



Northland Foundation
Pre-K Through 3rd Grade Success Stories
Across Northeastern Minnesota

2014-2015

By Molly Harney, Ph.D.
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NORTHLAND
FOUNDATION

202 West Superior, Suite 610
Duluth, MN 55802
218-723-4040

Foreword

The Northland Foundation's KIDS PLUS Program is dedicated to improving the wellbeing of children and youth from birth to adulthood. In 2003, the Foundation launched the Early Childhood Initiative in northeastern Minnesota. This regional effort is part of the statewide Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative, which is a collaboration between the Northland Foundation and the five other Minnesota Initiative Foundations serving Greater Minnesota. Over the past decade, 12 Early Childhood Initiative Coalitions, encompassing 46 communities, have been established in northeastern Minnesota. Through the Initiative, the Northland Foundation provides training, technical assistance, and resources to assist the coalitions in their efforts to ensure that young children have a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding.

Annual Early Childhood Summits

Hosting an Annual Early Childhood Summit is an integral component of the Foundation's Early Childhood Initiative. In 2007, the Foundation presented a regional training focused solely on Kindergarten transition to promote awareness and action among schools and communities. Every year since, the annual Early Childhood Summit has gathered teams from the region to learn and work together on initiatives that support young children and their families in early childhood to early elementary. In 2013, the Foundation began focusing on PreK-3rd grade alignment to encourage school districts, early learning programs, and other community partners to develop collaborative efforts that align early learning services with traditional K-3 programs.

Moving to Action: Grants for Schools and Communities

Following each Summit, the Northland Foundation has made available grants to school and community teams to implement action steps aimed at forging stronger relationships between early childhood and K-3 educators and develop a more integrated learning community. Over the years, \$125,000 in funding has been granted to support Kindergarten transition and PreK-3rd grade alignment initiatives in more than two dozen school districts. With the support of grants and high-quality training, northeastern Minnesota communities are working together more closely than ever to ensure all young children enter Kindergarten better prepared to achieve their full potential in school and in life.

Commitment to Sharing Lessons Learned

In 2012, the Foundation published "Enhancing the Transition to Kindergarten" to highlight promising approaches and learnings from Kindergarten transition efforts undertaken in the region with grant support from 2007 to 2012. This year, the Foundation supported a research study conducted by Molly Harney, Ph.D., University of Minnesota Duluth, to provide a snapshot of successful strategies to ensure positive early learning experiences from early childhood to early elementary. While PreK-3rd grade planning grants have been made for the past three years, the following report focuses on strategies conducted during the 2014-2015 school year.



Background

On April 24, 2014, the Northland Foundation held the 8th annual Early Childhood Summit in Duluth, Minnesota. The Summit convened more than 200 people representing 26 northeastern Minnesota public, charter, and reservation schools to support the young children in their schools and communities. At the “table” were superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, community education directors, and early care and education professionals.

The keynote speaker, Dr. Kristie Kauerz, used brain development and achievement gap data to set the stage for the importance of “intentionality and collaboration to create change.” Dr. Kauerz’s highly touted Framework, developed to promote a cohesive approach to Pre-Kindergarten through 3rd grade, was shared in the hopes that the educational experts in attendance would find ways to implement the strategies in their schools and programs.

The Framework has eight “buckets” or categories of effort designed to be used by school districts, early learning programs, and other community partners to develop collaborative efforts that align early learning services with traditional K-3 programs.

The eight integrated “buckets” are:

- Cross-Sector Work
- Administrative Effectiveness
- Teacher Effectiveness
- Instructional Tools
- Learning Environments
- Data-Driven Improvements
- Family Engagement
- Community Pathways

According to Kauerz, “The Framework helps users see the big picture of comprehensive and systematic PreK-3rd grade work and guides users in understanding how their own PreK-3rd grade strategies fit in the big picture.” (Kauerz, 2013 pg.4)

With the Framework as a guiding tool, the Northland Foundation made grant dollars available to school districts interested in engaging in the best practice approaches to supporting children who are PreK-3rd grade in their schools and communities.

Fifteen school districts participated in the Northland Foundation PreK-3rd grade grant program. Each district organized a team, developed a vision, and created a timeline for implementing programs and services that engaged the strategies and practices presented by Dr. Kauerz.

Grant Participation

The Northland Foundation made grants available to the participating school districts with teams attending the 2014 Early Childhood Summit. Each district had the opportunity to submit a proposal outlining how the district would use the funding to support the PreK-3rd grade initiatives for children in their districts.

Using the Kauerz Framework, 15 school districts responded with proposals addressing support initiatives from teacher observations to community-based Kindergarten transition nights. Nearly 7,000 children were supported in this multi-school district effort.

PreK-3rd Grade Transition grants were awarded to the following school districts:

- Barnum
- Cloquet
- Ely
- Esko
- Hermantown
- Itasca’s Invest Early
 - Grand Rapids
 - Deer River
 - Nashwauk Keewatin
 - Greenway/Coleraine
- Lake Superior
- McGregor
- Mesabi East
- Moose Lake
- Proctor
- St Louis County

The Northland Foundation's support for local school districts is clearly demonstrated in the context of existing programs and services for children PreK-3rd grade. In order to generate an accurate understanding of the impact the Northland Foundation has had on school district initiatives, it is important to establish an understanding of the existing programs and services offering support district wide. The programs and services provide a comprehensive overview of the core programs and services established to support children who are PreK-3rd grade in the seven-county region supported by the Northland Foundation.

Existing PreK through Grade 3 Programs and Services:

- ECFE (0-5)
- ECSE (0-7)
- Preschool (3-5)
- School Readiness (4-5)
- Private Child Care (0-5)
- Head Start (3-5)
- Title I (K-3)
- Kindergarten
- 1st-3rd Grades
- Jump Start 4 Kindergarten (Carlton County)
- Northland Foundation Early Childhood Coalitions
- Parent Teacher Organizations
- Early Childhood Screening



General PreK-3rd Grade Overarching Goals

According to Kauerz (2013), the goal of PreK-3rd grade intervention is to improve outcomes and close achievement gaps. It is important to recognize that efforts presented in response to supporting the Framework will always be integrated alongside existing district goals. Data collected by interviewing the 2014 grant recipients provides a sampling of overarching district goals for PreK-3rd grade students:

- Provide a smooth transition for PreK-3rd grade students
- Close the achievement gap
- Teachers work together and stay in communication about shared students
- Meet district Q Comp goals
- Increase school readiness
- Align curriculum (PreK-3rd grade)
- Create an interface between PreK and Kindergarten
- Generate a common understanding of what we all do and why
- Build relationships among teaching staff
- Create a seamless alignment (0-3rd grade)
- Bridge and build relationships with the intention to develop greater education
- Focus on math and literacy
- Increase state test scores
- Improve targeted services of K-3
- Align curriculum vertically
- Ease transition from PreK to Kindergarten
- Increase communication between grade levels
- Align curriculum with assessment
- Focus on cutting-edge technology
- All students read by 3rd grade

Using the Framework to Support Change

Using the Framework to assess and develop opportunities and interventions with the “buckets” in mind (Cross-Sector Work, Administrative Effectiveness, Teacher Effectiveness, Instructional Tools, Learning Environments, Data-Driven Improvements, Family Engagement, and Community Pathways), the 15 districts engaged in the PreK-3rd grade initiative and moved forward by assessing overarching goals, reviewing current practice, evaluating need, visioning change, and finally implementing strategies.



The Impact

The impact can be best understood through examples and stories. They make clear these communities' successes. During the interviews, alignment with the Framework was addressed with examples and passion for change.

Cross-Sector Work

Every school district from Ely to Moose Lake reported PreK-3rd grade teachers crossing sectors to learn more about development, curriculum, assessment, and each other. Cross-sector engagement is being supported through Professional Learning Community efforts (PLC), vertical classroom observation, and meetings dedicated to support cross-sector collaboration. Teachers are reporting a clearer understanding of the skills and expectations of children. Lisa Kruse reports, “Community Education, Early Childhood, and Title I staff continue efforts for inclusiveness and alignment throughout the grades. Ongoing staff meetings, daily communication and providing teachers with the tools that allow success have made for a strong collaborative approach in McGregor.”

Administrative Effectiveness

Each district, without expectation, shared the importance of administrative support. Principals, superintendents, and school board members were identified as critical players in the success of PreK-3rd grade efforts. Participation in the Early Childhood Summit was cited as key to administrative support. Jan Reindl from Itasca's Invest Early shared the importance of the Summit for continued support for both administration and board members, with “the vision for PreK-3rd grade starting as regional and moving to local.”

Teacher Effectiveness

One of the Framework strategies is “Work as a Team.” This strategy is supported through the grant activities at each of the sites. Although operationalized differently in each district, it was clear that there is an appreciation for the collaborative process in place. Most districts reported PLC engagement as key to supporting teacher effectiveness. Opportunities to meet and discuss curriculum, standards, assessment, and developmental expectations was vital. Vertical and horizontal observations were also supported through the PreK-3rd grade initiative. Mary Mattson from Ely shared, “Teachers stay in communication with each other, they share curriculum information, parent communications strategies, support new staff, and set future goals. The Northland Foundation grant brought us together.”

Instructional tools

According to Dr. Kauerz, instructional tools that are balanced, intentional, and relevant, as well as assessment strategies that support the understanding of students’ progress are key to best practice. School districts engaged in the PreK-3rd grade initiative reported positive change in terms of curricular alignment and effective assessment strategies. The category “cross-sector work” was cited as critical for developing an understanding of effective instructional tools. “Administrative support” was cited as essential for implementation. Lori Fichtner shared that through the Hermantown/Proctor PLC, teachers have created assessment tools that are used to inform instruction. She also shared that a tool was created allowing the literacy coach to have a clear feedback loop with the early childhood special education teachers. Both strategies were affected by “cross-sector work” and “administrative support”.

Learning Environments

Effective learning environments for children PreK-3rd grade need to be culturally inclusive, promote relationships, and support diverse learners (Kauerz, 2013). “Cross-grade level observations” and Northland Foundation training opportunities were cited as key to the continuous care and attention in creating effective learning environments. Julie Duesler shared that the Moose Lake School District benefits from the Northland Foundation trainings in support of developing effective learning environments. She said, “The Northland Foundation has a strong presence in Greater Minnesota. Their trainings are great. They always let us know when criteria are changing and support with money for the transitions we need.”

Data-Driven Improvements

Both “child-based” and “school/program-based” data are cited as instrumental to the Framework. Much attention is paid to data-informed improvements in each of the twelve districts. Examples shared include use of standardized test results to inform curriculum changes

that Title I supports as a result of assessment findings and use of parent surveys to ascertain community needs. A few of the districts are engaged in the Q Comp process so data collection and analysis are inherent in the district's efforts. PLCs (often supported by the PreK-3rd grade grant) were reported to be an instrumental venue for discussions related to Q Comp data collection, analysis, and discussion. Molly Johnson from Proctor said that through the Q Comp process they have "useable data" to modify instruction and to strengthen their Parent Aware practices. Additionally, Itasca's Invest Early and the Cloquet School District, as part of the Carlton County Jump Start 4 Kindergarten, are pioneering the implementation of early childhood program improvement systems through data collection with support of other funding sources. This data has been extremely helpful in planning meetings for PreK-3rd grade.

Family Engagement

"Employing strategies for engaging families" (Kauerz, 2013) was at the forefront of all of the school districts' efforts. Family engagement efforts ranged from home visiting in Ely and Hermantown to a community holiday party in Deer River. Each and every district was keenly aware of the critical partnership between school and home. Northland Foundation funding was cited consistently as instrumental in providing financial support to bring children, families, and school together in communities across the region. Districts involved in the Northland Foundation PreK-3rd grade initiative coupled family engagement efforts with school readiness and/or developmental awareness opportunities. Lori Cawcutt shared that the focus of the Barnum PreK-3rd grade efforts are on developing relationships with families by offering family nights designed to support literacy and math awareness. The literacy event was held earlier in the year with great success, and the math event is scheduled for later this spring.

Community Pathways

Establishing policies and practices that focus on ensuring a stable pathway to high-quality learning is at the core of PreK-3rd grade program success. Every district engaged in the Northland Foundation's PreK-3rd grade initiative supports efforts designed to ensure stable pathways for all children. Efforts vary from partnering with community childcare programs to creating informational tools for community outreach (Lake Superior School District's Toolbox). The Cloquet PreK-3rd grade initiative thoughtfully engages county resources for added outreach. The collaboration between the Cloquet School District and Carlton County, called the Child Network, has inspired brochures and a checklist, as well as the development of a program called Jump Start 4 Kindergarten, which aligns assessment efforts for all children in the county (and school districts).



Summary of the Activities for 2014-2015

Itasca Invest Early (Grand Rapids, Deer River, Nashwauk-Keewatin, and the Greenway-Coleraine School Districts)

Financial support was used to develop and sustain a PreK-3rd grade PLC. Northland Foundation funding supported meeting time and substitute teachers.

Activity:

1. Each PLC met per school district schedule. Quarterly meetings were held with the larger group (a 4 district PLC)
2. Created a written plan with assigned roles and responsibilities for each of the districts. (This step was reported to have made a positive impact.)
3. Established a process to support teachers who wanted to participate in vertical classroom observations
4. Shared training information
5. Discussed the alignment of PreK-3rd grade curriculum
6. Created family engagement events for each of the districts (Greenway-Coleraine had a very successful Holiday party)

Mesabi East School District

Mesabi East's PreK-3rd grade efforts focused on professional development.

Activity:

1. Training (literacy and math skill development)
2. Data (student) inform professional development initiatives
3. Standards mapping
4. Vertical curriculum alignment (PreK-K-1) (2-3) (4-6)
5. Developed curriculum binders (PreK-K-1) (2-3) (4-6)

Proctor and Hermantown School Districts

Through the existing PreK-3rd grade PLC 35 teachers participated in a "teacher swap" which focused on easing transition from PreK to Kindergarten.

Activity:

1. Developed an understanding of grade level expectations
2. Developed professional relationships (across grade levels)
3. Supported the overarching PreK-3rd grade effort for Proctor and Hermantown
4. Supported the integration of PreK-3rd grade services between Proctor and Hermantown

Lake Superior School District

Northland Foundation funding supported a PreK-3rd grade PLC.

Activity:

1. Designed and implemented Orton Gillingham strategies to support Kindergarten transition
2. Purchased materials needed to implement the Gillingham curriculum
3. Strengthened communications between and among grade levels
4. Developed and distributed the “Toolbox for Success” a document designed for parents which addresses Kindergarten readiness as well as PreK-3rd grade academic expectations

Esko School District

Northland Foundation Funding supported a PreK-3rd grade advisory committee. The committee focused on easing Kindergarten transition.

Activity:

1. Sponsored Family BBQ Night for incoming Kindergarten children and families
2. Sent personal invitations to Kinder-Camp and Beyond (K-1st grade)
3. Sponsored Get Ready for Kindergarten Night
4. Engaged in cross-grade-level observations

Cloquet School District

Pre-K-3rd grade funding supported the continued work of an Administrative Team as well as promoted cross-sector and cross-grade working relationships.

Activity:

1. Supported cross-sector and cross-grade understanding with “learning walks”
2. Supported assessment alignment for Jumpstart for Kindergarten
3. Sponsored Kindergarten Transition Night

McGregor School District

Grant funding supported the continued work of the PreK– 6th grade transition team as they focused on reading fluency.

Activity:

1. Supported Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST) curriculum training
2. Supported implementation of the FAST curriculum
3. Supported data collection and analysis related to the FAST curriculum (which focuses on reading fluency school-wide)

Barnum School District

In an effort to improve parent involvement, the Barnum PreK-K PLC used Northland Foundation funds to sponsor community literacy and math nights.

Activity:

1. Sponsored two family nights. One held in the fall, focused on literacy (120 people attended) and one held in spring 2015 focused on math
2. Supported PreK-K teacher collaboration

St. Louis County School District

St. Louis County Schools are engaged in the S.M.A.R.T. program and requested funding to continue supporting that effort for PreK– 6th grade.

Activity:

1. Supported S.M.A.R.T. curriculum training for teachers
2. Supported S.M.A.R.T. curriculum trained teachers to create S.M.A.R.T. spaces in their classrooms

Moose Lake School District

The Moose Lake Pre-K-3rd grade team used grant funding to continue work started by the PLC.

Activity:

1. Met monthly to discuss best practice and grade level curriculum
2. Aligned handwriting, math, literacy, and science standards
3. Developed and sponsored Kindergarten Transition Night for PreK students in the community
4. Sponsored Kindercamp, which is being planned for summer 2015

Ely School District

In an effort to address the achievement gap, the focus of the PreK-3rd grade initiative was to develop professional relationships and partnerships with community early childhood programs and services (non-school district).

Activity:

1. Provided a stipend for teachers from AEOA Head Start and Happy Days Preschool to attend district Q Comp meetings
2. Developed a home-based reading program for PreK-1
3. Conducted an online parent survey; results suggested that the reading program was successful in terms of increased reading time at home as well as more parent participation.

Conclusion

The Early Childhood Summit was cited as key to the success of each and every PreK-3rd grade effort. The grant funding provided the catalyst to help school districts move to action. Interview data made clear that there was a great deal of impact from learning about the comprehensive Framework presented by Kauerz, having an opportunity for educational teams to come together to learn and vision, and being supported to operationalize district-specific initiatives. Examples of activities included: regular meetings to foster cross-sector and cross-grade understanding training, PreK-3rd grade curriculum planning, and family engagement strategies.

The Framework provided a structure for school districts to use as they assessed current practices, explored options, and aligned new efforts. The Ely PreK-3rd grade Transition Team saw the opportunity to work with the Framework as a process that supported “Planting a seed by sharing ideas. Engaging both school district personnel and community partners was integral to successful implementation.”

Building community to engage in the support of PreK-3rd grade children was spoken of with passion across all districts. The Cloquet PreK-3rd grade leadership team addressed this by saying, “The Summits offer access to cutting-edge information. The Northland Foundation’s leadership promotes that PreK-3rd grade matters, which has helped us gain buy-in from an array of partners.”

Through the Early Childhood Summits, the Northland Foundation consistently and professionally convenes stakeholders to support the transition of children from home to school and through the early grades. The focus on PreK-3rd grade at the Early Childhood Summits have been described as providing consistent support and guidance for schools and community, aligning efforts to support Minnesota Department of Education recommendations, and building momentum around PreK-3rd grade best practices.

A Final Word

Thank you to the leaders in the PreK-3rd grade movement who made time in their schedules to share the stories of their districts and communities. Each interview was engaging and warm, and each district dedicated and focused. The children who live in northeastern Minnesota are in good hands.

Source

Kauerz, K. & Coffman, J. (2013) *Framework for Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Pre/k-3rd Grade Approaches*. Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington.

About the Author

Molly Harney is an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth. She has received a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and Parent Education, a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Special Education and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Early Childhood Studies and Cognitive Development. Her teaching focus is early brain development, social/emotional development, and early childhood special education. Her past experiences include: early childhood education teacher, parent educator, early childhood special education teacher, and child care center director. She has worked in a teen parent program, Head Start Programs, corporate child care, and public school programs. Molly's research in the areas of early brain development and the impact of quality child care has been presented both nationally and internationally.

About the Northland Foundation

Since 1986, the Northland Foundation has served as a resource for people, businesses, and communities working toward prosperity through economic and social justice in the northeastern Minnesota counties of Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis Counties. The Foundation's Grant Program directs resources to nonprofits addressing children and youth, strengthening families, poverty alleviation/self-reliance, and programming to help older adults remain vital and independent. The Business Finance Program provides loans to small businesses to help grow a sustainable economy. The KIDS PLUS Program utilizes an array of initiatives to improve the well-being of children and youth. Northland Assisted Living is a mission-driven social enterprise of the Foundation, providing high-quality assisted living to older adults in underserved rural communities. Visit www.northlandfdn.org for more information.

