

New approach to preparing teachers can close student achievement gap

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Public schools are increasingly moving toward a system known as the PreK-3rd approach, in which pre-kindergartens, full-day kindergartens, and primary grades are organized as a coordinated system of education. According to a Penn State researcher, the approach is lauded as a way to help solve the problem of the achievement gap.

“The PreK-3rd vision is new and emerging and is a reality in many districts,” said James E. Johnson, professor of early childhood education, “and hopefully it can become more common in our colleges' and universities' teacher education programs -- in Pennsylvania and nationwide -- to further its successful implementation. That the achievement gap can be thereby reduced is a prayer behind the vision.”

The PreK-3rd approach narrows the [achievement gap](#), said Johnson, “by better connecting early and elementary education through alignment of curriculum and instruction and assessment, school goals and standards from PreK to 3rd.”

Johnson and his colleagues recently completed an investigation of 42 early childhood education [teacher education](#) (ECETE) programs housed in major research universities within 38 states that support publicly funded prekindergarten. The report was funded by the Foundation for Child Development.

The team found that only about half of the ECETE programs reported impacts of the PreK and the PreK-3rd movements on changes within

their programs over a three-year period. But when asked how new teachers were being prepared to work in PreK-3rd settings, all programs gave legitimate responses, such as offering courses in teamwork and coordination, attempting to align programs with national K-12 teacher [education](#) standards, and placing trainees in diverse settings.

According to Johnson, the ECETE programs generally possessed high levels of teacher and student engagement, collaboration across departments and colleges within the university, and strong PreK or [early childhood](#) activity at the state level. Moreover, the ECETE programs demonstrated their abilities to respond dynamically and adaptively to significant challenges.

“We learned that collaboration within universities, as well as between universities and public schools and community programs, is very important in helping ECETE programs do the job of preparing teachers for the continuum of early learning from birth to fourth grade,” said Johnson. “Our findings demonstrated the many challenges ECETE faculties face as well as their dedication to meeting and exceeding national and state standards.”

While Johnson believes that the child development perspective is an important component of the PreK-3rd initiative, he advises that having this perspective does not mean having “a simple normative view.”

“Teachers from PreK to third grade must be well trained to work with children's developments in mind,” he said. “Pluralizing ‘child development’ is to stress the great variation in each child's pathway of learning and growth influenced by linguistic and ethnic background factors, social class and poverty, and ability-disability variations, as well as English language learning status and other influences.”

“Teachers must now, as never before, be ready to teach to diversity, and

to teach all children," Johnson said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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