

# Education & Learning Program: Establishing a Coherent PreK-3 Literacy Program

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**Schools participating in The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program identified program coherence as an essential ingredient for establishing PreK-3 pathways that support proficient third grade readers.** The Urban Education Institute (UEI) administered the 5Essentials (5E) survey to teachers in all E&L schools, and all but one school were rated weak in the area of program coherence. Yet, research has found that schools with strong program coherence tend to have better outcomes for their students.<sup>1</sup> Strong program coherence happens when curriculum, instruction, and assessment; support services; professional development; school improvement planning and progress monitoring; and participation in new programs and initiatives are aligned with the school's shared purpose and learning goals. This brief describes the status of program coherence in the E&L schools and the factors supporting and challenging development of program coherence around PreK-3 literacy work.

The findings are from 68 interviews conducted in fall 2014 with district and school administrators, PreK-3 teachers (including dual language and English language teachers), and literacy coaches in three districts and six schools with an E&L Program implementation grant and with three UEI staff members responsible for teacher training and leadership coaching.<sup>2</sup> The perspectives of the interviewees may not represent the full staff in these districts and schools or at UEI.

## E&L Program Coherence Supports

The E&L Program provided various supports to foster program coherence in the participating schools. To

support schools in becoming better organized, UEI staff helped school leaders use the 5E data to develop plans for improving program coherence and alignment during quarterly leadership collaborative meetings. Each principal also received the support of a leadership coach, who provided guidance based on individual school needs and 5E data. Administrators from some of the districts and CPA visited UEI in Chicago to learn how to use the 5E for school improvement and to meet with instructional leaders who had used it productively. Previously, they also visited Union City, New Jersey, to learn more about program alignment.

To facilitate instructional coherence, UEI established a literacy collaborative for literacy coaches and select teachers at each school where they learned new practices they were expected to spread to other teachers within their schools. Each school also received STEP training from a UEI trainer, who helped teachers be consistent in how they assessed students within and across grades and introduced instructional strategies to be used by all teachers.

## Accomplishments

The E&L districts and schools made progress in creating coherent PreK-3 literacy programs. Districts worked to align initiatives and strategies across schools and to support them in streamlining their programs. Schools made efforts to have common expectations and approaches for literacy instruction across and within grades.

**Some district and school leaders began prioritizing initiatives that more closely aligned to their strategic plans and learning goals.** UEI staff and 5E survey results helped district and school leaders see that incoherence was stemming from districts and schools having too many initiatives. UEI advised principals to inventory their programs and discontinue or minimize effort on those that did not align with the school's goals. While SPPS schools were required to still implement all of the districts' initiatives, the district gave them permission to prioritize literacy. In MPS, a district administrator recognized the challenge school leaders have of buffering their teachers from "unnecessary noise" without isolating themselves

<sup>1</sup> Newmann, F., Smith, B., Allensworth, E., & Bryk, A. (2001). Instructional program coherence: What it is and why it should guide school improvement policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(4), 297-321.

<sup>2</sup> Schools with E&L Program implementation grants included in this study are Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS); Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy (SPMA), Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS); Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS); and Community of Peace Academy (CPA). Academia Cesar Chavez has a grant but is not part of the study.

from the larger district reform initiatives. In BCCS, district leaders reviewed the coherence of programs to make sure they aligned with their new strategic plan. A BCCS district administrator explained the district's new approach to program adoption:

*We are making a commitment that we will not add any new initiatives or programs unless it adds to our strategic plan and is research based and manageable by staff.*

BCCS hired new leaders to articulate and strengthen the links between programs. The newly-created Executive Director of Teaching & Learning position is responsible for overseeing program coherence.

Several schools focused on reducing their number of initiatives. Both MPS schools made plans to align their various initiatives to their school improvement plans. One principal said, "The area that we have identified that we want to grow and strengthen is...specifically program coherence. So looking at how are we aligning the work of our school improvement plan." The principals and literacy coaches had begun communicating to staff how all of the initiatives fit together. The SPMA principal was transparent about the 5E results and made it clear what teachers should be working on. Finally, CPA decided that the E&L Program would be its main focus. An administrator said, "It's the most exciting initiative that's happened in our elementary [school] I can recall. We're quite selective about grant initiatives."

**Adoption of common assessment practices, curricula, and instructional strategies promoted alignment within and across grades.** For many of the E&L schools, implementing STEP was the first stage in aligning teachers' practices and expectations. Schools used STEP to drive the rest of the literacy work, such as guided reading groups, interventions, and goal setting. An MPS literacy coach said that STEP helped align the literacy program and drive instruction by "giving us clear long-term and short-term goals." Some schools instituted STEP beyond grade 3, which facilitated consistency and common language more broadly across the grades. At CPA, all grades PreK–6 used STEP, and BCCS and the MPS schools used it in grades PreK–5.

Further, in some of the schools, the use of a common curriculum across the grades facilitated coherence. In BCCS, many respondents believed purchasing the Benchmark Curriculum was a step towards coherence. At CPA, leadership noticed they needed to

move beyond using the same curriculum to also instilling common instructional strategies. The school adopted Literacy By Design in K–6 before the E&L Program, but teachers were not consistent in the ways and how often they used it. Leadership identified three strategies they wanted to see in every classroom: habits of discussion, writing about reading, and citing evidence. The literacy coach, math coach, and elementary director observed all CPA teachers weekly to ensure they saw teachers implementing those strategies.

**Common planning and collaboration time facilitated instructional coherence.** In districts with common planning time, respondents cited it as one of the primary facilitators of grade-level coherence. It enabled teachers to collaborate and calibrate their instruction. In 2014–15, CPA adjusted the master schedule to provide teachers common planning time with their grade-level peers twice a week, once each for literacy and math. During this time, CPA teachers reviewed data, planned lessons, and discussed observation feedback with the literacy or math coach. CPA teachers also met across PreK–6 during the weekly schoolwide PLC, during which teachers would group across grades to discuss vertical alignment and teachers who attended the literacy collaborative would present what they learned.

In BCCS, respondents said common planning time made the grade-levels more coherent. For example, an administrator described PreK as particularly coherent:

*For PreK in particular, I think we are completely coherent. All of the [PreK] teachers do their planning together. They use Google Docs to share everything they're doing; there are some forms of choice to make it their own, but basically all the classrooms are doing the same things.*

Additionally, kindergarten teachers in BCCS received extra release time during the day—a half-day every other week—for intensive coaching to bring their instruction closer to that of PreK.

**Coaches reinforced alignment and consistency across teachers.** In an SPPS school that received high ratings for coherency on the 5E, the principal credited her literacy coaches for instilling a coherent literacy program, and teachers said coaches communicated schoolwide literacy expectations and instructional goals. An SPPS administrator also believed coaching was a large factor in establishing coherence. In fall 2014, MPS coaches began conducting weekly

observations and debriefs to promote consistent strategies, such as habits of discussion, accountable talk, and word solving strategies.

For some districts, coaches used common planning time to support coherence. In BCCS, grade-level PLCs helped build grade-level coherence with support of the coach. For example, a first-grade teacher described how the coach played a large part in their instructional alignment by helping the first grade teachers identify common goals and strategies to use in their classes. In CPA, the elementary director, literacy coach, and math coach provided feedback to teachers during common planning time about inconsistencies in practices across classrooms.

**The training UEI provided to literacy coaches helped coaches create coherence around expectations and program goals.** To support teachers in creating a coherent program, the coaches had to first understand what they were asking teachers to do. In MPS, STEP trainers helped increase coaches' understanding of the program goals. In the first year coaches were still learning the program, but over time it became easier for them to focus on coherence. A literacy coach said the UEI consultant supported her in understanding program coherence and "now we understand what needs to happen, how it happens, why it happens." The CPA literacy coach shared that conducting observations with the UEI coach made her realize she needed to help teachers use clearer and more coherent language and definitions for reading strategies with their students.

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### Challenges

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Although districts and schools made progress towards developing greater program coherence, challenges remained in creating coherence across initiatives, assessments, and instructional settings and in providing collaboration time and staffing stability.

**School staff felt better alignment was needed between the E&L Program and other important district initiatives.** Although school leaders had begun prioritizing initiatives, they still struggled to draw connections between the multiple initiatives and then communicate those connections to teachers. Staff sometimes felt that initiatives were layered on top of each other with no consistent support around how to integrate the requirements. Even though their school is an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, some BCCS K-3 teachers struggled to integrate IB with Balanced Literacy, noting limited time and a lack of alignment between the resources. SPPS staff reported

that the introduction of STEP created less coherence because it was not aligned with the districtwide curriculum. Similarly, a literacy coach in MPS felt the STEP learning trajectory did not always align with some of the district's Focused Instruction units.

**Staff had difficulty integrating the data from multiple assessments to make instructional decisions.** In addition to STEP, staff administered multiple assessments, including the MCA, curriculum assessments, screeners, intervention assessments, as well as assessments for students who are dual language learners and those in special education. In some cases, the assessments were duplicative—assessing the same skills or serving similar purposes. In BCCS, CPA, and MPS, intervention teachers used different assessments than classroom teachers to identify students for support and to monitor progress, and staff noted that this duplication of assessments was repetitive and reduced coherence. For example, MPS staff said that STEP and the assessment used by the Minnesota Reading Corps were different but assessed the same skills. Similarly at CPA, the tutoring service's assessment system was not well aligned to STEP, so the tutors used their own system to monitor progress. The school had plans to work with an outside organization to better align the two.

School staff in several districts reported the challenge of integrating English language proficiency assessments with other assessments used by classroom teachers, explaining that they measure different skills. This hindered alignment between classroom instruction and English language instruction for dual language learners. Spanish teachers in MPS' Developmental Dual Language program had to translate the district benchmark assessments, and teachers reported that some of the English skills being assessed were not important for Spanish literacy skills.

In some districts, classroom teachers wanted more clarity around the alignment between STEP and other assessments. Because teachers are ultimately held accountable by their MCA scores, some were concerned about how well the two correlate. In BCCS, the assessment coordinator looked at proficiency scores on the MCA and STEP and found that especially for third grade, the two assessments were highly correlated. However, an MPS district administrator also analyzed the two assessments and found them not highly correlated. Additionally, MPS teachers reported a lack of alignment between STEP and the Focused Instruction benchmark tests, with

STEP focusing on literacy development and the benchmark assessments focusing on standards.

Finally, in BCCS and SPPS, STEP was not in the districts' data systems. Having STEP in a different data system made it difficult for BCCS teachers to pull out STEP data for special education and dual language learner students and compare their results to other students. In SPPS, teachers could no longer rely on the district DataZone data system to group students and identify materials for those groups as they did in the past with the Mondo assessment.

**Coherence was weak across instructional settings for children who are dual language learners and have special education needs.** Lack of common resources and strategies limited teachers' ability to link instruction across instructional settings. In SPPS, STEP increased coherence around assessment between English and dual immersion Spanish classrooms but a lack of Spanish instructional materials made instructional coherence between the programs difficult. In MPS, Focused Instruction was not fully developed for Spanish classrooms. Similarly, instructional strategies varied for the dual language and English language teachers, as well as for classroom teachers and special education teachers. Furthermore, administrators and staff in BCCS and MPS said classroom teachers had varied understandings and therefore varied expectations of dual language learners' and special education students' learning abilities.

A priority for all schools was ensuring that students who are pulled for EL, special education, or other support services do not miss core instruction. BCCS and SPPS were struggling to create such a schedule.

**Teachers reported lack of time for planning and collaboration within and across grades and across instructional programs as a key barrier to having greater coherence.** Some teachers reported that more common planning time and collaboration would facilitate greater alignment of instructional practices within grade levels. In BCCS, teachers had less common planning time than in previous years because the district used part of that time to increase instructional time. In MPS, with the new professional development structure that combines professional development and PLCs, called PDPLC, teachers could choose the PDPLC they want to participate in, so not all teachers had a common instructional focus.

Across districts, teachers also expressed a need for time to collaborate across grade levels in order to

ensure that instructional practices are similar and build on each other. In BCCS and SPPS, teachers noted the importance of creating time to share resources and strategies with classroom, special education, and English language teachers, as they instruct the same students. SPPS English language teachers did not have common planning time, so collaboration with classroom teachers had to happen before or after school, if at all.

**Staffing changes in some schools made it difficult to maintain consistent goals, expectations, and instructional practices.** BCCS was putting structures in place to reduce turnover; however, past leadership turnover temporarily impeded coherence as messages changed and were not always coordinated. For example, messages around the use of balanced literacy and the new curriculum changed and varied across leaders, creating some confusion in teachers. In MPS, staff turnover created challenges in building a common knowledge base across teachers. Staff suggested that district human resources policies need to be changed to better support teacher stability, and thus coherence.

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## Recommendations

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District and school leaders were taking important steps to foster coherent PreK–3 literacy pathways. However, the interviews identified some ways in which coherence could be further developed.

- Continue to help school leaders prioritize and coordinate efforts on district and school initiatives and to communicate the connections between them.
- Consider how the various assessments and data systems can be better aligned to reduce redundancy and help focus teachers' efforts.
- Identify ways to better coordinate students' learning experiences across the various instructional programs in which they participate.
- Provide more opportunities for planning and collaboration within grades, across grade levels, and across instructional programs.
- Underscore the importance of consistent messaging from new and veteran leaders.
- Increase efforts to reduce turnover in both leaders and staff.

The E&L Program will continue to help district and school leaders build their capacity to support coherent PreK–3 literacy experiences.