

*Birth to Grade Three Alignment Grant
Lowell Public Schools*

External Evaluation Report

June, 2015



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Summary

The Lowell Birth to Grade 3 Alignment project is a year and half long project intended to develop practice and policy changes aimed at improving the quality of learning opportunities for Lowell's children as they move from birth to their early years in elementary school. The overarching goal of the project is to create a birth to grade 3 "culture" or continuum of care that builds "collaborative, cross organizational relationships and supports the conditions necessary to shift the way the system approaches curricula and assessment alignment, educator capacity and program quality, and data use with the ultimate goal of harnessing widespread support for a fully aligned system." This current project is a funding extension of a previous 1.5 year Alignment Grant which laid the groundwork for much of the work that has transpired in the current project. This project evaluation covers a period of July 2014 through June 2015. The project did not bring on an external evaluator until mid-Summer 2014 (practically, evaluation work started in Fall 2014) and due to a funding cut has suspended evaluation activities effective June 2014 (six months before project funding ends).

Evaluation activities for this one year period commenced with the external evaluators working with key project staff – Lowell Public Schools Early Childhood Programs staff and Early Childhood Associates, the project's key consultant – to develop a set of evaluative indicators based on the *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches* (Kauerz, 2013). These indicators mapped to six of the eight "categories of effort" identified in the Kauerz framework. Associated with each of the six indicators (see the Appendix and the Findings chapter for these indicators) were the various project activities identified by the project as composing the coming year's work.

This report details the evaluators' findings related to the project's six indicators. Data for these findings comes from the evaluators attending monthly Alignment Team meetings, discussions with key project staff, surveys and interviews of staff and project participants, and observations at project events and activities. Also considered are the project's own self-reports to the Massachusetts EEC (a condition of project funding). All of this data paints a comprehensive picture of project work during the year.

Overall, the evaluators find that the 2014 – 2015 Lowell Birth to Grade 3 Alignment project has worked valiantly to pull together a broad and diverse constituency of stakeholders to perform beneficial work for Lowell's youngest citizens. There is no denying that this is difficult work akin to the proverbial "herding of cats". In this case, the cats are all positively disposed to working together and very clearly are interested in the over-arching project goal, but getting sufficient time and attention from all of these stakeholders has proven quite challenging. The project staff, and the lead consultant in particular, have worked consistently to build buy-in and to energize stakeholders to action, but after a year it seems that the project is still stronger in its work that relates to "awareness building" than it is in the development of actually implemented strategies for alignment. To this point, the evaluators note that the "Alignment Team" which meets monthly in both an issue-working-group format as well as a smaller project management format is one of the project's clearest accomplishments. This group continues to wrestle with developing – and in particular, implementing – action plans started during the project's keynote Fall 2014 Day of Action. Feedback from the various members of this Alignment Team (via evaluator interviews and monthly observation) indicate that most team members remain positive and committed to working together. The vast majority of Alignment Team members are optimistic that the efforts to align resources for children birth to grade 3 will continue after the funding period concludes.

One of the major outcomes from the Alignment Team's work and the various activities (e.g., surveys, data collection/modeling, data sharing, etc.) conducted by project staff has been the hiring of two "coaches" who created interest-based "communities of practice" in several early childhood centers and schools. These coaches seem to have been able to gain traction on actually working with teachers and parents around a variety of issues supportive of alignment. Equally important, it seems that having coaches actually on the ground in facilities has given the project's work the definition and visibility necessary to move from abstract to concrete action. Unfortunately, the coaching work will be discontinued due to lack of project funding effective June 2015.

Other significant project activities include much work with the CLASS observation tool – developing awareness of the tool, training staff to use the tool, and using the tool in observations/ratings of 47 teachers – and several professional development events. One of these was attendance at a state-wide early childhood alignment conference (organized by Early Childhood Associates). Another was the creating of a family engagement course that brought together 70 administrators and staff from programs across Lowell. In nearly every case, these activities were positively received by participants who credited these activities with building their awareness of and excitement for further alignment work.

A significant challenge for the project has been securing participation of administrators and teachers within Lowell elementary schools. While administrators from these K-3 schools have participated in project work and meetings, it has been made very clear to the project that there are "too many things on schools' plates" for there to be much attention given to the activities that this project has promoted. This seems to have been particularly the case in regards to work with data and assessment. Lowell schools (as are schools across the Commonwealth) are engaged in the implementation stages of a new teacher evaluation system, and this seems to have absorbed nearly all of the bandwidth available within the public schools for consideration of "new" assessments of pedagogy and practice (two big components of the data tools promoted by the project). By no means is it the case that the public system is opposed to working with the project, but rather just that there has not been time to truly engage these systems in project work this year. Nevertheless, it is clear that "alignment" cannot progress without the engagement of the K-3 component of the birth to grade 3 spectrum. This is a significant challenge for the project.

The evaluators recommend that as the project enters its last six months of work that it focus its efforts on securing firm commitments from programs and projects – with particular emphasis on public schools – to bring project work before administrators, teachers, and parents. Courses like the family engagement-focused "Beyond the Bake sale" and working groups (communities of practice) such as those facilitated by the coaches seem to be very practical applications of project work that result in delivered services. Some degree of discussion and planning by the Alignment Team remains important, but at this point with only six months of project remaining, the evaluators feel that it would be wise to spend more time delivering services than discussing the delivery of services. Then, perhaps toward the end of the project (e.g., late Fall 2015) the project could again convene the Leadership Group and spend the day reviewing and reflecting upon the services actually delivered with a goal of securing commitments for continuing the most valuable of these services as a framework for creating alignment. It is doubtful that the extraordinarily complex work of creating birth to grade 3 alignment will be completed by December 2015, but perhaps there will be enough of a practical, demonstrable, framework for alignment activities visible for boot-strapping further alignment efforts after the end of the grant.

Findings -- July 2014 to June 2015 Activities

Performance by Indicator

Evaluation activities for Lowell's Birth to Grade 3 Alignment project commenced with the external evaluators working with key project staff – Lowell Public Schools Early Childhood Programs staff and Early Childhood Associates, the project's key consultant – to develop a set of evaluative indicators based on the *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches* (Kauerz, 2013). The indicators developed by the project (see the Appendix of this report for the full set of project-developed indicators) mapped to six of the eight “categories of effort” identified in the Kauerz framework. Associated with each of the six indicators were the various project activities identified by the project as composing the coming year's work.

In each of the following six sections of this chapter (one for each category of effort indicator), the indicator is shown at the top of the section in a text-box and is followed by a statement of the planned (as of Fall 2014) project activities identified by the project as relating to that category of effort. The evaluators' findings related to that indicator are then offered.

Cross-Sector Work

- There is community-wide awareness and support of the Birth to G3 vision and plan.
- A cross-sector decision-making entity exists and has credibility and influence
- Cross-sector mechanisms are inclusive, comprehensive and informed by population-specific information

The project identified four action items that it would focus on in relation to fulfilling its indicator for Cross-Sector Work. These are:

- Hold School Readiness Summit (October, 2014)
- Create Alignment team
- Hold regular monthly Alignment team meetings
- Continue to revise and update Birth to Grade 3 Alignment strategic plan

The evaluators find that the project worked on all four of these items during the July 2014 – June 2015 project year. The bulk of the work in this area centered around the project's work to develop, hold, and sustain the momentum from its October 2014 “Day of Action” school readiness summit. The summit, held on October 3, 2014, was attended by over 70 individuals representing schools and agencies throughout the City of Lowell. Participant reaction was quite positive. For example:

- *I thought the dialog was rich and demonstrated a great understand of the city, the knowledge gaps, and what is needed to both meet the cities needs and to gather more information to fill in the knowledge gap.*
- *It was more beneficial than I could have imagined.*

- *I thought it was a remarkable day with lots of energy, great ideas, and a strong sense of community. I feel very fortunate to have been a part of this experience and hopefully was able to contribute my own special skills and ideas.*

The work of the summit was organized into five “Action Groups”. These were:

- Ready Schools and Educators: Accessible Early Education and Care
- Ready Schools and Educators: High Quality Early Education and Care
- Ready Families: Parent Education/Engagement/Support
- Ready City: Community Support for Early Childhood
- Ready Systems: Health and Wellness

Each working group spent the summit day identifying issues, priorities, and ultimately action plans and benchmarks. This clearly was challenging work. Most participants surveyed felt that the day was well organized and that if nothing else the day set the stage for productive future work. For example:

- *It was well organized and a lot of great goals were discussed. I hope that the momentum continues and that action steps will be taken in the near future.*

Indeed, the October Day of Readiness Summit proceeded to frame the project’s core work throughout the remainder of the time covered by this evaluation report. The project’s “Alignment Team” – a subset of the larger group of individuals and organizations that came together at the October Summit – continued to work the issues that grew out of the Summit throughout the fall of 2014 into the spring of 2015. From November 2014 through June 2015, the project essentially continued the Summit meeting format by convening a group of community early childhood and school stakeholders for a monthly half-day meeting (to essentially continue the October discussions). This meeting was followed by meeting of the smaller Alignment Team subset of individuals who then worked to operationalize within the context of the project’s work the various things discussed in the morning meeting. While this was not the entirety of the project’s work for the year, the issues growing out of the October Summit resonated throughout the rest of the evaluators’ time with the project.

One of the project’s identified action items for this indicator was to “continue to revise and update the birth to grade 3 alignment strategic plan”. Here, the evaluators note that discussion of strategic planning was consistent and regular throughout the project year but ultimately not a fruitful project deliverable. In interviews with Alignment Team members (in May, 2015), the evaluators found that only a few team members could readily identify any aspect of the project’s work that related to a strategic plan. Most team members professed no recollection at all of what “strategic planning” meant to the project. As one member noted:

- *Our school readiness strategic plan has been confused somewhat with a plan made years ago. [Early Childhood Associates] has tried to bring us to change the school readiness plans -- to make them mesh. It’s confusing.*

The evaluators find that discussion of “strategic planning” was indeed confused within the project. It seldom seemed clear as to whether the Alignment Team was supposed to be creating its own plan for alignment or if it was to “advise” on a city-wide early childhood plan. The precise mechanisms for providing this advice, as well as the intended format for any sort of plan (strategic, city-wide, or alignment), seemed unclear. In the end (as of June 2015), there does not seem to be any revised strategic plan nor any final “alignment plan” produced by the project.

In terms of the three components of the project's indicator (see the text box, above) for Cross-Sector work, the evaluators find that the October Summit and ongoing related work definitely fulfill the first and third components – specifically the building of community awareness and inclusive cross-sector mechanisms. The sheer fact that the Alignment Team exists is testament to the development of cross-sector mechanisms. Many of the project activities discussed later in this report are things which grew out of these cross-sector discussions.

Where the project may fall short of the Cross-Sector Work indicator is in its second component – “A cross-sector decision-making entity exists and has credibility and influence.” The evaluators find that Alignment Team's decision making, credibility and influence was compromised at times by their apparent loss of focus or commitment to well thought out activities. Planned, key activities (a leadership institute, data days, family engagement survey) were cancelled for one legitimate reason or another but then seemingly fell of the table not to be rescheduled. Several participants referred to the need for focus and maintaining momentum:

- *It takes time for things to get up and running... we wish we had more time and funding... we hope the momentum can continue. It took us a while to get going and now we're getting near the end. How can we get it to the next level? It was a big initiative... birth through grade three. It takes time to build relationships... we thought things would happen quicker. I wish the principals were present more and more a part of the initiative. Their voice was missed. We understand they're very busy.*
- *I think it's going to take years to get key players to buy in to what we want to do.*

Another issue related to cross-sector work is the difficulty that the project encountered bringing Lowell's principals, grade 1-3 teachers, and parents more thoroughly into the project's work. In interviews with the evaluators, several alignment team members made comments such as the following:

- *[There is] No participation in CLASS by my educators...My educators are not participating in many of the grant's initiatives. This is my frustration.*
- *Having teachers and principals involved has been an issue. Currently the LPS representation has been Pat and Terry. Could the focus be on the schools and have all meetings at the schools? Working with one school in an intentional way might bring the principals and teachers to the table. We've also struggled with getting parents to come to us. We've begun thinking about going to the parents.*

Finally, it is worth noting that much of the Alignment Team's work occurred during a historically bad winter that resulted in the need to reschedule many activities between December and March. Despite the unwieldy nature of the collaborative group and the shortness of time, the project did make progress in its cross-sector work. Much of this is to the credit of the Early Childhood Associates staff that led project meetings and served as a strong and always-ready resource to the Alignment Team members.

In general, and in spite of these difficulties, the evaluators find there has nevertheless been much accomplished related to the initiative's Cross Sector Work indicator. Overall, the Alignment Team's efforts have resulted in considerable bridge building amongst those entities responsible for the care and nurturance of Lowell's youngest children. The Alignment Team's activities have contributed to a community-wide awareness of the importance of aligning resources birth to grade 3. The Alignment Team has provided support to this effort and proved to be a credible and influential alliance.

Administrator Effectiveness

- Administrators are involved in the Birth to G3 reforms and are informed by formative feedback from the project.
- Teachers and families understand the impact of administrators on programs and instruction.
- Partnerships exist across the City to gather formative input on how improve administrator and program effectiveness.

In its indicators, the primary activity identified by the project in relation to this indicator was an anticipated February 2015 “Leadership Institute”. Unfortunately, a variety of factors – not the least of which was a school schedule complicated by repeated weather-related school closings during the winter of 2014/15 – conspired to prevent the project from holding this activity. Ultimately, the project sent a team to participate at the state-wide spring 2015 EEC Birth to Grade 3 Leadership Institute. While this represented a different orientation of effort than coordinating and hosting a Lowell Leadership Institute (as the project originally intended), the state-wide conference allowed Lowell participants to learn about leadership initiatives elsewhere in the state and to meet with noted experts in birth to grade 3 leadership alignment. It is anticipated that the fruits of these efforts will develop in the last six months of the project.

Despite not being able to hold a Lowell Leadership Institute, the project did attempt to address the role of school and program administrators (i.e., “leaders”) in birth to grade 3 alignment. Most significantly, the project attempted several activities intended to build school administrator interest and participation in birth to grade 3 alignment. One of these activities was a CLASS information session which was attended by 20 school/program administrators. The point of this session was to build awareness of the CLASS framework and how it could inform their existing evaluation efforts.

The evaluators’ survey of attendees at this January 9, 2015 session indicates that participants were thankful for the opportunity to learn about CLASS and in particular the various dimensions it covered. As several participants noted:

- *[I] Was able to walk away with an overview of the classroom assessment scoring system and dimensions herein*
- *The complexity of the evaluation tool makes sense and is very comprehensive. The problem is the overlap with the current teacher evaluation process established by DESE.*
- *I think it is great, we are already doing a lot with teacher-student interaction but this will help strengthen it. I think it will help teachers to feel like it is important. They put a lot more pressure on curriculum and I would like them to know how crucial quality teacher-student interaction is.*

The outcomes from this particular session were unclear at mid-year. In reflecting upon what “next steps” would be from this session, participants noted:

- *Unsure how we will use it at this time.*
- *Not sure if we are fully working with this tool. I have to engage the K team in order to continue this process.*

- *I am not really sure, with anything that is new there will be a learning curve, but I am confident that educators will be able to understand and implement the tool with proper training and support.*
- *I would like to know how to get started and how to educate the teachers on it so they are more aware of what is expected for to meet the standards of good quality teacher interaction.*

In terms of overall progress in the Administrator Effectiveness indicator, the evaluators find that the project's efforts to impact or increase administrator effectiveness were compromised by a number of factors. While some administrators of the non-public schools and agencies demonstrated a commitment and valuing of the project's efforts via their degree of participation, Lowell Public Schools' central administration did not always appear to prioritize the project's efforts. This lack of prioritization resulted in a relative lack of participation in the project's activities by school administrators. The evaluators understand that the plethora of state and local initiatives result in administrators having to prioritize their finite time and energy. Additionally, the project's attempt to integrate and benefit from the implementation of CLASS was not embraced by K-12 school administrators due likely to the perceived duplicitous nature, and implementation demands of the DESE's Educator Evaluation Framework initiative.

In response to the need to more fully engage with administrators, the project developed more outreach around CLASS. The spring of 2015 saw the project conducting more CLASS observations (i.e., administration of the tool) and a meeting was held on June 24, 2015 to share this data with the Alignment Team and to discuss next steps. Further discussion of CLASS is found below in relation to the Teacher Effectiveness indicator.

Teacher Effectiveness

- Project professional development results in improved use of data by programs as evidenced by improved goal-setting by practitioners.

The project identified two action items that it would focus on in relation to fulfilling its indicator for work in the area of Teacher Effectiveness. These are:

- Trainings in the use of the CLASS assessment tool
- Use of CLASS in project school and program sites.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is an observational instrument developed at the University of Virginia's Curry School Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning to assess classroom quality in PK-12 classrooms. CLASS describes multiple dimensions of teaching that are linked to student achievement and development. According to research, children in classrooms with higher CLASS ratings realize greater gains in achievement and social skill development. As implemented, CLASS includes four cycles of 15-minute observations of teachers and students by a certified CLASS observer. The alignment committee decided to hold an informational session for administrators on January 9, 2015 with plans to offer a similar session for teachers subsequently. The January 9 session was designed (by the Alignment Team) to be a lead-in to a session for classroom teachers and providers. The intent was to increase the number of leaders who perceive value in the use

of CLASS. The Alignment Team’s thinking was that, prior to getting teacher buy-in, it was essential to have the teachers’ administrators perceiving value in CLASS.

Throughout its July 2014 – June 2015 project year, the project consistently worked with the CLASS observation tool. This work included training school/program staff in the use of CLASS. Five certified assessors were used, all completing three days of training and passing a rigorous testing phase to 80 percent reliability. By the end of this funding cycle, the alignment team has gathered CLASS observation data on 47 classrooms/FCCs (family child-care centers) representing a sample of public and private programs and family child care systems that serve toddlers, Pre-K and/or K-3 programs. According to Alignment Team members debriefings were conducted with each of the teachers who were observed.

Data from the CLASS assessments were shared with the alignment team at its June 24, 2015 meeting. The aggregation of the CLASS data positions the project to accomplish one of its aims – to use of the CLASS assessment tool to drive the development and implementation of action plans. This effort has the potential to bring awareness of curriculum, standards, and assessment to settings such as family child care and center based child care. At its June 24 meeting the alignment team discussed bringing all of the teachers who had been observed together (fall, 2015) to share the collective results and data trends. The project’s work in using CLASS to measure interaction across the entire delivery system is the first of its kind and is of national interest. To date CLASS has only been used in one state (CA) with family child care providers.

Through all of these activities, the evaluators find that the project met its Teacher Effectiveness indicator.

Instructional Tools

- Standards, curriculum and assessment are focused on Birth to G3 goals and principles.
- Standards, curriculum and assessment is aligned
- Teachers, families and administrators understand the value added by aligned instructional tools.
- Aligned tools are implemented across project classrooms.

In December 2014, the primary activity identified by the project in relation to this indicator was the operation of communities of practice which focused on standards-driven instruction. In this work, one of the two project “coaches” (see the Engaged Families discussion below for additional information on the coaches) focused her work on instructional coaching and this work definitely addressed issues of curriculum, learning standards and assessment. In work with four educators in two different non-public programs, this coach worked with a teacher focusing on vocabulary acquisition and making use of books. The coach reported that several teachers in their child care settings asked for assistance in building science curriculum activities. The coach focused on instructional methods reported that she had about 14 meetings with the teachers in the two programs she covered. Particular topics covered in these meetings included reading, STEM, vocabulary and the development of assessment strategies. In fact, both coaches have reported working with home-based providers who want assistance in working with curriculum standards and lesson planning. When the coaches were asked where they get their resources they replied EEC’s infant and toddler guidelines and pre-school standards. For Kindergarten resources they refer to DESE and Common Core materials.

The evaluators note that Lowell's two elementary schools informed the project that they would not be using the instructional coaching services of the project. This was due to the fact that the principals at these schools felt that there was already "too much" on their teachers' plates to add additional work with instructional coaches from outside the school. This is why for the most part the instructional coaching project work in this indicator was almost entirely focused on non-public programs. It's important to note that the limited amount of time that the coaches were employed by the project (15 to 18 hours a week) put constraints on the coaches' ability to build the trust necessary for instructional coaching to successfully occur. A further demand on the coaches' time related to their other duties facilitating the communities of practice for parents and educators.

The evaluators note that since this is a "birth to grade 3 alignment" project, engagement with the public school (i.e., kindergarten through grade 3) partners is critical for successful engagement with all aspects of project work. With curriculum standards and assessment figuring prominently in the K-3 classroom, it is clear that in this Instructional Tools indicator, buy-in by the public school partners is especially critical. This buy-in has been challenging to the project since its early months. As was noted in the "Challenges" section of its October 2014 quarterly report to EEC, a major challenge was:

Maintaining School Principal involvement in the Alignment meetings. *We were disappointed in the number of school principals who turned out for the Readiness Summit. We plan to meet with each one of the Alignment Team principals individually to ensure that the work we are doing continues to align with their interests and needs. Last year we had a relatively high level of school leadership involvement in our work; we think that with the beginning of the school year finally behind us that their involvement will increase. Parent engagement is a topic that is of high interest to the school leadership so hopefully that will be the topic that brings them to the Alignment Table consistently. As Strategies for Children reminded us, Lowell has the support of the School Superintendent and that involvement alone can move not only the schools but the entire City in such important and meaningful ways.*

Nevertheless, it was still noted in the January 2015 (the next quarter after the one reported in October 2014) report:

Gaining Administrative Buy is Critical to Successful Implementation. *Administrators set the tone and agenda for any new initiative. Our focus this year on targeting a significant portion of our work with administrators -whether it is discussing high quality interactions and their impact on effective instruction and child outcomes or on ensuring that our leaders have a solid grounding in early childhood development and knowledge of research based practices via the Leadership Institute ensures that we have the right people at the helm to push the birth to 3rd grade agenda forward.*

And still in the next (April 2015) report it was noted that a significant challenge was:

Keeping the principals of the targeted neighborhoods invested in the work. There are so many competing agendas on their time. Consequently attendance at meetings is still erratic. We are hoping that the additional opportunities for leaders to be involved in the planned Administrator activities will push the needle toward higher involvement. We plan to interview each administrator to get a better understanding of what it will take to increase their engagement in the work.

Clearly, in its own assessment of its work, the project has identified that administrator engagement is an ongoing challenge. The evaluators observed the project struggling with the challenge of engaging

public-school programs throughout the project year. While the project tried a number of approaches to improving this level of engagement, this remains a challenge at the close of the July 2014 – June 2015 year. The evaluators find that without more engagement from these key partners and the loss of the coaches, there will be little progress on the “Instructional Tools” indicator and in the project’s main goal of “alignment” overall.

Data-Driven Improvement

- Appropriate data is collected and is used to support instructional improvement.
- Data is used to differentiate supports to schools, teachers, and children.

The primary activity identified by the project in relation to this indicator was the coordination and delivery of “data days”. These events were anticipated to help participants – school and center administrators, staff, etc. – understand how data can help inform program operation and to drive the overall success of creating an aligned birth to grade 3 continuum of curricula.

In the Alignment Team’s discussion of how to engage programs in the use of data – a discussion which occurred frequently throughout the spring of 2015 – team members noted that there are a variety of assessment tools and data collections that are of relevance to birth to grade 3 programs, and that the project should do more to expose programs to the use of these tools and data. For example, in May 2015, the Alignment Team took up discussion of the *Teaching Strategies GOLD reports* that were intended to be the focus of the December 2014 data day. GOLD is designed to provide info to schools on incoming students and that might be a way to support the connection from the child care programs to the schools with the schools perceiving value in the relationship and data. While the project had originally intended to offer a four-hour training on GOLD (facilitated by Lowell Public Schools’ GOLD trainer) as the basis of the December 2014 “Data Day”, this session was eventually canceled. It is anticipated that GOLD training might still be offered before the end of the project in December 2015.

As noted above in discussion of the Teacher Effectiveness indicator, the project continues to push ahead on creating awareness of data through its ongoing work with CLASS. The results of 47 CLASS assessments were shared with the Alignment Team on June 24, 2015. The team intends to distribute the full report of CLASS scores and trends to all Alignment Team members. It is hoped that this will inspire a discussion of how the language of teacher-child interactions can form the basis for birth to grade 3 discussions on quality and how data can inform professional development.

The evaluators find that although the project’s plans to provide a quarterly series of professional development related to the collection and use of data did not occur, it is well positioned to make use of the spring, 2015 generated CLASS data. It appears that the CLASS data provides substantial basis for further discussion. Next steps, as discussed by the alignment team, include mixed groups of educators from family child care, center based programs, and public schools viewing the various types of student data for the purpose of learning more about their children, improving instruction and recruiting more teachers to make use of CLASS.

Engaged Families

- Families participating in the communities of practice perceive of themselves to be active partners in their children’s learning.
- Family engagement is a clear program priority for the Lowell Birth to G3 Project.

The project identified three action items that it would focus on in relation to fulfilling its indicator for work in the area of Engaged Families. These are:

- Conduct city-wide Family Engagement Survey
- Use data from survey to inform the focus on the Communities of Practice for Families
- Conduct Communities of Practice for families (co-facilitated by project staff and school social worker. Starting with the Lincoln school)

The project intended to use a family engagement survey to gather system wide data on providers’ and administrators’ perceptions of what constitutes effective family engagement. The goal was to create a city wide definition of parent engagement and then pilot engagement activities based on the definition. However, the alignment team did not conduct the survey believing that there were too many surveys being distributed and thus would not get a high rate of response.

To operate the communities of practice, the project – through its partner Early Childhood Associates – hired two “coaches” in January, 2015. These two individuals were hired to each work an average of 18 hours per week. The coaches’ assigned major areas of focus were instructional coaching and creating and facilitating professional learning communities (aka *communities of practice*).

Each of the coaches facilitated/led a professional learning community for educators using the text *Beyond the Bake Sale: Exploring New Strategies to Support Authentic Parent Engagement*. The 10-hour course was reviewed and approved for one CEU by the Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children. Each of the coaches had intended to convene a discussion group for parents titled *Strategies to Help your Child Succeed in School*. However, for a number of reasons the parent groups didn’t happen. Lack of transportation, disparate languages, and getting parents to commit to all four sessions were reported by the coaches as some of the barriers to the parent groups getting started.

In consultation with Linda Warren of Early Childhood Associates, the coaches re-designed their plan to provide parent training/support. The coaches/facilitators recognized an opportunity to provide their *Strategies to Help your Child Succeed in School* workshop series by integrating the content into an existing ESL class being conducted at Lowell’s Robinson School. The class was for parents of children enrolled in the school's pre-K class. The ESL class’s instructors helped facilitate the coaches’ content given the multitude of languages among the parents. The four one-hour sessions were held on April 15, May 6 and 20th, and June 3. The first session was about family engagement and its benefits. The coaches explained Joyce Epstein’s six principles and had the parents discuss the different ways they had been involved in their child’s learning. The second session was about school readiness. The group talked about things children needed to be ready for kindergarten, including executive functioning skills. The coaches talked about ways to help children at home. The third session was very hands-on and gave demonstrations of reading books, using the backpacks that are available to them through their class which contain activities to do at home, and math games the parents and children could play. The fourth session focused on parent-teacher communication and conferences.

Another contribution by the coaches in relation to family engagement was a day of workshops for 70 providers at Acre Family Childcare Center. The two project coaches were invited to be among the presenters and in the morning provided two, 45 minute family engagement sessions – one for Spanish speaking providers and one for English speakers. The focus of the morning sessions was Joyce Epstein’s types of family involvement. In the afternoon the coaches set-up 6 stations through which the participants rotated every 10 to 12 minutes. Topics included communication, learning at home, decision making, and learning in the community.

The evaluators note that due to a reduction in funding, the project will terminate its coaching work after the end of the 2014-2015 school year. This is unfortunate in that there will be no resumption of the coaching work once the new school year starts in September 2015. Nevertheless, during the relatively short period of time that the project did provide coaching it seems that good work occurred relative to family engagement as well as instructional practice. The evaluators find that the coaches made valuable contributions to the project in the limited weekly time they were on-board.

Recommendations for On-Going and Future Project Work

As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, the evaluators find that much of the work of Lowell's Birth to Grade 3 Alignment grant remains as of this writing (June 2015) a work in progress. With this in mind, the evaluators recommend that the project focus its attention on securing firm commitments from programs and projects for conducting very specific pieces of work. Good examples of this sort of specific focus are courses, teacher professional development, and administrator training. In order to ensure the delivery of services, the evaluators recommend that the project place particular emphasis on cultivating relationships with school and program administrators. A lack of involvement on the part of public-school administrators is particularly notable in the findings, and therefore the evaluators urge the project to improve this engagement.

In terms of improving engagement with public schools, it might be helpful if the project could find a specific school to adopt and then work with that school's principal to secure participation of the school's kindergarten to grade 3 teachers. If it were possible for a public school to become the resource hub and community bridge for a neighborhood's birth to pre-school programming, this would be a considerable step forward in establishing a continuum of education and care. Developing such a resource would of course require the full commitment and support from Lowell Public Schools. Securing demonstrations of this commitment should be a top priority for the project during its last six months of work. The involvement of more Lowell Public School administrators (district-level as well as building-based) in the project's work would be an excellent demonstration of commitment.

The evaluators believe that the project is prepared to take advantage of this year's CLASS observations and its generated data. At the end of a year's worth of work, the project now has 47 individuals and trained observers who have gained at a minimum an awareness of the importance of the sorts of teacher-student interactions documented by CLASS. It is important for the project to act up its plans to bring these pioneers together to advance their insight by using the data and to act as recruiters for the expansion of the use of CLASS. Additionally, the Alignment Team needs to establish a data bridge that provides the public schools with critical transitional information accumulated by the pre-school programs. The project could choose to identify itself as a national leader in the use of this sort of data given the fact that no state other than California has made use of the CLASS tool at the pre-school level.

While the evaluators find that the Alignment Team meetings have consistently been one of the most tangible aspects of project work, the evaluators would urge project leadership to move the project away from discussion and more toward delivery of service (such as professional development, coaching, courses, data bridging, etc.). If the project manages to be productive in delivering specific services from the summer into the fall, then it would be helpful to again re-convene the October 2014 Leadership Group to review the project's work and to secure commitments for the on-going delivery of such services once the alignment grant ends. At that point, it will be up to the individual partners throughout Lowell to continue service delivery that supports alignment. If the alignment grant has been able to show that there is value in specific actions, then there is higher likelihood that there will be interest among partners to continue these actions.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Evaluation Indicators

Evaluation Framework for Lowell Birth to Grade 3 Alignment Project

Category	Project Aims	Project Actions	Indicators of Success (drawn from the Kauerz Framework)
1 – Cross Sector Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and clarify the Alignment team • Incorporate new priorities and implementation plans outlined in the School Readiness Plan • Garner support for the Birth to G3 vision and strategic plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create Alignment team • Hold regular monthly Alignment team meetings • Continue to revise and update Birth to G3 Alignment strategic plan • Hold School Readiness Summit (October, 2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is community-wide awareness and support of the Birth to G3 vision and plan. • A cross-sector decision-making entity exists and has credibility and influence • Cross-sector mechanisms are inclusive, comprehensive and informed by population-specific information
2 – Administrator Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the number of partnerships between elementary schools and early learning programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold Leadership Institute – February, 2015 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators are involved in the Birth to G3 reforms and are informed by formative feedback from the project. • Teachers and families understand the impact of administrators on programs and instruction. • Partnerships exist across the City to gather formative input on how improve administrator and program effectiveness.
3 – Teacher Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a community of practice and coaching model to drive curriculum and assessment • Expand the use of the CLASS assessment tool to drive the development and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainings in the use of the CLASS assessment tool • Use of CLASS in project school and program sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project professional development results in improved use of data by programs as evidenced by improved goal-setting by practitioners.

Category	Project Aims	Project Actions	Indicators of Success (drawn from the Kauerz Framework)
	implementation of action plans		
4 – Instructional Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get the entire system to use learning standards as the foundation of curriculum and assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project operates communities of practice (practitioners from the target sites) which focus on standards-driven instruction (what are the standards, how do you integrate the standards into your practice, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards, curriculum and assessment are focused on Birth to G3 goals and principles. • Standards, curriculum and assessment is aligned • Teachers, families and administrators understand the value added by aligned instructional tools. • Aligned tools are implemented across project classrooms.
5 – Data Driven Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with school as well as center-based and family child care facilities to effectively use data to identify achievement gaps and to improve instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate, plan and conduct “Data Days” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate data is collected and is used to support instructional improvement. • Data is used to differentiate supports to schools, teachers, and children.
6 – Engaged Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage families around issues of Early Childhood to G3 alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct city-wide Family Engagement Survey • Use data from survey to inform the focus on the Communities of Practice for Families • Conduct Communities of Practice for families (co-facilitated by project staff and school social worker. Starting with the Lincoln school) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families participating in the communities of practice perceive of themselves to be active partners in their children’s learning. • Family engagement is a clear program priority for the Lowell Birth to G3 Project.

Appendix 2 – Data Collection Instruments

Day of Action Participant Survey

Dear Participant:

The following brief survey is part of Lowell's Early Childhood Advisory Council's effort to assess your experience at October 3rd Day of Action community summit. The data obtained from this survey will help the Council fine tune its efforts to provide follow-up services and support to the Action Groups as well as the broader Lowell early childhood community.

Data from this survey will be analyzed in aggregate. Individual responses will not be tracked, and will remain anonymous.

Thank you in advance for your time!

From the pull-down list, please select the item that best represents your role or the type of organization you represent.

Which action group did you work with?

In response to each of the questions below, please feel free to type in as much text as you would like. The box will automatically scroll and your text will automatically wrap in the box.

1. What was your primary reason for attending the Day of Action summit?

2. What were your expectations for the day, coming into the summit?

3. Were your expectations met? **Please explain your response:**

4. What do you hope to be the ultimate product of the work that you and your colleagues did at the Day of Action summit?

5. Do you have any other comments that you wish to share about the Day of Action summit or any other facet of your work with the Council?

When you are finished with this survey, click on this button to the survey for processing. Please click only once.

If you want to delete all of your answers and start again, click here

Last updated, October 1, 2014

CLASS Information Session -- Participant Survey

Dear Participant:

The following brief survey is part of Lowell's Birth to Grade Three Alignment Initiative's effort to assess your experience at the CLASS Observational Tool Information Session you recently attended. The data obtained from this survey will help the project fine tune its efforts to provide follow-up services to the Birth to Grade Three community in the use of CLASS and other tools.

Data from this survey will be analyzed in aggregate. Individual responses will not be tracked, and will remain anonymous.

Thank you in advance for your time!

From the pull-down list, please select the item that best represents your role or the type of organization you represent.

Please select the date of today's training from the pull-down list:

In response to each of the open-ended questions below, please feel free to type in as much text as you would like. The box will automatically scroll and your text will automatically wrap in the box.

1. Prior to today's information session, have you or other individuals from your school/center used the CLASS tool?

2. What were your expectations, coming into the CLASS information session?

3. Were your expectations met? **Please explain your response:**

4. Now that you've participated in the information session, how do you think that data from CLASS will impact the work of your school/center?

5. Do you have any other questions or comments about CLASS or the information session that you attended that you would like to have addressed? If so, please describe below.

When you are finished with this survey, click on this button to the survey for processing. Please click only once.

If you want to delete all of your answers and start again, click here:

Last updated, December 8, 2014

Questions for Alignment Team Members

1. (background question) Please give me a bit of background as to what organization you represent, your role in that organization, and how long you've worked with the Lowell Birth to Grade 3 Alignment project.
2. What in your opinion is the purpose of the project Alignment Team, and how specifically have you worked to support that purpose? (probe for differentiation between the formulation and purpose of the "larger" morning group and the smaller afternoon group.)
3. What in your opinion has been the highlight of the Alignment Team's work? Please explain.

(from the project's quarterly report, it's said that "The primary work of the team is to create a birth to grade 3 culture by creating supportive conditions for alignment to occur, build and support relationships across the mixed service delivery system and focus on instructional support." Probe for their understanding of this statement of purpose and the degree to which they see their involvement actually helping the project to meet this purpose.)
4. What if any frustrations have you experienced in your work with this project? Please explain.
5. Going specific to the Strategic Planning work, what can you tell me about your impressions of how this work has gone and what else needs to be done in this aspect of the project's work.
6. Could you comment or provide input on other specific aspects of project work? (e.g., CLASS, the coaching/communities of practice, the Leadership Institute, activities focused on data, family engagement activities, etc.)
7. What is your prognosis for this project and its work beyond the end of funding (in 12/2015)? What suggestions do you have for sustaining the work with or without funding?
8. Any other comments about the project and/or your involvement in this work?

Appendix 3 –Data Collected

- Monthly Alignment Team meetings -- attended (9/2014 – 6/2015)
- Day of Action – attended 10/2014
- Day of Action participant survey
- CLASS Data Orientation – attended 1/2015
- CLASS Data Orientation participant survey
- Project Coaches Interviewed – 3/2015
- Coaching Session Observation – 5/2015
- Alignment Team Member Interviews – 5/2015