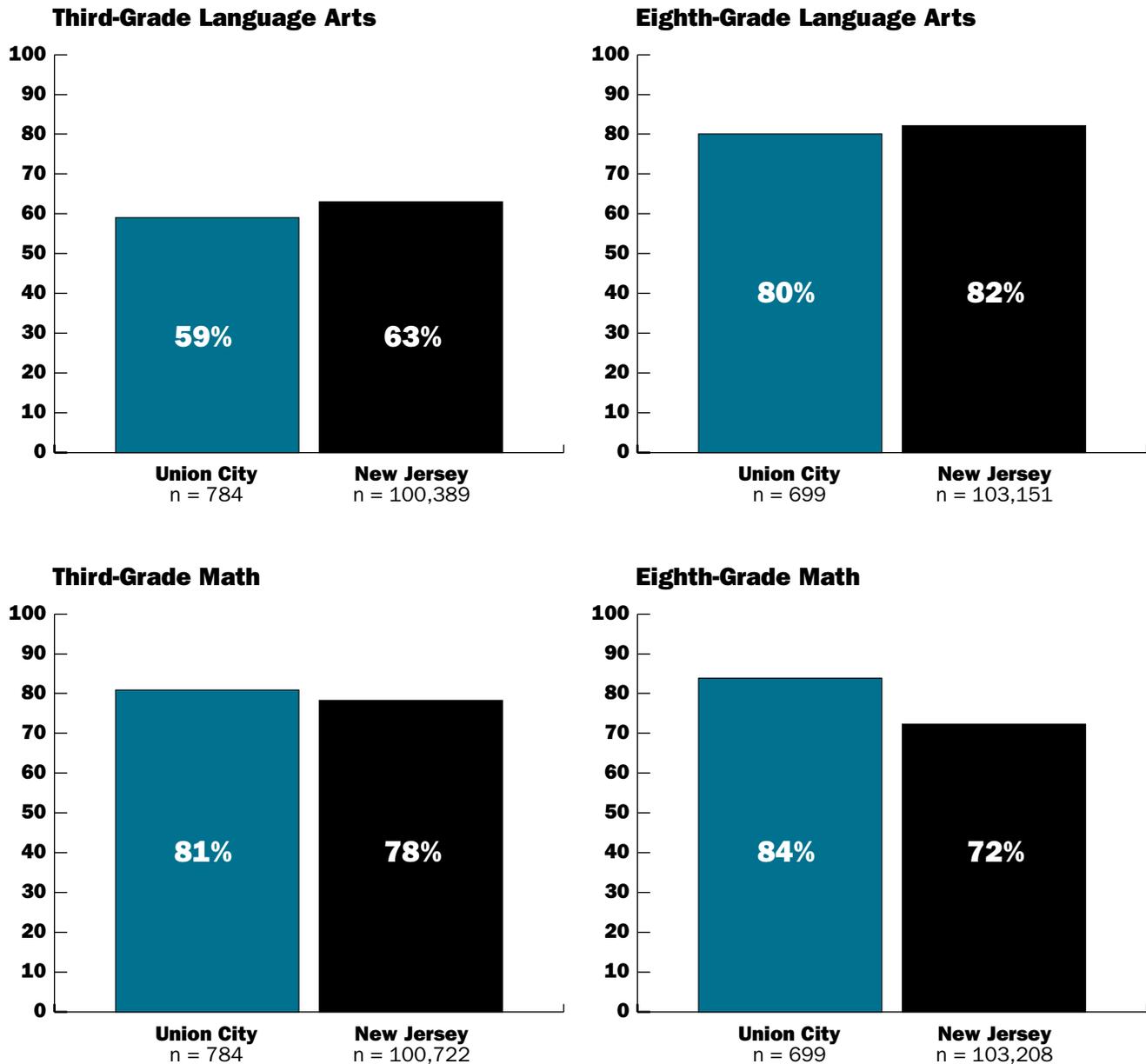


Figure 2 Academic Proficiency for Union City Students and Hispanic and Low-Income Students in New Jersey in 2011¹⁹

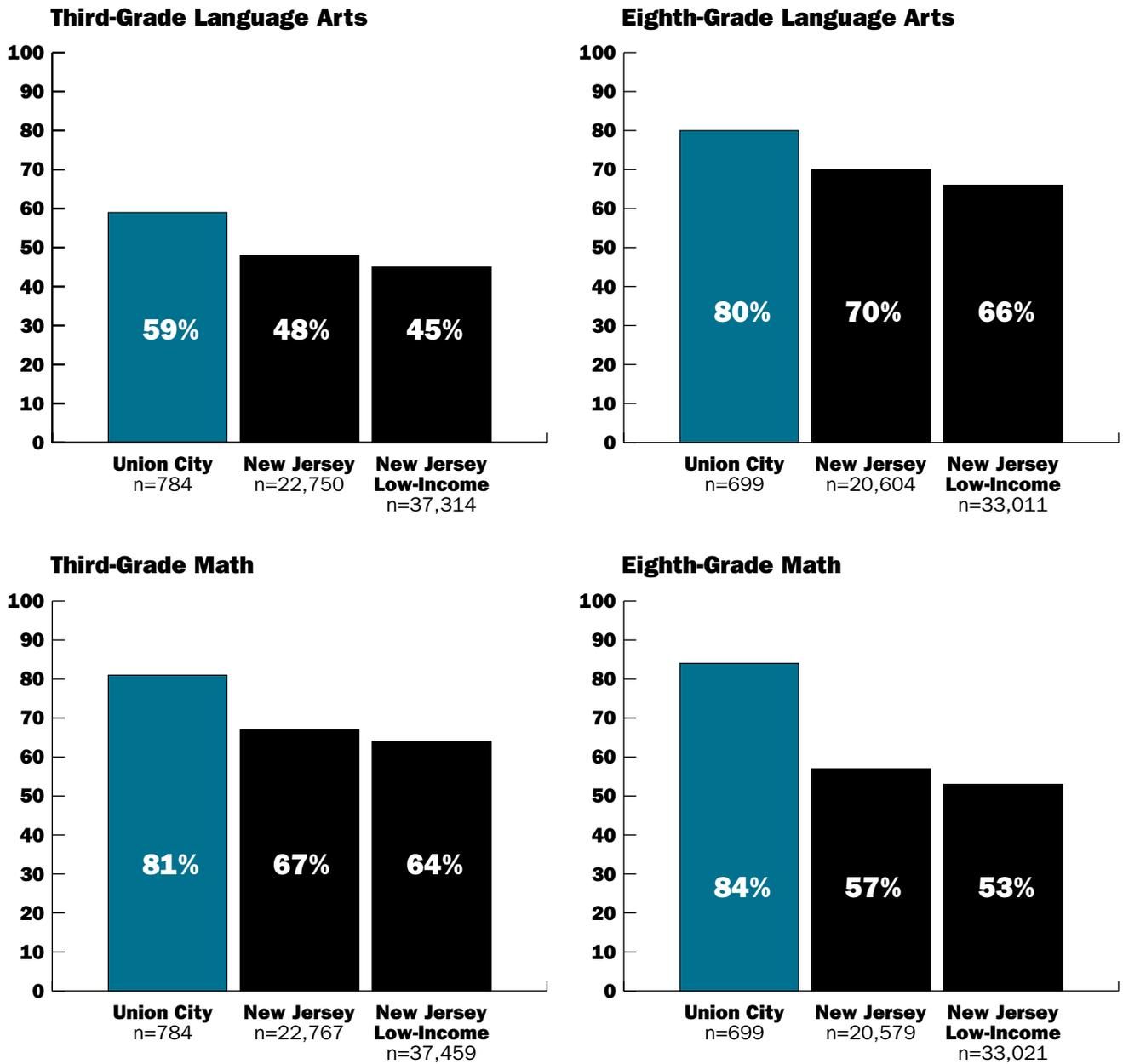
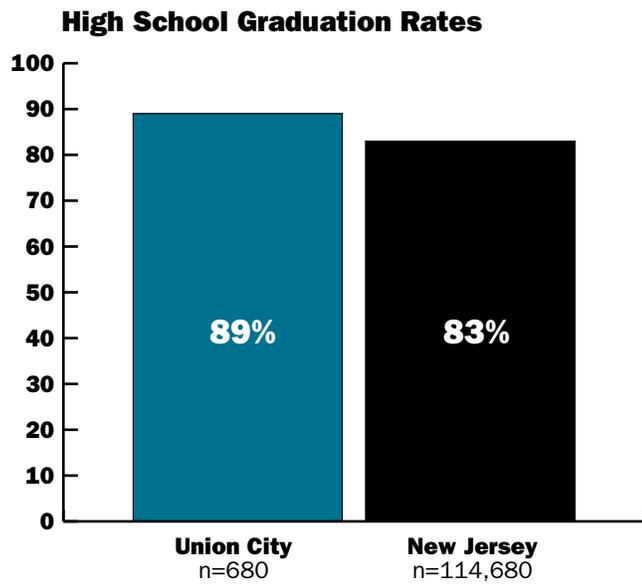


Figure 3 Union City and New Jersey Graduation Rates for the Class of 2011²⁰

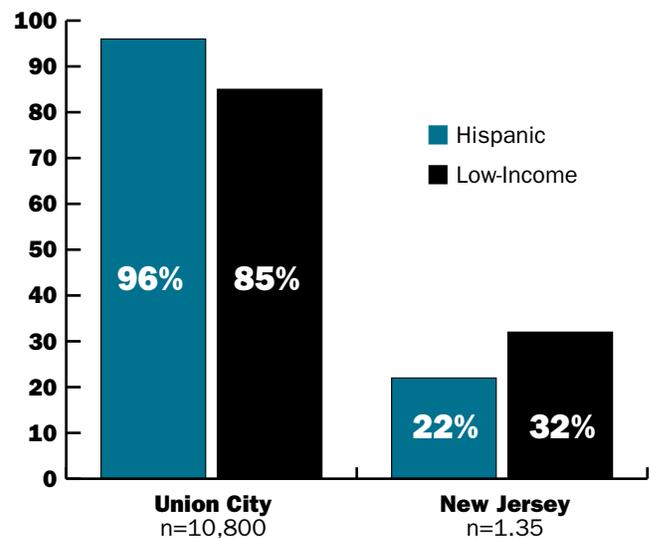
Building on a Strong Foundation

At the time Sanger became Union City superintendent in 2003, his predecessors had built a strong model of PreK-3rd education, and the district was near the end of implementing its five-year strategic plan. The cornerstones of the reforms included assessment, curriculum, and teacher training strategically aligned to college readiness from the first days of PreK. The district had a comprehensive assessment system that was benchmarked to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. The assessment system included multiple progress indicators aligned from PreK through 3rd Grade that forewarned teachers of skills and competencies students were not consistently reaching.²¹ A focus on early literacy stipulated large blocks of uninterrupted time in the early elementary grades for reading and writing.²² Struggling students received additional supports and instruction targeted to demonstrated needs in specific literacy components.²³ Union City boasted a highly trained and leadership-oriented teaching force, and investments were made to ensure that all teachers had bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) certification, and were trained in effective literacy practices.²⁴ Finally, the curriculum employed in Union City was developed and refined over time by district teachers to specifically address local needs in a context with high percentages of DLL students.

Under Sanger, the district continued the emphasis on PreK-3rd education and maintained high levels of performance. Nonetheless, Sanger has faced his own challenges in meeting students' learning needs. In particular, an ever-shifting population meant the needs of students and their families had become more complex and dynamic with time (see **Figure 4**). The basic demographics of Union City students veil the complexities of teaching children of the

newly immigrated. While the percentage of students learning English as a second language had remained fairly stable, the families of children entering Union City schools were coming from more rural and remote areas of countries in Central and South America. Many parents only attended elementary school in their home countries; some lacked any formal education at all, or were fleeing from harsh and traumatic circumstances.

Figure 4 Percentage of Hispanic and Low-income Students in Union City and New Jersey



Another challenge they faced was that the scale of early learning services provided by Union City was expanding at a rapid pace. The district served nearly 2,000 three- and four-year-olds between 33 community providers and six district schools. To further meet enrollment demands, the district opened a \$13 million early childhood center in October 2007. This facility alone served nearly 300 PreK and Kindergarten students in 18 classrooms (16 PreK and 2 Kindergarten classrooms).

It is in this context that Superintendent Sanger and his team, including Adrianna Birne, Principal of the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Center for Early Childhood Education and overseer of the district's early education program, and Silvia Abbato, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, continue to address the needs of students in Union City. Their goal was to create an inclusive model of PreK-3rd education designed to provide a three-year-old who has just arrived from the remote areas of Central and South America the tools necessary to achieve the same academic and social access as any other child in the State of New Jersey.

How has Union City confronted these new challenges while sustaining high performance? Union City's efforts build on common best practices, yet the district is unique in its ability to consistently implement culturally relevant, high-quality instruction in a coordinated manner over time. Union City offers four key lessons to any PreK-3rd programs serving linguistically and culturally diverse students, even in times of economic uncertainty and shifting demographics:

1. Promote Continuities Between Home, Community, and School
2. Develop the Whole Child through Rigorous, Locally Developed Curricula
3. Promote Teacher Leadership as Means of Coherence and Alignment
4. Create a Blueprint for Success

By following these four lessons, Sanger has built on early successes by creating a lasting architecture of PreK-12 learning environments for the many different students who call Union City home.

The Union City community relies on a mixed delivery system of in-district classrooms and community providers for its PreK services. While teachers of four-year-olds may teach in different settings across the borough, their work is more similar than different. All teachers, regardless of setting, receive the same training, are paid the same as K-12 district teachers, and teach using the same proven and developmentally appropriate curriculum. All teachers also have college degrees, are certified in early childhood education, and are supported by an assistant teacher. These requirements were more than just best practices, they were also codified in state law. In addition, all teachers are dually certified in their content area and in ESL.

Lesson 1: Promote Continuities Between Home, Community, and School

Children who enter school unfamiliar with the language and behavior expected by teachers, often struggle academically. A good deal of attention has been paid to gaps in language skills present in very young children,²⁵ but this is only part of the story. In fact, a misalignment between a child's everyday experiences with language and print materials in the home and a teacher's expectations for how the child will speak and act can shape the very quality of instruction the child receives.²⁶ In short, schools oftentimes create achievement discrepancies for cultural minorities. While these differences can hinder the development of any child whose sociocultural background does not mesh well with the expectations of school, young DLL students are a particularly vulnerable population.

In fact, instructional environments that value only the English language and mainstream American culture can lead to loss of the primary language—an outcome associated with poorer academic outcomes and increased family stress, particularly for children whose parents are only proficient in the primary language. The younger the child is when the first language is lost, the more negative the impact on the child's family life and school outcomes.²⁷ In practice, this means that providing high-quality PreK-3rd programming may not be enough to set young DLL students on a college trajectory. Instead, these children require PreK-3rd experiences that integrate and build on their home culture and language(s), while providing rich, immersive experiences with academic English.²⁸

Union City has been able to meet these challenges through a long-term focus on hiring local staff. As Adrianna Birne said, "The community may be transient, but the staff are not. We recruit from all over the community and each teacher brings a different approach or expertise. It is like you are cooking a recipe, with each teacher providing a

different spice to make a delicious meal." Because Union City has historically been a landing spot for immigrants, teachers recruited from the community are often bilingual themselves; thus, the community-based PreK-3rd teachers are able to appropriately implement the district's Spanish-English bilingual program. Most teachers hired are already certified as ESL teachers; teachers who are not, receive support from Union City to earn ESL certification as soon as possible.

Even though the specific demographics of the community have changed, the experience of learning American customs and English is a shared background between school staff, teachers, parents, and children. "I know what it was like to come here in Third Grade and learn English," said one PreK teacher. "So I will do my very best for the child facing the same situation." The common language and experiences between teachers and families reduce the home-school barriers often found in communities serving immigrant families and children. Teachers feel at ease visiting their students' homes and have no need for an interpreter. Informal conversations in the morning or afternoon during dropoff or pickup, as well as formal discussions at parent-teacher conferences are often conducted in the parents' home language.

While parents are often thankful for the familiarity they feel with teachers, it has also created remarkable continuity in the leadership of the school system. A 33-year veteran of the district, Superintendent Sanger graduated from high school in Union City, went on to teach social studies, become a principal, and move up to assistant superintendent. Assistant Superintendent Silvia Abbato started as a teacher in Union City, then served as a curriculum supervisor, and elementary school principal before moving into her current position. Of the 15 Master Teachers working in Union City, 13 grew up in the

community. The two “outsiders” also had deep connections to Union City. Taken together, the Master Teachers have hundreds of years of combined teaching experience in Union City and hundreds more of combined community experience. In the words of Abbato: “Everyone takes pride in our schools. They are the shining example in the community.”

Another benefit is that turnover is low. At district-run Eugenio Maria de Hostos Center childhood center, there have been only two new teachers in the last several years. Nearly all the teachers have been at the center since it opened six years ago. High teacher retention is consistent at the system level as well. Of the 1,990 teachers who taught in the 2011-2012 school year, only four left the district. In the last six years, about 30 teachers in total have left Union City, most of them for a promotion in a nearby district. A PreK teacher explained how this shared background shaped her role: “It is a job for life. We work with a wonderful group of women with so much knowledge who share a common goal. We give up lunch, prep, get

up early, stay late for that one objective.” It also helps that PreK teachers in Union City receive the same pay and benefits as K-12 teachers.

Union City’s focus on building deep connections within and across the community are anchored in their PreK-3rd work. As Abbato said, “PreK-3rd education is like the foundation of a house. If it’s not solid, then you can’t build on it.” Thus, the district also prioritizes teacher professional development and training, particularly for teachers serving young DLL students, for teachers both in the district and at community providers. Union City works to ensure that all PreK-3rd teachers in the schools and community providers are certified in ESL. In the end, the coordinated focus of local teachers has led to a family feel in the district. In the words of one PreK teacher: “We love what we do. We’re a family supporting the next generation.” A Master Teacher Supervisor emphasized, “Teachers have to know the child before they know the content, they must truly know who the children are, where they come from, and how they learn.”

Lesson 2: Develop the Whole Child through Rigorous, Locally Developed Curricula

After seeing the results Union City has accomplished, some might infer that teachers focus only on “skill and drill” instruction to raise student proficiency. But the entire approach is grounded in educating the whole child—social, emotional, and intellectual development. This is accomplished through collaborative and project-based instruction, based on themes aligned to state learning standards PreK-3rd.

In PreK, skills and concepts such as gross motor, fine motor, expressive language, social independence, and cognition are integrated through thematic units (see **Table 1**). The approach emphasizes intensive balanced literacy and language development through play. An administrator explained, “It’s not just haphazard playing. The play is planned by the teacher with a specific literacy skill in mind. Children are playing but also building skills for reading and writing. In some ways it is quite insidious that children do not know they are learning so much by playing.” Birne calls their approach “High-Scope with a twist.” Indeed, classroom curriculum represents an immersion of children into a literature-rich environment, proving authentic language learning experiences in English and Spanish where teachers have bilingual and multicultural understanding.

Table 1 Example PreK Themes and Foci

Theme	Focus
Welcome To School	Classroom and School Environment
I am Special	Themselves as Individuals
Changing Colors	Fall Season
Celebrate	Ethnic Backgrounds and Celebrations
Days of Long Ago	Dinosaurs

The overall PreK-3rd curricula blended best practices from various research-based curricula with local expertise. In an initial push to meet the needs of its students in the 1990s, Union City tasked its teachers with writing the district’s entire PreK-12 curriculum. Teachers built the curriculum to meet the specific needs of the children in the Union City community. Since then teachers have been deeply involved in systematically updating the curriculum each summer so that all grades and subjects are revised every three years. The result is a homegrown curriculum and corresponding assessments that have been developed and refined by district teachers over more than a decade. The curriculum is the same across all classrooms/settings for each grade level.

Each summer the district targets a few grade levels or subjects to revise. Teachers from these grades/subjects apply to be on the curriculum/assessment committees, which are paid positions that meet over the summer. As Birne explained, “Teachers take great pride in developing the curriculum. Teachers spend over 100 hours in the summer developing a curriculum that is aligned to the Common Core and meets the needs of Union City children and families.” Another administrator said, “The teachers are the curriculum team. We barely oversee the process because they are really the experts.”

The summer curriculum/assessment revision process has the added benefit of supporting the alignment of standards, instructional approaches, and expectations across grade levels. Each afternoon, grade-level committees come together to discuss progress revising their respective curricula and assessments. In this way, PreK and Kindergarten teachers become familiar with what standards and content First, Second, and Third Grade teachers covered each week of the school year, and how those standards are assessed. The cross-grade

curriculum development meetings also inevitably lead to sharing instructional practices across grade levels.

Once completed, the teacher-developed curricula is distributed electronically via a CD or flash drive, but even then, they are not considered static. Sanger likens the curriculum development process to a hypothesis testing through scientific experiment: “Everything we do—our customized curriculum, for example—is based on our experience in the community, best practices, guidance from the department of education, and making gains.”

The results of this work are rigorous, locally responsive, and aligned curricula and assessments that teachers believe in and can implement. The goal is to create a mainstreamed learning environment for DLL students. This includes a bilingual program that provides DLL students a gradual progression from the native language through three levels of English, with limited use of pull-out services. Online tracking system keeps track of students’ language proficiency, enrollment information, attendance rates, and other important information.



Lesson 3: Promote Teacher Leadership as Means of Coherence and Alignment

In Union City there is a strong sense of teacher professionalism and pride. Teachers have input on all decisions in the district, not only for the materials and instructional techniques used in the classroom, but also on the overall strategy of the district. Said Sanger: “There are no fancy words that describe the leadership from teachers in the district. We embrace teachers because we are all in this together.” Teachers conduct collaborative planning meetings in grade-level teams two times a week, and meet in cross-grade teams one to two times a month. In addition to discussing pacing and implementation of the curriculum, teachers also identify patterns of “skill clusters” that students are having a hard time learning, then share best practices on how to address these gaps. As Abbato explained it: “When you have your stakeholders on board from the beginning, it is easier to roll out. Teachers are telling teachers how to improve.”

In Union City, experienced and successful teachers are called upon to become “Master Teachers,” a role that encompasses instructional coaching and leadership in PreK and Kindergarten. Master Teachers develop individual professional development plans with every PreK and Kindergarten teacher, both within the district schools and at community providers, then use observation tools to engage teachers in a reflective cycle about teaching and address goals in development plan. They have a case load of about 20 teachers each and visit all 33 community providers and the six district schools daily. As Birne said: “The Master Teachers provide a new set of eyes to the teaching in a classroom. They help teachers see things that are hard to catch while teaching a classroom full of children.”

The daily presence of Master Teachers in community childcare settings has been essential to ensuring consistent quality in curriculum implementation. Union City expects all providers to use its curriculum with Master Teachers responsible

for training the teachers, staff, and administrators on implementation. When problems arise, Master Teachers work with the community provider teachers and leaders to find solutions. Ongoing leadership team meetings between the community providers and Union City administrators offer additional support.

The leadership of Master Teachers has slowly helped build the capacity of providers, some of which started as “Mom and Pop” home-based day cares. Birne remarks on the transformation over the years of some of the providers: “We needed them as much as they needed us. There was no way we were going to serve all the students and they welcomed the benefit of increased tuition. It was really a diamond in the rough that has been polished over time.”

Master teachers also played a role in transforming the Kindergarten instruction in the district. Sanger and his team focused on integrating PreK and Kindergarten instructional practices in a manner that promoted alignment and developmentally appropriate practices. Some Kindergarten teachers were slow to make the necessary changes; Master Teachers conducted “sweeps” of all the Kindergarten classrooms in the district, rearranging them to mirror the PreK classrooms. Some Kindergarten teachers were upset by the move and involved the teachers’ union in a complaint to the district. However, the practice was upheld as the district effectively argued that it was addressing the needs of students.

The continuity of experience and deep technical expertise from the teacher leaders in Union City supports the delivery of excellent instruction to meet the needs of DLL students. Abbato calls it the “clinical approach.” She explained, “When something is wrong, we run tests just like a doctor might run diagnostic tests. It might be A, B, or C; we run tests to rule out possible causes, implement a solution, and then action plan if problems continue.”

Lesson 4: Create a Blueprint for Success

The intensive support for teachers provided by Master Teachers is mirrored by supports for leaders and administrators. Just as carefully as Union City has created its own curriculum, it has also developed a “Blueprint for Sustained Academic Achievement” that maps out best administrative practices for the school year. These plans treated principals and assistant principals as key change agents to improving student achievement.

The blueprint set 105 indicators across five domains of effective educational leadership—administration, assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and school improvement. Indicators were developed over time and adjusted annually to reflect rising standards and policy changes. They are

designed to reflect the gamut of practices found in effective schools in Union City, from the important but mundane task of “Designate a time, place, and focused agenda for each Administrative Team meeting” to the more involved “Institutionalize success. Promote professional development at the school level to be conducted by successful teachers. Create demonstration rooms at designated schools.”

The domains were also broken down into key sequential steps. For example, indicators in the assessment domain were broken out into collect data, sort data, use data, and review ongoing assessment data. A few example indicators from the assessment domain illustrate the level of detail and complexity of the Blueprint (see **Table 2**).

Domain	Sample Indicator
Administration	20. Increase daily walkthroughs with purpose. Utilize district recommended PROFILES Checklists. Communicate findings among all stakeholders (administrative team members and teachers) to positive effect change and build high quality instructional programs. Walkthrough results should be used as a guiding force for professional development needs.
Assessment	6. Use the Data (August) – Isolate/Review Math cluster, Reading & Writing strengths and weaknesses per grade, per homeroom. Extract data from “Individual Student Profile” reports and New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK)/High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) data report and update to master data file. Produce “year in review” data reports for staff and “projected year” data reports for current homerooms. Create pictorial/graph representations for staff review. Distribute to staff Day 1.
Curriculum and Instruction	12. Establish collaborative planning meetings on grade level and/or by content area, once a week, to effectively construct short- and long-term goals and assess the program for its strength and weaknesses.

Central office administrators put the blueprint into action by conducting data-driven School Wide Assessment Team (SWAT) visits, where they visit every single classroom in a school in one day looking for adherence to the curricula and identifying instructional trends. While some teachers undoubtedly feel anxious when visited by members of the SWAT, neither the intention nor the design is evaluative. According to Sanger: “We don’t have ‘snoopervision’ in Union City. There are no fear factors. We have tremendous respect for the classroom teacher. They are the most important factor—I only allow things to happen, they make things happen.”

Instead, the SWAT visits combined with assessment data help administrators identify weaknesses in the curriculum and instruction in Union City, which then informs teaching training. Abbato explained: “These are leading indicators that we can use to analyze schools vs. schools and subgroups vs. subgroups. It gives us a barometer for what is happening in schools and classrooms.” Sanger calls it the Continuous Cycle to Quality Instruction; he said: “Through assessments and observations we can identify weaknesses in skill clusters. Administrators must then have the fortitude to regroup students and reassign staff to meet the needs of the students identified. It is one thing to have the data and assessments, it is another how you use them to shape instruction.”

Through “face-to-face” meetings with the principal to talk about the SWAT visit, administrators review schools’ comprehensive action plans, and plan for improvement. Sanger explained: “[The system is] not a gotcha. It is a process, gets your house in order.” At face-to-face meetings principals are expected to show how they are responding to assessment and walkthrough results. The emphasis is on how principals are adjusting existing programs, staffing schedules, and services to meet problem areas identified in the data. A by-product of this intensive process is that it also made central office administrators accountable for support. Central office follows the face-to-face meetings with a detailed memo of strengths and weaknesses at the school, and suggests how to make improvements with the available support.

Recommendations may include more effective use of academic coaches, assessment tools, or bilingual supervisors with guidance from central office. The plan may ask that schools utilize Master Teachers for additional training or professional development programs available across the system, such as PD360—an online video repository of teachers demonstrating a skill. This level of detail has allowed for a high level of alignment around the core features of the Union City strategy.

Conclusion

The elegance of the Union City model lies in its simplicity. The leadership has ignored the siren call of the latest trends and initiatives offering quick fixes for student achievement. Instead, Sanger and his team have a clear focus on building a strong model for their particular community, step by step, over many years of teacher and community input. Over time, the model has been refined to better meet the specific needs of their constituents, including students, teachers, community providers, and schools. Through development of a careful blueprint, the model has been formalized into clear practices and routines that are upheld through continuous assessment and discussion across the many levels of a school system. As a result, the district has become a stable, thriving community for educators and students alike. Within the warm embrace of familiar faces, languages, and institutional routines, the magic of Union City unfolds.

Certainly, such an environment would be good for any child. Indeed, a middle-class, monolingual child would gladly join the play-based, thematically oriented PreK classrooms in Union City. Moreover, she would be challenged through in-depth exploration of interesting ideas, and required to continuously build her linguistic repertoire while navigating a variety of learning and social environments. Now imagine a different child: Alberto, one who is entirely new to a big noisy city, including its school and classrooms packed with unfamiliar children. Alberto is a child who recently came to Union City from a rural agrarian community in South America, and is living in a crowded, multi-family apartment supported by adults who work various shifts to make ends meet in their new country. Despite these challenges, Alberto is also happy to enter a classroom where he will be greeted in Spanish, welcomed by a teacher who is deeply familiar with his own immigrant experience, and who can speak to his parents. Alberto is engaged in exploration, and allowed to build his Spanish and English skills over time through authentic interactions with peers and materials.

For Alberto, his experiences in Union City will become part of a carefully choreographed dance that will build his skills year by year, teacher by teacher, supported by many layers of guidance and monitoring from the districts coordinated systems. Over time, he will be carefully led through increasingly challenging experiences, designed by teachers who know his neighborhood and needs. He will be asked to use English more and more, and he will hear more complex stories and more unfamiliar words. And through it all, a careful path will be laid that will lead him not only to see school as a warm and welcoming place, but also the place that builds the skills needed for him to go all the way to college. Rather than dividing the child from his family, this approach brings them together. Soon, Alberto's father's heart swells with pride as his son begins to teach him new English words.

Years later, perhaps Alberto will return to Union City as a teacher. There, Alberto may reflect on what others can learn from his community's success. This is the scenario that Union City inspires, and will continue to inspire for our most vulnerable population of young learners in America today.

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Sky Marietta is a postdoctoral fellow in education and lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research examines how children are involved in talk in their homes and communities to better understand connections between language, culture, poverty, and reading achievement. She graduated from Yale College with honors in Psychology and holds an MAT in Elementary Education, EdM in Language and Literacy, and EdD in Human Development and Education.

Endnotes

- 1 New Jersey Department of Education. (2012). 2011-2012 District Enrollment. Retrieved October 25, 2012 from <http://www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/education/data/enr11plus.pl>. The term “low-income” refers to students who qualify for a free or reduced-priced lunch. For school year 2012-2013, a four-person family income at or below \$29,965 qualified students for free lunch, and a four-person family income at or below \$42,643 qualified students for reduced-price lunch.
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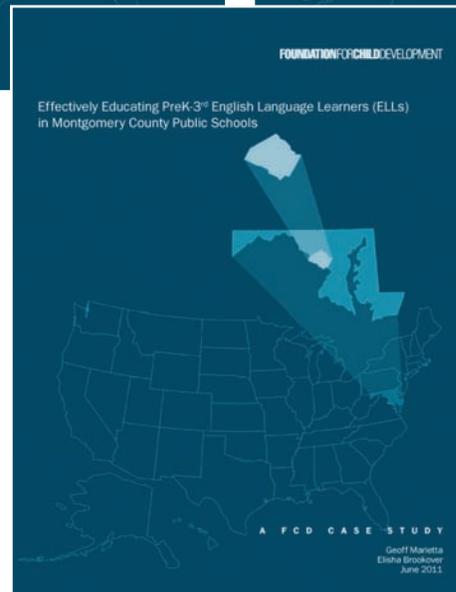
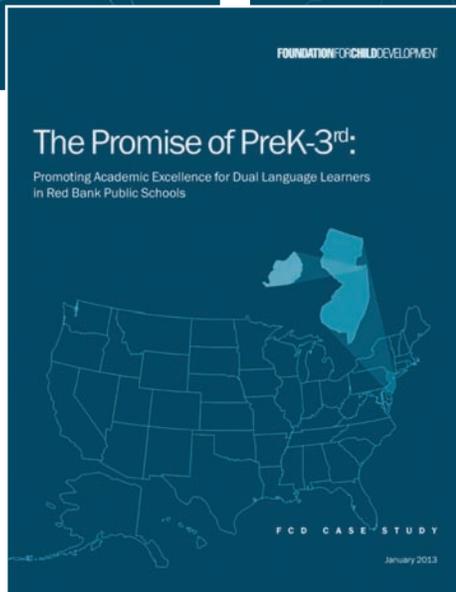
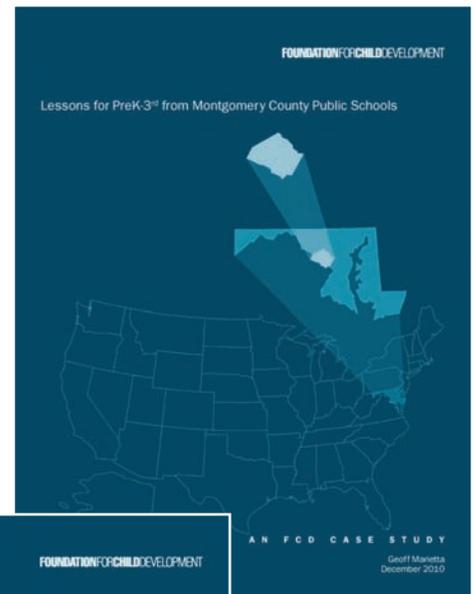
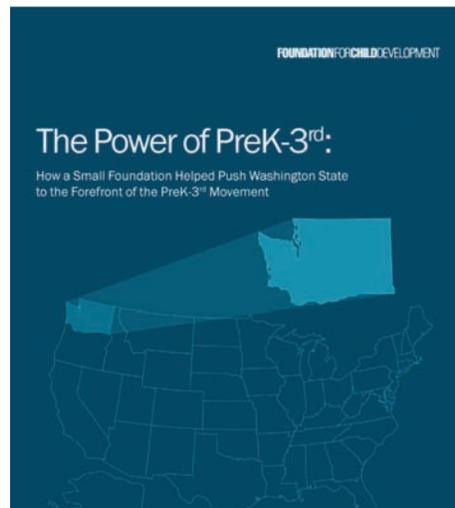
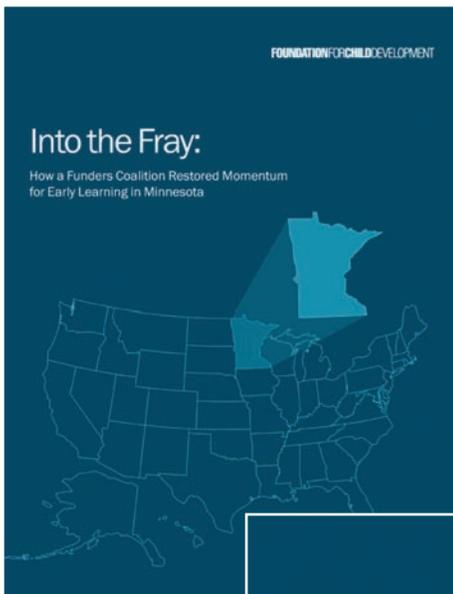
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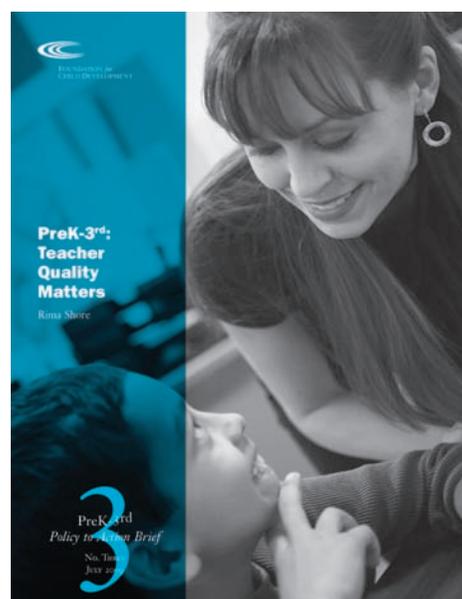
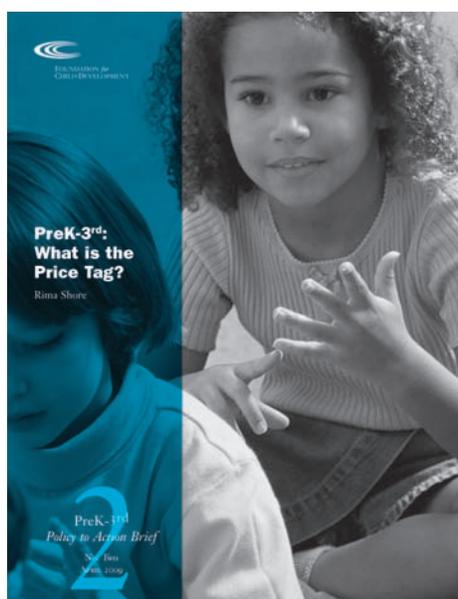


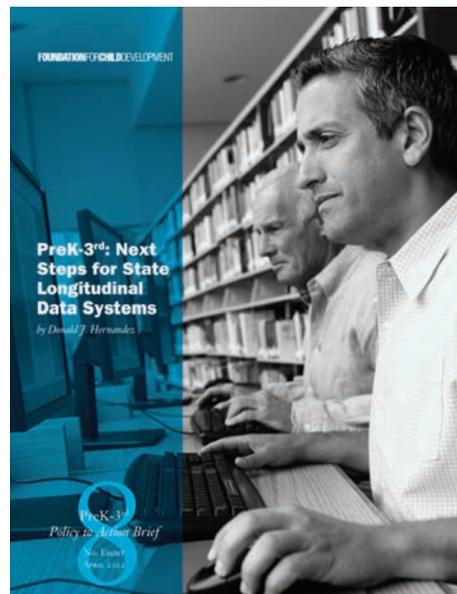
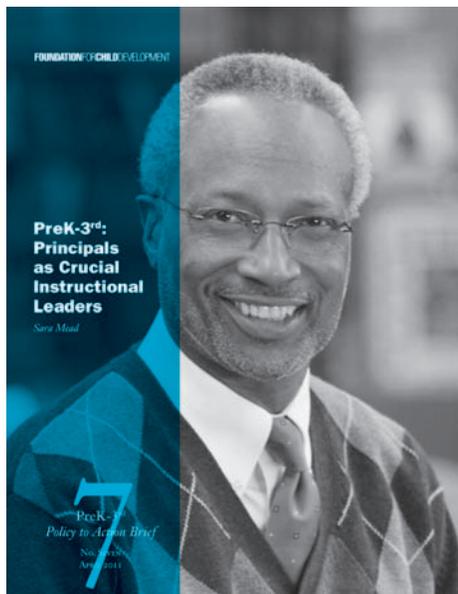
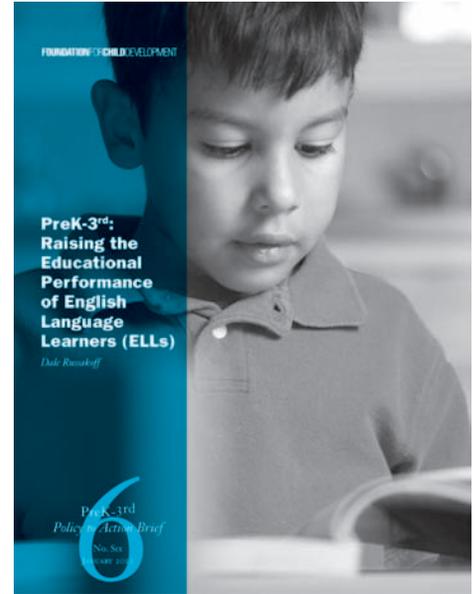
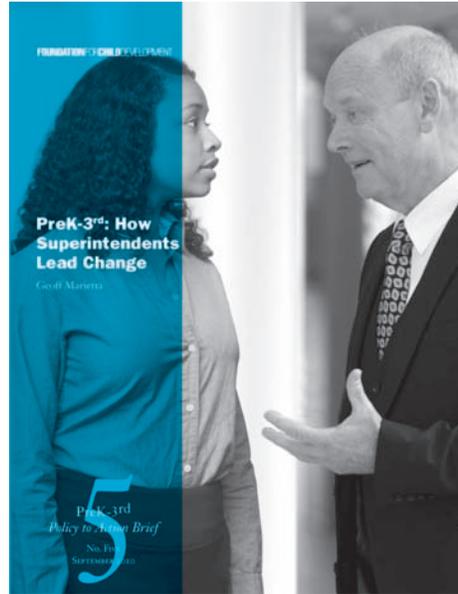
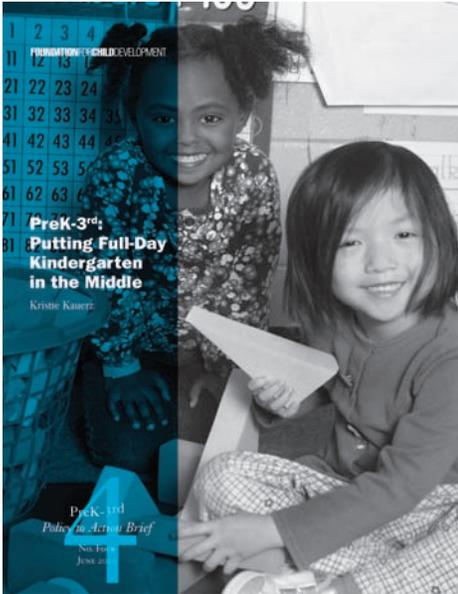
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PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs seek to promote the idea of PreK-3rd and to provide guidance for its implementation. The goal of PreK-3rd Grade Education is the creation of a seamless learning continuum from PreK to Third Grade.

PreK-3rd is a national movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different efforts use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools to create a well-aligned primary education for all our nation's children.

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