



From Alignment to Action: Nevada's Work to Expand Developmentally Appropriate Kindergarten Practices

LAURA BUCKNER
MARCH 2023

A transformative kindergarten experience can be a powerful lever for equity. Kindergarten is a pivotal time—it is the “on-ramp” to K–12 education, with our youngest learners entering from a variety of settings, including public and private preschool programs, home-based care settings, early childhood special education settings, and other formal and informal venues. Regardless of where young learners are entering kindergarten from, adults can create safe, supportive, and responsive developmental conditions in kindergarten so every child can thrive and achieve their greatest potential in school and in life.

The Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, facilitated by the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd, was a yearlong program for state education leaders working to ensure young children experience equitable and developmentally appropriate conditions for learning. Leaders from 15 states took part in the program, which involved monthly in-person sessions from April 2022 to March 2023. Participants in the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative focused on three critical components of kindergarten—developmental relationships, safe and supportive environments, and developmentally appropriate practices—to improve statewide systems to better support educators, students, and families.

One of the states involved in the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative was Nevada, which sent leaders from the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) to participate in the program. This brief describes Nevada’s efforts over the last several years to align and strengthen its system of supports for early childhood learning and development through grade 3. It is intended to share insights into the journey that Nevada’s leaders have undergone to navigate the state’s complex early care and education systems. The brief concludes with a set of questions that state leaders can ask to assess ways to strengthen their own state’s early childhood learning and development efforts.

About the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety

With a focus on equity, the Center aims to build the knowledge and capacity of state and local education agencies to adopt evidence-based practices in social and emotional learning, school safety, and other integrated whole-person initiatives. [Learn more about the Center and the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative.](#)

Nevada's Investment in Early Childhood

"Nevada's children will be safe, healthy, and thriving during the first eight years of life, and the system will support children and families in achieving their full potential."

—Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council 2022–2024 Strategic Plan¹

The past decade has seen significant investment in Nevada for improving the care and education of young children. The passage of the Read by Grade 3 Act in 2015 elevated the importance of an aligned early childhood system and included a number of key investments to support children from birth to grade 3. Further efforts have been bolstered by numerous policy and funding initiatives in the state. Yet despite a shared vision for aligned early childhood supports, leaders in Nevada have found it difficult to document and communicate how their work is impacting schools and classrooms.²

Nevada, like many states, has a complex system of support for young children and their families. Four state-level departments administer early childhood services. Each of these departments has its own divisions or offices, and more than 20 inter- and cross-agency coalitions oversee, advise, and support these efforts. Additionally, several public and private agencies and organizations contribute to the shared vision of "safe, healthy, and thriving" children.³ The involvement of so many entities, while difficult to coordinate, indicates high levels of support for improving early education.

Aligning State Policy With a National Framework

Nevada's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) is a multisector group of representatives appointed by the governor, including the NDE, business and community leaders, educators, parents, government staff, and health care providers. In 2019, ECAC members recognized the need for further alignment of Nevada's early childhood programs and services. Drawing on targeted federal funding, they used the national Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P–3 Approaches (P–3 Framework) to examine the alignment of the state's policies on early learning and development with each other and with the national framework. The policy review highlighted many areas of shared interest among the state agencies responsible for administering programs that impact young children and their families. However, the authors of the review also surfaced opportunities for improvement, including strengthening alignment between the 0–5 and K–12 educator sectors, preparing and retaining effective early childhood educators and administrators, developing shared definitions of quality and effectiveness in early education, and ensuring equitable access to high-quality early education. The review also confirmed what leaders in the state had previously identified as an issue—the need to explicitly link state-level investments with impacts in schools and classrooms.⁴

The national *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P–3 Approaches*⁵ provides guidance for supporting learning prior to entering formal education (preschool) through grade 3. It organizes the work of providing high-quality learning experiences to young children into eight categories:

- Cross-Sector Work
- Administrative Effectiveness
- Teacher Effectiveness
- Instructional Tools
- Learning Environment
- Data-Driven Improvement
- Engaged Families
- Continuity and Pathways

In 2021, the ECAC drafted a strategic plan to strengthen coordination among all of the agencies, divisions, and coalitions that impact early learning and care. In addition to responding to the policy review, the strategic plan aligns with recommendations from recent statewide needs assessments related to maternal and child health and education. The plan focuses particularly on serving the state’s most vulnerable populations.⁶

Taking Action

The strategic plan has prompted the NDE to take a range of action, including training teachers and school administrators in developmentally appropriate practices. For instance, the agency works with teachers to identify and build on best practices in classrooms and with administrators to support transitions from early learning and care into the K–12 school system. Leaders in the NDE have helped school districts knit together financial and programmatic support to implement professional development and peer-to-peer learning and invest in early childhood systems. These investments include offering school site leaders a professional leadership program informed by the P–3 Framework and facilitating peer-to-peer learning for cohorts of educators developing their knowledge of developmentally appropriate kindergarten practices. All of the NDE’s activities to support early education are grounded in the importance of meeting the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children as an essential foundation for academic learning.

Through its work in the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, the NDE wanted to build on its activities to support the ECAC strategic plan by further developing comprehensive plans for aligning Nevada kindergarten and preK programs through policy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Drafting a Policy Statement

Leaders in Nevada recognized and appreciated the broad support for developmentally appropriate early childhood practices. To capitalize on that existing goodwill, they chose to draft a policy statement endorsed jointly by the NDE and the statewide ECAC. Facilitated by coaching through the Collaborative, the Nevada team wrote the policy statement and developed a plan to have it reviewed by key decision-makers, including the state board of education.

The policy statement was presented to the state board of education in December 2022 and received a very positive response. The policy statement defines developmentally appropriate practice for learning and development from birth through grade 3 and provides a foundation for expanding promising practices throughout the state.⁷ It also discusses the importance of equitable practices grounded in the science of learning and development that can help children transition successfully from early care to kindergarten and set them on track for optimal learning and development.

The policy statement was formally endorsed by the NDE and the statewide ECAC in early 2023, representing another significant step at the state level to align systems support for best practices in the education of young children. Additionally, the validation of support for developmentally appropriate practice draws attention to the many initiatives underway to provide high-quality, equitable kindergarten experiences to all of Nevada's young learners.

Moving Forward

With the backing of the state board and other important partners, the NDE hopes to continue expanding its support for developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood spaces. Its plans include scaling professional learning opportunities; collecting data about the positive impacts of safe, supportive, and responsive learning environments in kindergarten; and communicating strategically to advance an aligned and coherent vision for B–3 education. Altogether, these activities will move the state closer to achieving its vision for early learning and having tangible impacts in schools and classrooms.

Those working across the agency and state to strengthen this work include Education Program Professionals in Early Learning and Development, Family Engagement, Standards and Instructional Support, and Safe and Respectful Learning Environments, as well as a district-level elementary literacy coordinator and the state pyramid model coordinator. This group meets monthly and informally calls itself the Nevada Department of Education Developmentally Appropriate Practice Ambassadors.

To accompany ongoing discussions related to the policy statement and developmentally appropriate practice, the Nevada state team and staff from the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety developed a short video to illustrate the impact that aligned systems at the state level can have in classrooms across the state. The video emphasizes the importance of developmentally appropriate practices that are grounded in relationships, exploration, and joy.

Reflection Questions for State Leaders

State leaders can learn from Nevada’s efforts to align its early learning and development systems. The following questions can serve as prompts for understanding where your state is—and what work still needs to be done—in working toward aligned and coherent early childhood programs and services that equitably and effectively support all young children to thrive.

- Does my state or education agency have a formal statement about the purpose of early childhood education and best practices for supporting young learners and their families? In what ways does the statement reflect equity goals and developmentally appropriate practice?
- What do I know about where state policy is succeeding in supporting young learners and their families? What are known areas of opportunity? What do I need to learn more about regarding how state policy impacts early learning?
- What agencies, departments, community-based organizations, and individuals in my state are making investments in early learning? How might I partner with them to align efforts and maximize impact?
- Where are efforts in supporting developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten aligned? In what areas could they be better aligned?
- What policies and practices are in place to provide equitable transitions to kindergarten?

Resources for Learning More About Nevada’s Investments in Early Learning and Kindergarten

- [Nevada Developmentally Appropriate Practice Kindergarten Policy Statement](#)
- [Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council 2022–2024 Strategic Plan](#)
- [Nevada’s B–3 Initiatives: Creating Alignment & Coherence from Birth through 3rd Grade](#)
- [Nevada Ready! B–3 Professional Leadership Program](#)

Endnotes

- 1 Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council. (2021). *2022–2024 strategic plan*. http://nvecac.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NECAC2022_2024StrategicPlanFINAL.pdf
- 2 Kauerz, K., Burnham, M., & Waugh, S. (2019). *Nevada Ready! B–3 policy analysis and recommendations*. Office of Early Learning & Development, Nevada Department of Education. https://nationalp-3center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Policy_Nevada-Ready-B-3_FINAL.pdf
- 3 Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2021.
- 4 Kauerz et al., 2019
- 5 Kauerz, K., & Coffman, J. (2019). *Framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating P–3 approaches* (2nd ed.). National P–3 Center, School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado Denver.
- 6 Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2021
- 7 Nevada Department of Education. (2022). *Nevada developmentally appropriate practice kindergarten policy statement* [Presented at the December 2022 Nevada State Board of Education Meeting]. https://doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/Boards_Commissions_Councils/State_Board_of_Education/2022/December/Developmentally_Appropriate_Practice_Kindergarten_Policy_Statement_FINAL.pdf

©2023 WestEd. All rights reserved.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

Suggested Citation: Buckner, L. (2023). *From alignment to action: Nevada’s work to expand developmentally appropriate kindergarten practices*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd.

The authors would like to thank Rachel Stepina and Anna Severens at the Nevada Department of Education for their contributions to this brief and for their partnership as participants in the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative.

This brief was prepared by the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education under grant S424B180004. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.