EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION BRIDGING TO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

COMMUNITY GOAL: INCREASE THE NUMBER OF THIRD GRADE STUDENTS READING AT GRADE LEVEL BY 50% BY 2022

What Is a Community School?
A Community School is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Using public schools as hubs, Community Schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities.¹

Six Conditions of Learning
1. Basic needs met
2. Families as partners
3. Engaging instruction
4. Safe schools/neighborhoods
5. Positive youth development programming
6. Quality early childhood education strategies

The Case for Quality Early Learning
Recent studies and research have shown that inequitable educational experiences and outcomes, such as chronic absenteeism and lower test performance, often have roots that begin as early as infancy. The importance of quality early childhood education was underscored in a new study from The Center for Public Education. The report concludes that preschool and full-day kindergarten in tandem is the best combination for reading proficiency by the third grade. A large and growing body of research shows that investing in high-quality pre-k education yields benefits for children, schools and communities. There is strong evidence showing that young children who participate in high-quality pre-k programs enter school more ready to learn than their peers.²

To accomplish the community goal objective by 2022, United Way will invest in children beginning at birth (including maternal health), in and around schools where the need is the greatest.

United Way engages in multi-method investing that includes programmatic strategies, Community Schools and Promise Neighborhoods. Strategies to ensure success for early childhood include:

- Babies are born healthy.
- Families with young children will receive adequate supports.
- Early learning teachers of children ages 2–5 years will build skills to enhance age-appropriate development of children.
- Children ages 6 weeks to 5 years receive a quality early learning experience.
- Students will transition successfully into kindergarten.

Research conducted for the United Way 2014–2018 Investment Plan shows that nearly half of the children in the Lehigh Valley live in low-income families with limited availability of high-quality child care. Early childhood programs are the most cost-effective way to ensure the healthy development of children living in poverty and offer the greatest returns to society.³

Return on Investment
Investing in early childhood education produces a high return on investment. Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank published a paper examining the returns on investment of early education in Minnesota. In Early Childhood Development with a High Public Return, early education investments are compared to other kinds of state investments, such as subsidizing private industry. The conclusion is that early education investments yield a return that far exceeds the return on most public projects that are considered economic development. The report considered several studies of model programs, such as the Perry Preschool program, which found a return on investment of 16 percent, with 80 percent of the benefits going to the general public. The data about model programs yielding more than $8 for every $1 invested is one way of describing the investment. Rolnick and Grunewald’s use of the rate of return clearly shows the benefits of investment quality early childhood education.⁴

Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman’s work is devoted to the development of a scientific basis for economic policy evaluation. His career has included developing models to study unemployment, wage growth and skill formation. Heckman’s report, The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children, describes how individual productivity can be fostered by investments in young children, particularly children living in poverty or other adverse circumstances. This research
shows that effective early care and education adds to the ROI by:

- Decreasing the need for special education services and remediation.
- Reducing juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy and dropout rates.

Family environments are important in determining education and skills of young children. Early education and other early interventions, such as home visits, can mitigate the effects of disadvantaged family environments.

Key workforce skills such as motivation, persistence and self-control are developed early. Heckman concludes that K–12 schooling comes too late, and other remedies are prohibitively costly as well (e.g., job training programs and second-chance GED programs).5

Business leaders are also embracing the idea of early childhood education as an investment in the country’s future based on Rolnick and Heck’s research. Business leaders want the United States to be a thriving country with income equality, a strong middle class, employment opportunities and skilled workers in many industries.

At-risk children who don’t receive a high-quality early childhood experience are:

- 25% more likely to drop out of school.
- 40% more likely to become a teen parent.
- 50% more likely to be placed in special education.
- 60% more likely to never attend college.
- 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Brain Development

Early childhood is a time of amazing transformations for children. The fastest developing organ is the brain and the most development takes place in the first three years of life. A child at birth has most of the brain cells he/she will need for the rest of his/her life. That is why United Way invests in programs that engage pregnant mothers to ensure a healthy pregnancy and a child born at a healthy weight.

What is not present at birth are the connections needed for the brain to function. However, the brain rapidly begins to build those connections, or synapses, at a rate of 700 per second in the first few years of life. This building of the architecture of the brain is dramatically influenced by life experiences.6

An infant’s brain is dependent on responsiveness from adults. The baby does something, the adult responds back and vice versa. It’s the back and forth that shapes the brain circuits. If a baby is not getting those kinds of interactions, the connections in the brain are not made. Quality early childhood programs ensure that these experiences occur continually.7

Another factor that can affect the brain’s development is stress. Stress is any external stimulus that threatens the balance of the normal equilibrium in the body. Children experience stress as a normal part of growing and learning. It can result from positive, as well as, negative experiences. The events or experiences that cause stress are known as stressors.

One of the biggest stressors that can affect a child’s brain development is poverty, but not because a child understands the lack of money. The challenge of poverty is how well the parents are able to adjust their behavior to create a safe and enriching environment for the child. If the parents aren’t able to modify their stress, the child feels the stress as well, which in turn affects the brain’s development adversely.8

Any framework for a quality early childhood experience will include the following domains of development:

- Physical Development & Health
- Social & Emotional Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Language and Literacy
- Cognitive and General Knowledge

The domains are interrelated; what happens in one domain influences development in the other domains. The skills and knowledge that children develop early in life are the foundation for more advanced skills and knowledge.

Each child develops at his/her own rate. However, children develop in a predictable order, from simple to more complex skills. They learn by doing, and they practice new skills through play. Play is a critical part of a child’s development. Many factors influence child development – heredity, family and community. Children’s early experiences will affect them now and in the future. Children must have their basic needs met, and feel safe and valued in order to develop and learn. Along with families, quality early learning programs can provide these basics for children.

Physical Development and Health

This refers to physical well-being, use of the body, muscle control, and appropriate nutrition, exercise, hygiene, and safety practices. Early health habits lay the foundation for lifelong healthy living. Equally important, physical well-being, health and motor development are foundational to young children’s learning. Motor skills permit children to fully explore and function in their environment, and support development in all other domains. Health problems, delays in physical development and frequent illnesses interfere with a
child’s ability to learn and are associated with a range of poor developmental and educational outcomes. Included in this category is the child’s physical health status; health knowledge and practice; gross motor skills; and fine motor skills. If these skills are not developed fully, it will negatively impact a child’s school readiness.

**Social and Emotional Development**

This refers to the skills necessary to foster secure attachment with adults, maintain healthy relationships, regulate one’s behavior and emotions, and develop a healthy concept of personal identity. Positive social and emotional development provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning. In early childhood, social and emotional well-being predicts favorable social, behavioral and academic adjustment into middle childhood and adolescence. It helps children navigate new environments, facilitates the development of supportive relationships with peers and adults, and supports their ability to participate in learning activities. Children with emotional or behavioral challenges are likely to receive less adult support for development and learning and to be more isolated from peers. Included in this category are social relationships; self-concept and self-efficacy; self-regulation; and emotional and behavioral health. If these skills are not developed fully, it will affect a child’s school readiness.

**Approaches to Learning**

This refers to observable behaviors that indicate ways children become engaged in social interactions and learning experiences. Children’s approaches to learning contribute to their success in school and influence their development and learning in all other domains. Children’s ability to stay focused, interested and engaged in activities supports a range of positive outcomes, including cognitive, language and social and emotional development. It allows children to acquire new knowledge, learn new skills and set and achieve goals for themselves. Many early learning experts view approaches to learning as one of the most important domains of early childhood development. This domain includes initiative and curiosity; persistence and attentiveness; and cooperation.

**Creative Arts Expression** refers to participation in a range of activities that allow for creative and imaginative expression, such as music, art, creative movement and drama. The creative arts engage children's minds, bodies and senses. The arts invite children to listen, observe, discuss, move, solve problems, and imagine using multiple modes of thought and self-expression. The creative arts provide ways for young children to learn and use skills in other domains. Elements include music, creative movement and dance, art, and drama.

**Language and Literacy**

This refers to emerging abilities in receptive and expressive language. This domain includes understanding and using one or more languages. Language development is among the most important tasks of the first five years of a child’s life. Language is the key to learning across all domains. Specific language skills in early childhood are predictive of later success in learning to read and write. Also, children who are skilled communicators are more likely to demonstrate social competence. Elements of this domain include receptive language and expressive language.

**Literacy Knowledge and Skills** refers to the knowledge and skills that lay the foundation for reading and writing, such as understanding basic concepts about books or other printed materials, the alphabet, and letter-sound relationships. Early literacy is the foundation for reading and writing in all academic endeavors in school. It is considered one of the most important areas for young children's development and learning. Early literacy learning provides children with an opportunity to explore the world through books, storytelling and other reading and writing activities. It is a mechanism for learning about topics they enjoy and acquiring content knowledge and concepts that support progress in other domains. It is critical for supporting a range of positive outcomes, including success in school and other environments. Elements of this domain include book appreciation and knowledge; phonological awareness; alphabet knowledge; print concepts and conventions and early writing.

Within a child’s early life, the parents or caregivers are responsible for most of the child’s social stimulation. In turn, this affects language and communication development. As a result, how parents interact with their children lays the foundation for the way children process information for years to come. Nearly two decades ago, a groundbreaking study found that by age 3, children of professional parents heard words millions more times than those children with less educated parents. With this came a distinct advantage for these children in school, which suggested the need for earlier intervention, such as quality early learning programs. This study shows a clear correlation between the conversation styles of parents and the resulting speech of their children. Literacy experts emphasize the importance of natural conversations with children, asking questions while reading books, and helping children identify words during playtime. Educators and policy makers say they must focus increasingly on parents.
Educational research shows that vocabulary strongly relates to reading comprehension, intelligence, and general ability. Since oral language and vocabulary are so connected to reading comprehension, the most disadvantaged children face increased challenges once they enter school and start learning to read. A child's vocabulary as early as age 3 can predict third grade reading achievement. Science is clear that the only way to dramatically decrease the gaps in this achievement is by providing rich learning experiences much earlier than standard school age for children who live in disadvantaged environments.

**Cognition and General Knowledge**

**Mathematics Knowledge and Skills** refers to the conceptual understanding of numbers, their relationships, combinations, and operations. Mathematics also includes shapes and their structure; reasoning; measurement; classification; and patterns. Because math is also about generalizations and abstractions, math skills during the early years help children to connect ideas, develop logical and abstract thinking, and to question, analyze, and understand the world around them. Math knowledge, interest, and skills are basic to children's success in school and later life. Early math skills are highly predictive of later academic achievement in multiple subject areas. Elements of this domain are number concepts and quantities; number relationships and operations; geometry and spatial sense; patterns; and measurement and comparison.

**Science Knowledge and Skills** refers to the emerging ability to gather information about the natural and physical world and organize that information into knowledge and theories. Young children are often called natural scientists. Their inclination to be curious, explore, ask questions, and develop their own theories about how the world works makes science an important domain for enhancing learning and school readiness. Science learning during the early childhood years encourages children to discover the world around them and refine their understanding of it. It provides opportunities for rich vocabulary learning and collaboration with peers. It fosters a sense of curiosity and motivation to learn. Elements of this domain include scientific skills & methods and conceptual knowledge of the natural & physical world.

**Social Studies Knowledge and Skills** refers to understanding people and how they relate to others and the world around them. Social studies helps children to understand themselves, their families, and communities. Through learning experiences related to history, culture, and the environment, children enhance their self-identity and expand their experiences beyond the walls of their home and early childhood setting. Elements include self, family and community; people and the environment; history and events.

**Logic and Reasoning** refers to the ability to think through problems and apply strategies for solving them. Logic and reasoning skills are an essential part of child development and early learning and a foundation for competence and success in school and other environments. Children's ability to think, reason, and use information allows them to acquire knowledge, understand the world around them, and make appropriate decisions. Elements include reasoning and problem solving; and symbolic representation.

**Family Engagement**

Family engagement is one of the six conditions for learning in a community school and it includes early childhood families. Parents who have positive relationships with, and spend time in, their children's school environment advance their children's school success in many ways. Their involvement improves academic outcomes and those children are less likely to be anxious, depressed, defiant, and aggressive. At the most basic level, when families are involved, students are more likely to attend school and to participate in testing, which allows districts to meet annual progress goals.

Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and others shows that family involvement—including factors such as parenting style, family participation in learning activities, and parental expectations—is a more accurate predictor of student achievement than family income or socioeconomic status.

Meaningful family engagement in children's early learning supports school readiness and later academic success. Since parents and families are their children's most important educators, parental involvement is a critical element of high-quality early care and education. When parents leave those environments and enter the school system, their expectations for continued parental involvement are high. It can be very disappointing and scary for parents. When the public school system is welcoming to families, it carries on the continuity of parent engagement.

Head Start has long stood as a model of parent involvement and leadership. Some national experts suggest that community schools could improve their efforts to engage parents by following the example set by Head Start through its informal “listen and learn” sessions in which parents, community members, and school staff meet to discuss strengths and ways to improve partnerships. This is another way for community schools to engage.

Another way to strengthen the ties between families with young children and community schools is to open after-school programs to pre-k and kindergarten students. By including early childhood, the community school builds bridges to serve birth to kindergarten. It is important to include kinder-gartners in family events and let the families know they can receive the same social services as older children.

Schools that engage community partners to offer comprehensive family supports have a better chance of promoting family well-being and, as a result, improving children’s readiness for school. It is important to provide regular opportunities for staff to learn about the connection between family engagement and school readiness. It is just as important to create opportunities for parents and communities to learn about school readiness as well.
Transitions
PreK-3rd Grade Alignment
The PreK–3rd grade alignment is Pennsylvania’s framework linking early childhood education to the K–12 system.

“The vision for the work of quality early childhood education strategies and successful transitions in community schools is to improve the quality and coherency of children’s learning opportunities, from the experiences children have before they enter the K-12 system and extending through elementary school. Effective instruction, instructional coherence, and meaningful learning opportunities are central to comprehensive PreK-3rd grade approaches. PreK-3rd grade reforms are systems change efforts that are complicated and complex. They cross the traditional boundaries of early learning (also known as birth-to-five or 0-5) and K-12 education. They cross multiple grades and multiple elements. They aim for practice and policy changes in many areas (e.g., leadership, professional development, data) and at multiple levels (e.g., classrooms, schools, districts). They aim for multifaceted changes in multiple groups (e.g., children, families, teachers, education leaders, community members).”

Community schools and their partners are in the best position to lead the way in connecting early childhood to the K–12 field. This PreK–3rd grade framework can lower chronic absenteeism rates among young students, provide smoother transitions from Pre-K to primary grades, and better align early education instructional standards through the community school strategy.

Community School pilot projects found that communication between preschool education and kindergarten teachers was almost non-existent as students moved on to grade school. The Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative Linkages Project connects with Oklahoma’s early care and learning system to achieve improved school readiness and success in the early years of school. The initiative created transition teams at the schools to build bridges between early childhood and kindergarten teachers. This allowed information-sharing about individual students to move from school to school. The focus was on creating an effective continuum of quality, developmentally appropriate opportunities for children aged 0–8 years.

An ideal state for successful transitions would be to have early learning centers on site at all community schools, making the connection natural. In lieu of that, community schools can begin conversations with local child care providers, both public and private. One way to do this might be to ask a child care Director to sit on the Leadership or Core team. In this way, conversation can flow both ways and the Director would be able to add expertise to the dialogue.

When schools and the early childhood community build bridges and collaborate, they are able to address challenges and identify solutions. For example, focusing on an issue that is relevant to both early childhood educators and elementary schools—such as early chronic absenteeism—provides a vehicle for increasing communication between and among sectors, potentially leading to significant progress.

Partnerships between early childhood programs and the school system can create a continuum of supports, ensuring that children and families who are familiar with services through Head Start or state-funded prekindergarten programs continue to receive assistance when children enter elementary school. One of the goals of a Community School is to ensure that at-risk children are ready for school success by age 5. This can be done by working with children, families, early childhood providers and the community:

• To support children’s social-emotional development.
• To help children develop cognition and general knowledge necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond.
• To help children develop language and literacy skills that prepare them for success in kindergarten.
• To help children develop approaches to learning that facilitate kindergarten readiness.
• To support children in developing physical well-being and motor development.

Early childhood experts describe school readiness in many different ways, but all align to the five key points listed above. School readiness can also refer to the school’s ability to provide children with an education or it could refer to families’ readiness for the transition to school. School readiness is a shared responsibility among schools, programs and families.

As bridging entities, community schools are uniquely well-positioned and organized to support and strengthen linkages with early childhood opportunities.

It is important to note that the early childhood system is a mix of supports for children and their families (i.e., Head Start, prekindergarten, child care centers, family child care providers, and family friend and neighbor care as well as an array of health, social, and family services and parenting, home visiting, and family support programs). This patchwork of different types of care can bring challenges to building bridges at the community and school-site level. Use of the transition toolkit (discussed later in this section) can make this easier.

A summer transition program for children entering a community school and their families helps children and parents acclimate to the school environment. It promotes
social and emotional skill building, fosters enthusiasm among children and parents as children prepare to enter “big school,” and connects them to resources available at the community school. More than just co-locating a transition program within a school building, the programs are integral to, and supported by, school and community partners.

Positive Pre-K to K Transition Practices
At the point of intersection between the early childhood education and public school worlds is where transition is most effective. Following is a link to the Pennsylvania Early Learning “Keys to Quality” website. The transition toolkit contained within this site is the framework to be used in all community schools. It contains everything needed by a principal to create smooth transitions into the public school setting for all children.

For more information, please visit www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=TransitionToolkit.

Following is an outline of topics covered by the framework:

Overview: Implementing Positive Transition Practices

I. Management of Transition Practices
This section emphasizes the necessary systematic and structural components for the implementation of best transition practices.

• Audience
• Personnel
• Transition Plan
• Data Collection
• School Registration

II. School in Community
This section emphasizes practices which connect programs and services which touch the lives of children and family to provide a seamless system of early education. Linkages between school and these multiple partners provide access to resources and information that can enhance the outcomes of the transition process.

• Participation in Community Transition Team
• Partnerships
• Promotion of Quality Early Care

III. Child-to-School
This section emphasizes practices to help make transition an exciting event with a high level of comfort. These practices help foster positive attitudes toward school and learning, foster positive teacher-child relationships, and help children develop and maintain positive relationship with peers.

• Orientation to new setting
• Orientation to child
• Orientation to school
• Relationship

IV. Family-to-School
Family involvement has been linked to positive student outcomes. This section emphasizes practices to involve and engage families in the transition process, fostering positive attitudes toward school and learning and helping families act as partners in their children’s learning

• Orientation to school
• Family networking
• Partnerships
• Orientation to Family

V. School-to-School
When sending and receiving teachers use similar strategies; children adjust more easily to school. It is essential that both early learning teachers and elementary school staff work together to overcome the barriers to smooth transitions for children and families.

• Partnerships
• Resources

Action Plan for Evaluation
Rubric provides school district and other local education agency personnel the means to evaluate current transition practice, as well as a means to plan for continual quality improvement. The action plan covers five areas: management of transition practices, school in community, child-to-school, family-to-school and school-to-school.

Best Practices: Transition to FormalSchooling (for Pre-K settings and families)

I. Management of Transition Practices
This section emphasizes the necessary systematic and structural components for the implementation of best transition practices.

• Audience
• Personnel
• Transition Plan
• Data Collection
• School Registration

II. School in Community
This section emphasizes practices which connect programs and services which touch the lives of children and family to provide a seamless system of early education. Linkages between school and these multiple partners provide access to resources and information that can enhance the outcomes of the transition process.

• Participation in Community Transition Team
• Partnerships
• Promotion of Quality Early Care

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• Orientation to school
• Relationship
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- Participation in Community Transition Team
- Partnership

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This section emphasizes practices to help make transition an exciting event with a high level of comfort. These practices help foster positive attitudes toward school and learning, foster positive teacher-child relationships and help children develop, and maintain positive relationship with peers.

- Orientation to new setting
- Orientation to child

IV. Family-to-school
This section emphasizes practices to involve and engage families in the transition process, fostering positive attitudes toward school and learning and helping families act as partners in their children's learning.

- Orientation to school
- Family Networking
- Partnerships

V. School-to-school
Continuity across early childhood services in which all programs for children birth–age 8 in the community work together can ensure consistent and effective services throughout these important years. Continuity includes alignment of expectations, environmental design, as well as instructional practice. When sending and receiving teachers use similar strategies, children adjust more easily to school. It is essential that both early learning teachers and elementary school staff work together to overcome the barriers to smooth transitions for children and families.

- Partnerships
- Resources

Action Plan for Evaluation
Rubric provides early education personnel the means to evaluate current transition practice, as well as a means to plan for continual quality improvement. The Action Plan covers 5 areas: Management of transition practices, school in community, child-to-school, family-to-school and school-to-school.

- Best practice emerging – effective practice is at beginning stages
- Best practice progressing – program is moving toward the move effective practice but has not yet achieve it
- Best practice achieved – program has met the most effective practice which would result in optimal outcomes for children and families

Additional Resources
The basis for the framework comes from the work of Robert Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre in their book *Successful Kindergarten Transition – Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families & Schools*. This book is required reading for principals to begin to learn about transition and its importance.

In addition, *Getting It Right from the Start – The Principal’s Guide to Early Childhood Education* by Marjorie J. Kostelnik and Marilyn L. Grady is a good resource for principals who are just learning about early childhood education.

It is recommended that all principals view *The Statisticks Lottery* to understand the impact poverty has on learning for children: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52KuhCpiOUE.