

## Introduction

Support for publicly funded pre-kindergarten has increased tremendously in recent years as parents, educators and policy makers have come to recognize the many benefits of high-quality early education. As of 2008, 38 states and the District of Columbia invest in pre-k programs, and many school districts are doing so on their own with local and federal funds.<sup>1</sup>

Between 2002 and 2008, state-funded pre-k enrollment rose more than 50 percent,<sup>2</sup> and state appropriations increased from \$2.9 billion in 2005 to \$5.2 billion in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Nationwide, as of 2008, more than 2.1 million three and four year olds were enrolled in publicly funded early education, with state-supported pre-k accounting for about half of all children served.<sup>4</sup> Pre-k is now the fastest growing sector in public education.<sup>5</sup>

School administrators are motivated by several factors to expand early learning opportunities. Decades of research show the positive effects of high-quality pre-k on children's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development.<sup>6</sup> These gains generate significant savings because children need fewer higher-priced interventions such as special education and grade retention.<sup>7</sup> Further, high-quality pre-k has been spotlighted as critical to intensified national efforts to close achievement gaps among children from different backgrounds.

In spite of this growth in funding and support, less than 30 percent of the nation's three and four year olds are served in publicly funded early education.<sup>8</sup> Many principals, superintendents and school board members are seeking ways to provide more and higher-quality early learning opportunities for children.

One strategy embraced by some K-12 officials is to include community-based programs (e.g., child care centers, Head Start, faith-based organizations, family child care homes, other non- and for-profit entities) in their pre-k systems.<sup>9</sup> These leaders find that "collaborations" – partnerships with community-based early learning and care providers – can help address

some challenges, such as the lack of resources and expertise or the inability to meet the comprehensive needs of children and their families.

Collaboration also allows public school systems to avoid "reinventing the wheel" and instead to build upon the work of community-based programs and to enhance families' pre-k choices. The existing early education system is very diverse, with one third of all state-funded pre-k children enrolled in non-public school settings, such as child care centers, Head Start programs and faith-based providers.<sup>10</sup> Collaborations with community-based programs ultimately enable school administrators to expand access to and increase the quality of all programs, no matter where they are housed.

This report 1) provides school administrators and policy makers with an overview of the benefits and challenges of establishing collaborative pre-k programs, 2) highlights promising practices from communities undertaking these efforts, 3) suggests concrete steps to develop successful partnerships and 4) offers policy recommendations to help state and federal officials facilitate collaborations. The information and insights were obtained from interviews with national, state and local education leaders as well as a review of publications and Websites from state and national K-12 organizations. This research focused on the experiences of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Tennessee, which together illustrate how states with differing policy and educational contexts can develop and implement collaborations.

For education leaders with a traditional K-12 perspective, collaboration often presents both new opportunities and new difficulties, from establishing relationships with early care providers to developing a shared definition of "school readiness." While implementing a pre-k program in partnership with community-based organizations may require more time and effort, this strategy ultimately benefits all stakeholders: public schools, private providers, families and children.

## What is a Pre-K Collaboration?

Whether motivated by local initiatives or legislative or court mandates, K-12 administrators around the country are finding that pre-k collaborations provide children and families more and higher-quality pre-k options. These officials build partnerships with Head Start programs; private, for- or nonprofit child care centers; faith-based organizations; and/or family child care providers to pool resources (e.g., space, transportation, personnel) and offer more comprehensive early learning and care services.

At a minimum, collaborations involve school districts subcontracting with qualified private providers to deliver a pre-k program. Other partnerships build upon this basic framework to integrate core operations like professional development and curriculum, share the cost of implementation, expand services and/or improve quality. For instance, a collaboration could

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To learn more about general models of collaboration, read “Community Tools for Promoting Sustainable Collaborations,” available on the Children’s Learning Institute Website: [www.childrenslearninginstitute.org](http://www.childrenslearninginstitute.org).


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allow a publicly funded, half-day program to offer a longer day, ensure alignment of standards across programs, provide more comprehensive services (e.g., health screenings and services, parent involvement activities, referral to other social services), serve a more economically diverse group of children, and/or enhance professional development opportunities for pre-k teachers in all settings. Specific examples throughout this report illustrate the strategies employed by collaboration partners and the decisions they made to create an enhanced pre-k program.

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### State Profile: Maine

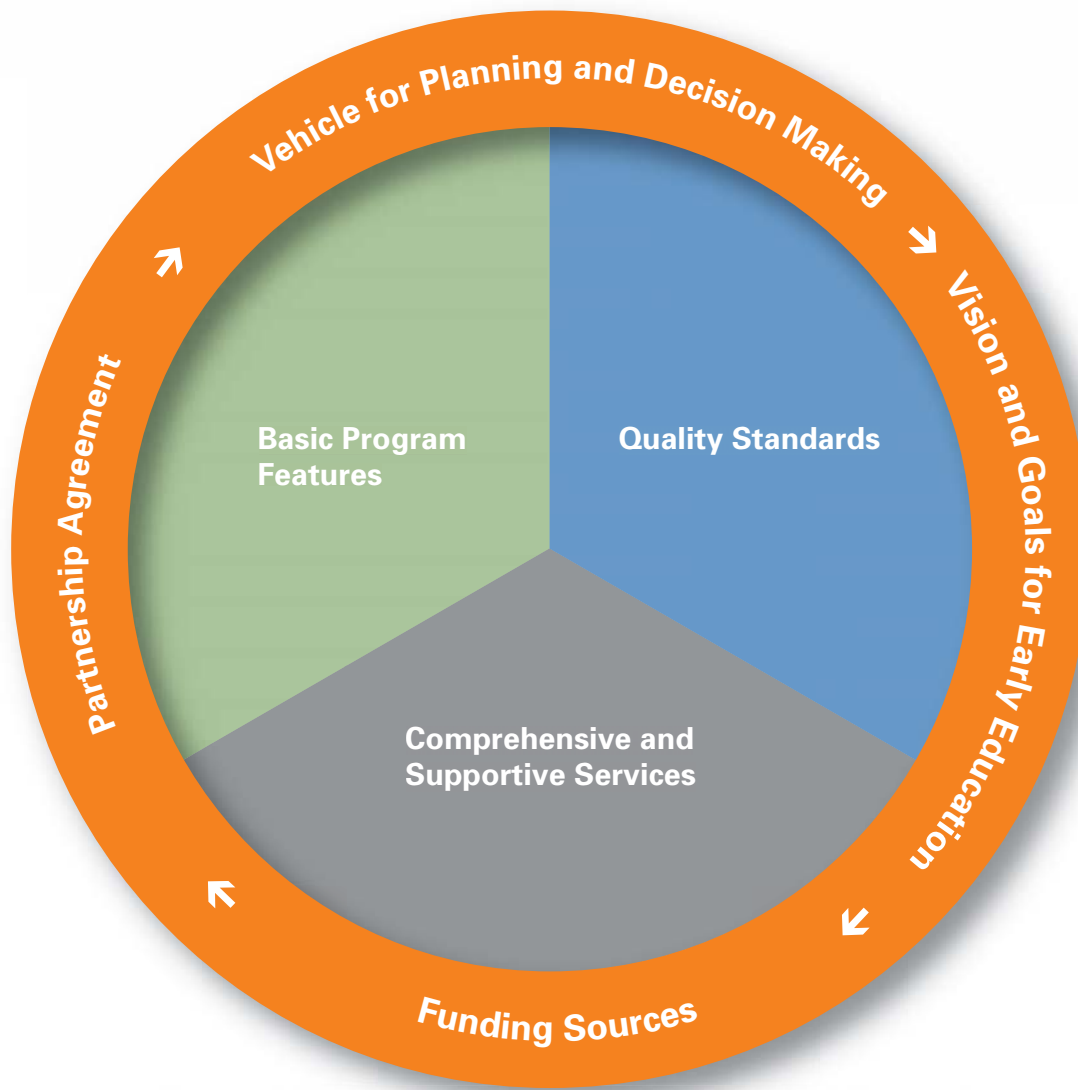
One Maine school district is collaborating with Head Start to organize three school-based pre-k classrooms, serving 51 children. While Head Start is the partner, about 40 percent of the children served in the collaboration have families who earn more than Head Start’s income eligibility level. Nevertheless, all of the children attend the same classes and receive the same comprehensive services that typical Head Start programs provide. The Head Start program relies on other funding sources, such as United Way, to serve the Head Start-ineligible children. The organizers believe that the resulting diversity of children, with different backgrounds and strengths, creates a more supportive environment for cognitive and social development.



In addition to space, each school provides support staff (e.g., nurse, cafeteria workers), computers, classroom supplies and materials, and transportation. Federal Head Start regulations require buses to have safety restraints and a monitor. The partners split these costs, with the district providing properly outfitted buses and Head Start paying for monitors.

Head Start also pays teaching staff but at a higher-than-usual salary, so their compensation is more closely aligned with those of other K-12 teachers in the district. Since Head Start teachers may not hold state-required certifications, the district pays for any coursework they need to become certified.

## The Elements of Pre-K Collaboration



A solid pre-k collaboration leverages partners' expertise and resources to support three core elements:

- 1. Basic program features** such as duration, target population, location and budget,
- 2. Quality standards** related to curriculum, classroom environment, staffing (including compensation and supervision), assessments and professional development, and
- 3. Comprehensive and supportive services**, including family involvement; before and after care; transportation; and screenings, referrals and other interventions (e.g., health, special needs, mental health).

These core features and structures are held together by a number of supportive elements. A vehicle for convening and communicating helps partners and other stakeholders build relationships and devise a **common vision and set of goals** for early education. This network also provides opportunities for **shared planning and decision making** and for exploring the appropriate mix of **funding sources**. A **partnership agreement** formalizes these arrangements and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of all parties in the collaboration

## Benefits of Collaboration

While jointly planning and delivering pre-k programs can be a complex process, those who have implemented this strategy report clear benefits for all stakeholders. Through collaboration, schools and communities can maximize resources, improve and expand services, minimize barriers to implementation and provide higher-quality programs.<sup>11</sup> A former superintendent from an urban district in New Jersey admitted that he did not want to collaborate initially because he “thought that the district could do a better job... and didn’t want to be responsible for programs that are housed in centers.” With experience, however, he concluded, “Public schools are in no better position to run a comprehensive pre-k program than private providers... Mixed delivery is the way to go.”

This section reviews the main benefits interviewees sought to realize through collaborations with community-based early learning and care providers and how these partnerships were constructed to best serve the needs of all stakeholders.

### Share Resources and Expertise

Each partner – whether a public school, child care center or Head Start program – brings a set of assets to the collaboration. For example, public schools may have more professional development capacity. Child care centers may have better facilities for young children and greater experience with developmentally appropriate practice. Head Start programs may offer more or better comprehensive services. Developing collaborative pre-k programs can help each party leverage these resources to enhance the array and quality of services offered to families.

One resource mentioned by many interviewees was professional development. Collaborations allow partners to create opportunities to share best practices and maximize the use of their training budgets.

- In one **Maine** school-based collaboration, the Head Start agency, which has more experience with young children, provides staffing and professional development for all pre-k staff. At the same time, in order to participate in this collaboration, Head Start teachers must attain state early childhood certification, and the district provides financial assistance for them to do so.
- A school in **Massachusetts** places pre-k children who need full-day special education services in community-based settings. The principal and her partners meet regularly to plan professional development for all pre-k teachers – in schools and in the community. Often, workshops are organized by district specialists and teachers and are funded by both the school and the community-based programs. In addition, private providers in the collaboration have access to the district’s early intervention specialists and other pre-k teachers to observe classrooms and provide coaching as needed.
- Public school teachers from one **Oklahoma** school district, who work in child care centers, are given co-planning time with their center-based colleagues so they can “develop a common language about what they are doing and set the same benchmarks for children.”<sup>12</sup> Participating teachers learn together, build relationships and develop a shared understanding of school readiness.

Another resource-sharing opportunity identified by interviewees as a benefit of collaboration was space. In many cases, schools do not have the facilities for a pre-k classroom, and even if they do, the available space is not necessarily appropriate for young children. Districts implementing pre-k may also become subject to state regulations, such as child care licensing and facilities requirements they have not had to comply with before. “It comes down to the logistics,” said a representative from the National School Board Association, “physical space is the motivation to work with community-based providers. They’re learning to share teachers and professional development resources in return for the space.”

- Administrators in a number of **Oklahoma** school districts reached out to community providers and developed collaborations in which public school teachers are placed in a range of settings, including Head Start, child care centers and YMCAs. The district pays the lead teacher’s salary. So by participating in the partnership, the provider gets additional qualified staff at no cost and has more of their own budget available for other needs, such as supplies and materials or professional development.

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### State Profile: Massachusetts



A collaborative pre-k arrangement at one suburban Massachusetts school grew out of previous work with community providers to support expanding kindergarten to a full school day. An effort to find additional classroom space led to the creation of a local early childhood coordinating body that included private, community-based providers, the school district and a higher education institution. As this group tackled the kindergarten issue, its mission expanded to examine how the community could best provide early education for three and four year olds.

The coordinating body and the relationships it fostered promoted collaboration in a number of ways. The school is home to six half-day pre-k classes, each with about 15 children who are from low-income and/or single-parent families or are in special education. The collaboration both facilitates contracts between the school and community partners to provide additional, full-day, intensive services for certain children with special needs and creates opportunities to better align the early learning experience for all children across diverse settings.

The school principal and her partners meet regularly to plan professional development for all pre-k teachers in schools and in the community. Workshops are funded by both the school and the local early childhood coordinating body and often feature school district experts. In addition, private providers in the collaboration have access to early intervention specialists and other pre-k teachers who can offer staff support, observe classrooms and provide feedback.

Finally, through this collaboration, pre-k children in the school who are not in special education can be enrolled in before and/or after care at the same community settings if their parents also want full-day services. The school district modified some school bus routes to provide all children with transportation between the school and the centers.

# Benefits of Collaboration

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## Offer Full-Day Programs

Many state-funded pre-k initiatives only have resources to offer a part-day program. Full-day services, which combine program elements that focus on cognitive, social and emotional development and child care, however, are critical to meeting the diverse needs of young children and working parents. Collaborative arrangements with private providers who offer longer hours and before and after care (often called “wrap-around” services) can enable districts to expand programs from half day to full day or from school year to full year.

- In Tulsa, **Oklahoma**, enrolling children in a collaborative program between the school system and Head Start allows administrators to leverage multiple funding streams to expand from a half day to a full day. This partnership allows schools to offer both a pre-k curriculum and comprehensive services for low-income children.<sup>13</sup>
- In one **Delaware** community, partners in a collaboration agreed that the schools would not undertake new efforts to provide wraparound services since they already exist in the community. Instead, the collaboration leverages the school system’s transportation resources to bring children, before or after the half day of school-based pre-k, to community-based programs.<sup>14</sup>

## Align Expectations across Settings and Grades

When early education efforts are not coordinated within a community, children enter kindergarten with widely varying levels of social and academic readiness. Pre-k collaborations can help address this disparity. In the process of coming together to implement quality programs, schools and community partners can begin to align program standards, curricula and teaching practices across different early childhood settings. As a result, children are more likely to experience a consistent educational experience before they start kindergarten. In this way, collaborations can enhance

the overall quality of early education in the community and provide a richer and more seamless delivery system for all children. As a superintendent in a Wisconsin school district shared, “By taking the community collaboration approach, the district has a greater opportunity to influence the development of early childhood education practices as a whole.”

- In **New Jersey**, all teachers in state-funded pre-k programs, whether school or center based, receive the same core training. As a result, they share a common approach to teaching young children. Another growing practice in the state is for principals and center directors to meet monthly to maintain such alignment.

Collaborations can also help align expectations and practices across grade levels. Working with other early educators in the community can help teachers in the elementary grades broaden their view of student learning and teaching strategies. This ultimately breaks down some of the traditional silos between grade levels and helps elementary school teachers become more knowledgeable about learning and development among diverse age groups. As a principal from Massachusetts states:

*“Having relationships with early childhood education providers has adjusted expectations of the school as a whole. There is more of a perspective that children’s skills develop in a continuum. Also teachers are more cognizant of other domains of development, other than reading, writing and math. This has translated to teachers at the other grade levels informing parents that there are more appropriate ways to think about their children’s progress.”*

In other words, the goal of collaboration is not to push teaching and assessment practices from the upper grades down into the pre-k programs but to integrate more developmentally appropriate practices throughout the school.



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## State Profile: New Jersey

In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court mandated that the state provide high-quality pre-k for all children in 31 of its poorest districts, the so-called *Abbott* districts. The ruling also required school systems to include community-based providers who can meet rigorous quality standards. As early education leaders planned for this expansion, however, they realized it presented an opportunity to forge a more coherent early learning system that could improve the readiness of all children. To accomplish this, the state committed significant resources and offered scholarships for state certification to ensure that teachers across settings attained the same high level of performance and used consistent approaches to working with young children.

Each *Abbott* district receives extensive support from the state for pre-k. With those resources, they hire an early childhood supervisor to oversee implementation and administration and to promote school-community collaborations. Working closely with local Early Childhood Advisory Councils – which consists of education, social services, child care, family support and health agencies from the community – each supervisor

develops an implementation plan and helps identify potential partners. The supervisor also helps center directors and teachers use child and classroom assessments to inform short- and long-term improvements.

Districts also provide one master teacher for every 20 classrooms. The master teachers carry out professional development plans – created in conjunction with school- and community-based administrators – including coaching individual teachers and organizing joint workshops for all pre-k staff. These activities help ensure consistent practice and facilitate peer-learning opportunities across settings.

Other district personnel who are available to center-based providers include community parent involvement specialists, early intervention specialists, nurses and social workers. These individuals screen children for special needs and provide health and other comprehensive services. The district also offers assistance with managing state pre-k funds and navigating the relevant fiscal requirements.

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### Provide Linkages to Comprehensive Services

Collaborations can also help school districts provide a variety of comprehensive services (i.e., health, mental health, social services) that schools may not be able to offer on their own. Community-based settings are often more integrated with social services and are accustomed to providing referral services for children and families. This is especially true if the partner is Head Start. As a representative from the National Association of Elementary School Principals says, “Serving the whole child means schools and communities need to work together to serve families.”

- In a **Tennessee** school district, collaborating with Head Start provides access to a number of supports outside of the classroom experience. A “family partner” works with the schools to connect families to other supportive services as needed. Head Start also provides health screenings and dental care directly to all children in the collaboration.
- In Syracuse, **New York**, a district official pursued a partnership with community-based programs not so much for academic reasons but to provide young children with more access to supportive services. This led the district to seek out partners who could tap into resources such as psychologists or social workers.<sup>15</sup>


## Benefits of Collaboration

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### Increase Family Involvement

Support from family members is critical to children's development, especially in the early years. The early childhood community, perhaps even more than most public school systems, has a strong tradition of parent engagement that can be an asset for schools. In fact, researchers have observed that significant barriers exist between schools and parents, especially those from low-income backgrounds and immigrant cultures and those who have not had positive interactions with school systems themselves.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, then, a number of interviewees mentioned that, through collaborations with community providers, schools can reach out to more families before their children begin kindergarten or first grade. These relationships provide opportunities to help parents become more effective partners in their children's development and ease the transition into kindergarten for both parents

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To learn more about collaborations between Head Start and state pre-k, read "Better Outcomes for All," available on the Pre-K Now Website: [www.preknow.org/resource/reports/preknowreports.cfm](http://www.preknow.org/resource/reports/preknowreports.cfm).

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and children. Families also become more knowledgeable about the expectations of schools and what they offer. At the same time, teachers and administrators are more aware of families' needs and concerns.

- Through a partnership with Head Start in one **Tennessee** district, each school with a collaborative pre-k classroom developed a broad parent-involvement plan as well as a Family Partnership Agreement to help identify resources and services each family needs to be involved with their children's education and development.

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### State Profile: Tennessee



A Tennessee school district partnered with a Head Start program to serve 50 low-income children in three public school-based classes in a school-day program. In addition to the space, the school district provides a lead teacher with state certification in early education and an assistant. Head Start provides an additional aide, which means every classroom has three adults for about 18 children. To better align all classroom practices, Head Start provides lead teachers with training in its standards and regulations as well as ongoing professional development opportunities. A Head Start staff member observes the classrooms regularly, but all pre-k staff are supervised by the school. District-sponsored trainings are also open to all early childhood staff.

Collaborating with Head Start enables the district to provide children and families with a number of supports outside the classroom experience. A "family partner" works with the schools to connect families to other programs, such as parent education, nutrition, mental health, social services and job counseling. Each school site is required to create a parent-involvement plan that includes social and educational activities for families. In addition, programs develop individualized Family Partnership Agreements to identify resources families need to be more involved with their children's education and development. Finally, Head Start provides access to health screenings and other comprehensive services, such as medical and dental care.

## Recognizing Barriers to Collaboration

Given the substantial benefits of collaborations, what prevents school leaders from developing them? A representative from the Council of Chief State School Officers sums it up by saying:

*“The main reason schools don’t collaborate is because it’s very hard. There’s a lack of trust and some tough politics. People are cordial, but there’s no collaboration because they didn’t know how.”*

Her response reflects the opinion of a former New Jersey superintendent that collaboration efforts encounter two main types of barriers: attitudinal obstacles – those that have to do with beliefs and perceptions – and mechanical obstacles – those that have to do with logistics, regulations and requirements. Both need to be addressed before implementation can begin. Interviewees indicate that it took at least one year to negotiate these differences, find common ground and formalize an agreement and action plan.

### **Attitudinal Obstacles**

In establishing partnerships, school leaders may leap to the obvious questions such as: *How will we hire teachers? Where will funding come from? What assessments should be used?* Before these questions can be answered, however, school leaders must first attend to the perceived and real gaps in attitudes, beliefs and cultures between public school systems and community-based providers.

K-12 leaders who are unfamiliar with community-based providers may not realize that early education has been occurring outside the school system for a long time and that these organizations possess significant knowledge about and experience in supporting young

children’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Many public school teachers may not have specific training with the pre-k age group and may be more comfortable with a teacher-directed environment that emphasizes discrete subject matter and cognitive development. Rather, early education is a discipline that calls for a distinct set of skills and practices. As a principal from Massachusetts put it, “Pre-k is not mini-first grade. It’s about using play, social interactions and language experience” to promote children’s holistic development.

Furthermore, whether operated out of a school building or in a community-based setting, school staff may consider pre-k an “add-on service,” which takes up resources or staff time and energy, rather than as integral to the school’s mission. School leaders have to work proactively to ensure that collaborations are not viewed as a burden. For instance, a principal in Massachusetts experienced some resistance from her staff because they felt that her work with community providers took away her focus from the older children.

At the same time, because of their long history in the field, early educators in the community may resist the suggestion that they can benefit from K-12 practices, such as different accountability requirements and a greater focus on the development of academic skills. Some may assume that schools will simply push a K-12 curriculum onto young children and test them inappropriately. These beliefs and preconceptions can be detrimental to launching a successful partnership if not handled carefully.

## Recognizing Barriers to Collaboration

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In addition, school administrators should be aware that community-based providers are often wary of public schools' entry into the pre-k "market." Publicly funded pre-k can pose a threat to the viability of private providers by siphoning off a significant proportion of their pre-k enrollment to public schools. K-12 leaders need to be sensitive to these concerns and communicate that one purpose of collaboration is to protect and preserve the community-based early childhood system.

### **Mechanical Obstacles**

Another set of obstacles to collaboration involves the "nuts and bolts" of running a pre-k program when different parties are involved. Because the early care and education community evolved without a centralized administrative structure, it is supported by multiple funding sources with differing rules and regulations and subject to disparate program requirements, which can make these issues difficult to navigate.



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language experience.

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Partners may need to negotiate new and sometimes conflicting sets of requirements regarding program elements, such as transportation, facilities, personnel, and monitoring and reporting. For example, federal regulations require buses used to transport Head Start children to have safety restraints and a monitor. These standards are stricter than those in the states. To facilitate collaboration, one Maine school district provides buses with the proper equipment while Head Start pays for the monitor. Similarly, schools that choose to operate pre-k classrooms on their premises may be subject to child care licensing requirements, which can result in duplicative background checks for public school staff or conflicting regulations regarding facilities like water fountains and bathrooms.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, partners may need to address conflicting policies that govern student outcomes. For example, monitoring and evaluation systems must be able to accommodate different sets of learning standards such as state pre-k guidelines and the Head Start Outcomes Framework.

Further, teacher compensation is a particularly thorny issue. Public school teachers usually get paid higher salaries and receive better benefits than teachers in community-based settings. It may also be difficult to reconcile union-negotiated provisions for public school teachers (e.g., work hours, professional development requirements) with the expectations of teachers who work in community-based centers.

## Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration: Five Critical Steps

Clearly, successful collaborations cannot be built overnight. They require sustained commitment and strategic action from inception through development and eventual program implementation. In addition, the process for developing collaborations must address the barriers outlined above. Based on the experiences of interviewees for this report, below are five critical steps that school leaders should take to develop successful pre-k collaborations with community-based providers.

### **1. Visit community-based programs.**

Before developing collaborations, school leaders should take time to visit center-based providers in the community. Such visits offer a chance to learn different ways of working with young children, assess the quality of available programming, scout potential partners and gauge the need and capacity for new programs.

Visiting community-based programs is also important for developing relationships within the field. These early interactions offer opportunities to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions and to discuss the potential benefits of collaboration for private providers. K-12 leaders in Oklahoma and Tennessee acknowledged that the schools needed to engage in some “public relations” before actual work on the collaboration could begin to allay some of the attitudinal barriers mentioned earlier. One Massachusetts principal described her role as “diplomat or ambassador between the early childhood community and the K-12 community.” She informed potential partners about resources and experts in the districts to whom they would have access, while assuring them that there was no “hidden agenda.” This helped overcome suspicions that the school district was sending teachers to “spy” on the providers.

Principals also benefited from visiting other schools that have implemented successful collaborations. In New Jersey, such site visits were arranged through a network of district early childhood supervisors. Over time, the state department of education compiled a list of districts and schools with interesting models to demonstrate.

### **2. Survey the landscape to determine need and capacity.**

K-12 leaders should conduct a needs assessment to determine what pre-k programs already exist and seek input from parents and community providers about the demand for additional services. This process will help identify underserved populations, existing capacity (e.g., facilities, staffing, funding) and potential partners for collaboration. In determining a location for Boston’s pilot pre-k program, for example, officials looked at the supply and the demand for pre-k within certain geographic areas to ensure they located the program where the need was significant and that the expansion built on the existing community-based early childhood system.<sup>18</sup> The assessment should also examine the professional development needs of teachers from various settings in order to successfully work under the same standards and regulations. By understanding the unique assets and needs of the community, school leaders can promote strategies that maximize resources.

# Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration: Five Critical Steps

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### 3. Create a vehicle to engage a broad set of stakeholders in developing, monitoring and sustaining collaborations.

Bringing key stakeholders to the same “table” is a critical step in creating collaborations. At its most basic level, this involves each party communicating its needs and concerns to establish some common ground that will enable further conversations. Another important function for such interactions is to learn what potential partners can offer, what resources they lack, and what regulations and restrictions come with their respective funding sources. For instance, Maine’s department of education compiled pre-k, child care and Head Start provisions on a variety of program elements into a handbook. This helps educate schools and community providers about both the benefits and limitations of blending funding. It also helps clarify the requirements of each funding source and identify potential conflicts.

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To learn more about potential funding streams for pre-k collaborations and their associated regulations and requirements, read [Maine’s collaboration funding guide](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/ec/occhs/funding_guide.pdf), available at: [www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/ec/occhs/funding\\_guide.pdf](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/ec/occhs/funding_guide.pdf).

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In addition, through these interactions, stakeholders can identify any district policies, such as those regarding work schedules and facilities management, that may create obstacles to collaboration. For example, districts may be party to union contracts that preclude outside providers. Similarly, stringent procurement and accounting regulations regarding the acquisition and use of district supplies or in-kind resources can discourage partnering. With input from a more diverse group, school leaders can find ways to make such contracts and policies more flexible to accommodate pre-k collaborations.

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### Partnering with Home-Based Providers – A Unique Model

When considering collaborations, school administrators may not immediately think to partner with home-based providers. While such collaborations are not as common, the Chicago school system has shown that it is possible and effective. This collaboration demonstrates that working with home-based child care providers can help pre-k programs reach more low-income and working families. In this partnership, children are transported, with funding from state pre-k grants, from the home-based setting to a half-day, school-based pre-k program with a certified teacher four days a week. On the fifth day, the school-based teacher and assistant teacher visit the home-based providers to discuss the children’s development, share resources and materials, and generally ensure the programs are well aligned. In addition, home-based providers and pre-k teachers attend joint

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To learn more about how this collaboration with home-based providers works, watch a clip from [Pre-K Now’s 2008 Conference](http://www.preknow.org/go/home-basedpartnerships.cfm) at: [www.preknow.org/go/home-basedpartnerships.cfm](http://www.preknow.org/go/home-basedpartnerships.cfm).

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monthly professional development meetings. Notably, even though the children spend less time in the home-based program, participating in the collaboration does not affect the reimbursement rate that providers receive for children supported by child care subsidies.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> “State-Funded Preschool and Home-Based Child Care: The Community Connections Model,” (Chicago: Illinois Action for Children, 2008).

The National School Board Association recommends engaging the following key stakeholder groups: district superintendents, early childhood providers (including family child care and special education programs), state and local advocacy groups, teacher unions, families, business leaders, and government and civic leaders. In addition, school leaders may want to involve representatives from local higher education, social service organizations and philanthropic institutions – all of whom can provide useful expertise and resources to collaboration efforts.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the composition, interviewees stressed the value of a third-party facilitator. According to one Tennessee principal, “It only takes one person to be detrimental to the collaboration – a facilitator can help navigate these difficult interactions.”

Formal vehicles for communication help collaboration partners engage in common planning, problem solve, navigate disagreements and make improvements. Interviews revealed a number of models for stakeholder engagement. Some examples include:

### **Local Collaboration Councils**

A number of states, such as Connecticut and Tennessee, require local communities to establish collaboration councils in order to receive state pre-k funds. Typically, these groups are led or chaired by the superintendent (or designee) and consist of diverse local leaders, including elected officials (e.g., mayor, school board members), parents and community-based providers. They conduct needs assessments, create implementation plans, develop grantmaking processes and administer the funds in the community. Councils are designed to create a level playing field among stakeholders, to ensure that funds are distributed to a spectrum of providers, and to promote alignment of expectations and approaches across settings.



To learn more about the planning toolkit from the National School Board Association, go to [www.centerforpubliceducation.org](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org).

### **Public-Private Ventures**

Some states leverage private funds to support and supplement local collaboration and coordination efforts, such as the councils mentioned above. In Connecticut, the Graustein Memorial Fund provides grant funding for 53 community collaboratives, allowing the local councils to exceed their charge as defined by state statute. The grants support staff, professional development and when necessary, advocacy. In one community, these resources have increased family engagement efforts and supported meetings where early education, kindergarten and first-grade educators share experiences and expectations. In Norwalk, the private dollars fund an “Early Provider Network” to sustain peer-to-peer learning among all pre-k providers.

Since they are essentially nonprofit – as opposed to public – entities, such public-private initiatives provide neutral, third-party leadership, which further levels the playing field among the partners.

### **Early Childhood Conferences**

States can create networking opportunities to promote collaborations by organizing regional or statewide conferences. Since 2006, the Tennessee Department of Education has organized an annual Early Childhood Summit, which brings together a broad spectrum of providers to learn how to further state early education goals, including expansion, quality and collaboration. Similarly, administrators in Maine pointed to local community meetings organized by the state department of education that involve diverse providers as important to making connections and navigating the planning process – from developing a common vision for young children in the community to negotiating how costs and responsibilities will be shared.

# Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration: Five Critical Steps

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## State Profile: Connecticut

In Connecticut, in order to receive pre-k funds from the state, communities must establish a School Readiness Council, consisting of the mayor (or designee), the district superintendent (or designee), parents, community-based early childhood programs, a health care provider and other organizations that serve children (e.g., library). The state allocates funds to councils in designated high-priority districts, using a formula that estimates the local pre-k demand. Councils in other districts may apply for small grants. Because of their diverse membership, the councils are uniquely positioned to promote collaboration among a variety of community providers. Moreover, they can strategically deploy funding to further encourage partnerships.

Other council responsibilities include developing grant applications, issuing requests for proposals to schools and community providers and making funding recommendations

to mayors and superintendents. As part of this process, councils also assess local demand and capacity to ensure that resources are directed toward the greatest needs.

To manage this work, some communities have combined local public and private funding to hire coordinators and/or enable the council to take on a broader mission, such as professional development, parent education, assessing available infant and toddler services or developing a more comprehensive early childhood plan beyond pre-k. As an early childhood specialist in one school district put it, the council is a “clearinghouse for all programs and stakeholders, from birth to five.” For instance, with additional, private funding, her council was able to create an Early Provider Network that includes all providers receiving state pre-k funds and allows programs from diverse settings to share information and resources and plan professional development activities.

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## 4. Invest in personnel to oversee collaboration efforts.

Designating staff to handle the various regulatory, budgetary and philosophical issues that arise in pursuing collaborations is important for developing relationships, coordinating program details and ultimately sustaining pre-k momentum. Here are a few examples of positions that have been created to aid in the process:

### Collaboration Coach

Maine and Wisconsin have created positions within their departments of education to support and assist community leaders in promoting, planning and implementing collaborative pre-k programs as part of a statewide, comprehensive early childhood system. By facilitating discussions, the coach helps the community articulate goals for young children and ensures representation from a wide range of early childhood programs including special education, pre-k, child care, Head Start, parent education, family support, and health and mental health services. This person also assists in the

dissemination of state early learning standards and the training of educators across settings to assure compliance. Importantly, the coach is both an expert in early education and a neutral, third party facilitator trained to help groups navigate differences. In the years that Wisconsin has used this strategy, collaborative pre-k programs have increased from 2 percent of all district programs in 2001 to 27 percent in 2008.<sup>20</sup>

### School Readiness Coordinator

Some Connecticut School Readiness Councils hire a coordinator to help ensure that eligible children have access to pre-k by building relationships with and providing information to families and community partners. This individual develops materials about available services, the stages of child development and ways parents and caregivers can promote children’s school readiness. The coordinator also organizes local events and activities, facilitates a roundtable for providers and parents, and collects and analyzes data to determine the need for training among pre-k teachers.

### **Collaboration Principal**

In Oklahoma, this itinerant, district-level position supervises all certified pre-k teachers and assistants. The collaboration principal visits classrooms regularly, observes and coaches teachers, conducts evaluations, connects teachers with professional development and helps them purchase supplies and materials. He/she also visits with center directors and helps them address challenges related to the collaboration.

### **Pre-K Consultants/Supervisors**

In New Jersey and Tennessee, state-level employees are assigned to various regions. They provide technical assistance to school districts and communities that are collaborating on pre-k, ranging from professional development for teachers and administrators to curriculum to budgeting. These individuals also monitor pre-k programs and evaluate teachers. Some districts also hire consultants/supervisors to perform similar roles at the local level and serve as liaisons to the state's office of early education. In New Jersey, for example, each *Abbott* district employs an early childhood supervisor who helps school-level staff work through obstacles. The supervisors also meet regularly in Trenton to exchange resources and best practices.

## **5. Develop collaboration agreements.**

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or operational agreement, which delineates partners' roles and responsibilities, establishes clear expectations between parties and creates a tangible, enforceable structure. Where such accords did not exist, interviewees indicated that they lacked the authority to enforce program standards. According to a Texas collaboration manual, "A strong MOU can serve as the foundation for a partnership, give legitimacy to the project, and ensure legality among entities."<sup>21</sup> Importantly, these arrangements should be developed with consideration of teachers' perspectives. As a state administrator from Tennessee warns, "If the agreements are not shared with teachers and people who are implementing [them] on the ground, that creates problems."

Agreements should articulate not only the purpose and objectives of the collaboration but also how partners will handle issues such as staffing, facilities, curriculum, assessment, program monitoring and evaluation, comprehensive services, and special populations like English language learners and special needs children. The questions below highlight some of the critical and difficult issues that can be addressed in a formal accord.

### **How will collaboration teachers be paid?**

When public school teachers and community-based educators work in the same building or classroom, tensions can naturally arise over differing compensation. Partnership agreements should detail how salaries and benefits will be handled and what measures (e.g., scholarships and mentors for community-based teachers) can be taken to alleviate inequities among staff.

### **How will union contracts be taken into consideration?**

Some administrators find it difficult to reconcile union-negotiated considerations for public school teachers such as pay, professional development requirements and teaching assignments with what community-based centers expect of and provide for their staff. When policies for early educators in non-public school settings conflict with those governing union teachers, agreements can help collaborative programs anticipate and reconcile differences fairly, and ideally, in the best interest of children.

### **Who has authority to hire and supervise staff?**

Agreements should clearly determine which party has the authority to hire, supervise and fire staff. For example, in a Tennessee school district, principals and center directors decided to interview prospective staff for the collaborative program jointly so all partners have a say; while in one Maine school, pre-k teachers are technically Head Start employees and fall outside the school principal's authority.

## Overcoming Barriers to Collaboration: Five Critical Steps

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### **How will partners ensure ongoing communication with each other and with pre-k staff?**

Collaboration agreements should include arrangements to ensure ongoing communication, such as regular visits to off-site programs by principals and meetings among teachers and administrators from the partnering organizations. These arrangements help ensure that pre-k teachers in collaborative programs are not isolated from the rest of the school community or torn between different organizational expectations or demands. For example, teachers in one Oklahoma district are part of a group comprising public school and center staff that meets regularly to monitor program operations. Similarly, in a collaborative program in Tennessee, where public school pre-k teachers are placed in community-based centers, the principal and the center director communicate regularly to ensure they are not giving teachers mixed messages. The principal also tries to visit the center weekly.

### **What opportunities for professional development and peer learning will there be?**

Interviewees agreed that professional development and peer-learning opportunities (with other K-12 colleagues or with early learning and care providers in the community) are essential to developing and maintaining a healthy collaboration. Site visits, conferences, classroom observations and joint training programs all offer rich settings for the cross-pollination of ideas and experiences. For instance, school districts can open their in-service sessions to their collaboration partners, send school-based pre-k teachers to the community programs' training or jointly organize professional development activities. The partnership should also ensure that such opportunities are equally accessible to teachers from all settings by scheduling them at convenient times and locations and providing financial incentives for participation. Details about these opportunities – who will organize them, who will pay for them, etc. – should be part of collaboration agreements.

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### **State Profile: Oklahoma**



A pre-k collaboration in Oklahoma has built-in support and ongoing communication opportunities for teachers who work under two different entities. In this partnership, a school district partners with a local Head Start agency to serve 180 low-income children in a school-day program. Because the agency also receives child care funding, it is able to provide before and after care, extending the day to better serve working families.

The school district pays for the lead and the assistant teacher and hires a “collaboration principal,” who visits the site daily to observe the classrooms and provide additional staff support. The Head Start program pays for other supportive staff, including family advocates and a program supervisor, and for comprehensive services (e.g., health screenings), meals, supplies and transportation.

In addition, regular team meetings, involving the pre-k teaching staff, collaboration principal and supervisor, allow stakeholders to monitor the collaboration and problem solve when necessary. Pre-k teachers from the district and Head Start also participate in monthly staff meetings at the school and joint professional development opportunities. The district’s director of early education meets monthly with the collaboration principals and community partners to ensure that private providers have an opportunity to communicate directly with the school district. Ultimately, these interactions help teaching staff, who have different training and educational backgrounds, work with young children as an effective team.

## Recommendations for State and Federal Policy Action

School leaders are more likely to take the above steps if they operate in a supportive policy environment. Public endorsement by an executive or legislative leader can go a long way toward building enthusiasm for collaboration among policy makers, potential partners and K-12 administrators. Interviewees from Tennessee credited their governor for championing collaborations in early education, “planting the seed in people’s minds” and giving the effort political and educational legitimacy. Below are specific actions that state and federal policy makers can take to facilitate collaborations.

**Provide technical assistance to early education providers regarding regulations, policies and funding across sectors.** Administrators are hungry for more and better information on how to work together, especially as it relates to varying laws, regulations and funding streams. State and federal agencies that administer early childhood funding should provide guidance on when standards and regulations are required across settings and when there is room for flexibility at the local level. Managing finances can also be challenging when a collaboration is supported by multiple funding streams from various federal, state and local entities without a centralized administrative structure.

A number of states have created Websites and toolkits that include guidance on implementing collaborations, sample budgets and agreements, and examples of existing efforts. (See Appendix A for a list of such resources.) These products include resources that help school leaders conduct needs assessments in the community; organize planning meetings; understand the requirements and regulations associated with various state and federal programs and funding streams; develop budgets, partnership agreements and contracts; and learn from existing collaborative efforts.

**Streamline program quality standards and requirements to facilitate collaboration.** The myriad standards and requirements that exist among programs and funding streams can make it difficult to establish consistent quality benchmarks. Policy makers should work with communities to better align disparate measures and create a more uniform system that prioritizes quality. Upholding high standards, however, often means states must provide additional resources to ensure all parties have the capacity to participate in a pre-k program.

**Address differences in pay and hours between providers and build career ladders for all early education professionals.** A large disparity in pay and other workforce conditions between settings can undermine the ability of community-based providers and schools to collaborate. Policy makers should provide resources to help partners afford higher salaries and/or improved benefits and should create career ladders and financial incentives for teachers’ professional advancement.

**Enhance knowledge of early childhood among K-12 administrators.** Collaboration would be more commonplace if K-12 leaders – principals, superintendents – were more knowledgeable about early education and the existing field of providers in the community. Policy makers should work with state licensure boards and schools of education to ensure that early learning is a standard element of administrator training and professional development.

**Create financial incentives to encourage more collaboration.** No matter how funds are distributed, policy makers should also consider creating incentives such as higher reimbursement rates, priority status or reduced paperwork requirements to promote community collaborations. For instance, school districts that choose a collaborative pre-k model can receive priority for limited state start-up grants. Another strategy is to require school districts to set aside a portion of state funds for collaborative efforts.

## Conclusion

Collaborative pre-k programs are not easy to construct, and there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Early education requires school administrators to step outside of traditional K-12 models of teaching and learning and think about new ways of delivering education services to children. Collaborations also take time. Schools and community-based providers need to learn about the workings of their respective systems, develop trust with each other and negotiate conflicting beliefs, practices and regulations.

Despite these challenges, many states and communities have developed models and implemented effective strategies to bring schools, child care providers, Head Start programs and others together to enhance the quality of early learning and care services in their areas. Through a series of interviews, this report draws on their experiences to show how collaborations are playing out in diverse communities across the country, to share lessons learned and to articulate immediate steps that policy makers and K-12 leaders can take to support pre-k partnerships.

As school leaders engage in these efforts, it's useful to keep the end goal in mind. Ultimately, the purpose of partnering with existing community-based providers is to provide added value to schools, partners and mostly importantly, children. When done effectively, collaborations draw upon the best wisdom, expertise and resources of multiple entities to enable all pre-k providers to better meet the diverse needs of children, families and communities. At their best, pre-k collaborations allow all children – no matter where they are enrolled – to have high-quality educational experiences that will give them the foundation they need and deserve.

## Appendix A: Resource List

The following Websites and publications from state education agencies and other nonprofit organizations provide guidance and models for school administrators who are interested in developing pre-k collaborations with community-based providers.

- From the Iowa Association of School Boards:  
<http://www.ia-sb.org/EarlyChildhood.aspx>
- From Maine's Interagency Funding Collaboration Taskforce:  
[http://mainegov-images.informe.org/dhhs/ocfs/ec/occhs/funding\\_guide.pdf](http://mainegov-images.informe.org/dhhs/ocfs/ec/occhs/funding_guide.pdf)
- From the National School Board Association:  
[http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/site/c.kjJXJ5MPlwE/b.5113557/k.BB9E/Planning\\_for\\_prekindergarten\\_A\\_toolkit\\_for\\_school\\_boards.htm](http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/site/c.kjJXJ5MPlwE/b.5113557/k.BB9E/Planning_for_prekindergarten_A_toolkit_for_school_boards.htm)
- From the Tennessee Alliance for Early Education:  
<http://www.prekfortn.com/documents/Voluntary%20Pre-K%20in%20Tennessee%20-%20Understanding%20the%20Collaboration%20Model%20-%20October%202007.pdf>
- From the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition:  
<http://www.childrenslearninginstitute.org/our-programs/program-overview/TX-school-ready/documents/PromotingSustainableCollaborations.pdf>
- From West Virginia's Departments of Health and Human Resources and Education:  
<http://www.wvdhhr.org/oss/pieces/ta/>
- From Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction:  
<http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/>  
<http://www.dpi.wi.gov/fscp/pdf/eccommap.pdf>

