



The Fresno County Birth Through Third Grade Challenge Year One: Building the Foundation for Change



Introduction

The academic achievement gap between students from low-income and minority families and their more well-off peers has been a persistent problem in the nation for decades. Hundreds of concerted, well-intentioned efforts and millions of dollars have been invested in the research and application of 'best practices' to attack this issue—without any appreciable dent in the problem.

In Fresno County, results revealed that 56% of third grade students in the county had scored below proficient in English Language Arts on the 2011 STAR California Standards Test (CST), a test that is considered a proxy for determining reading proficiency. Among students classified as economically disadvantaged, 65% scored below proficient by this measure, and of students classified as English Language Learners, 78% tested as below proficient.ⁱ

Child and family poverty is also a strong predictor of academic achievement and many of Fresno County's residents exist on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder: in January 2014, the county's unemployment rate was the tenth highest of California's fifty-eight counties.ⁱⁱ Its median household income was 33% lower than that of California as a whole,ⁱⁱⁱ and almost 25% of the county's population was living in poverty as compared to 15% of the state's population.^{iv} Many of these families have become stuck in a cycle of low academic achievement and high poverty.

Early in 2012, a new initiative was created to tackle what many in the county viewed as a growing educational crisis with negative long-term economic consequences. The Fresno County Birth Through Third Grade Challenge was designed to test a new model for closing the achievement gap by significantly improving third grade reading proficiency for the county's most vulnerable students.

Why Third Grade Reading Proficiency?

Third grade reading proficiency is widely recognized as an important indicator of a child's future educational and even life prospects.^v Research has shown that a student not reading at his or her grade level by the end of the third grade is four to six times less likely to graduate from high school.^{vi} Lack of a high

school diploma is strongly correlated with an individual's future earning potential and therefore quality of life.^{vii} Without a high school diploma, many individuals and their families become trapped in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. The academic achievement gap is, in essence, a reading gap.

From 1992 to 2009, ...the [reading] achievement gap between Hispanic and White students did not change for fourth-graders.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011

In May 2010, the Annie E. Casey Foundation published a KIDS COUNT special report, *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, to launch the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. *Early Warning* summarized the research basis for focusing on grade-level reading proficiency as an essential step toward increasing the number of children who succeed academically, graduate from high school on time, and do well in life and the workforce.

This report and others also make the research-based case that it is critical to start early in a child's life cycle in order to adequately address the problem. Compelling research on brain science and early child development show that "...the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth..."^{viii} and that "...early experiences establish either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the learning, health and behavior that follow."^{ix} Therefore any efforts to affect third grade reading proficiency need to start from birth in order to have the greatest potential for success.

The Fresno County Birth Through Third Grade Challenge

The Fresno County Birth Through Third Grade Challenge (B3 Fresno County) was launched in early 2012 by a partnership between First 5 Fresno County, the Fresno County Office of Education, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and Early Edge California. The Design Team (formerly Sponsoring Partners) resolved to develop a successful local model for addressing the reading gap. Understanding that a variety of social, health, and economic factors impact children's ability to read and learn, they realized that any solution must involve partnerships between the education and service sectors.

At the same time, they acknowledged that there have been many efforts to align the different human and social service systems that touch the lives of the children and families at the center of these problems and that, similar to the marginal successes realized by school reform efforts, successful models of full-scale system re-engineering have also been few and far between.



Over the course of several months of meetings and work sessions, the Design Team conceived B3 Fresno County as a pilot project that could demonstrate the effectiveness of implementing a place-based model for a continuum of evidence-based learning, supports, and systems from birth through third grade. They issued the B3 Challenge, a competitive process during which a handful of Fresno County school districts would be selected to participate in a Professional Learning Community to design birth through third continuums in their school communities. They would also convene community partners to complement the effort by offering the additional support services needed by families. Finally, they engaged the consultant services of VIVA Strategy + Communications to provide strategic consultation, planning, and facilitation for the effort.

The Design Team adopted the following theory of change to provide focus for the effort, define the model, and hold themselves accountable:

B3 Fresno County would significantly decrease the reading proficiency gap by:

- *Collectively engaging and aligning the participation of key community partners in the effort;*
- *Providing school districts access to content experts, best practices, and technical support needed for them to design and implement effective systems of learning and support from birth to the third grade; and*

- *Identifying and effecting policy and system changes needed to support the birth through third grade agenda.*

They developed a model for B3 Fresno County that consists of the following three components:

1. A **Policy Cabinet** charged with planning policy- and systems-level strategies to support the B3 Fresno County agenda. This Cabinet would be made up of a core group of county agency leaders. The purpose was not to create an all-inclusive forum of all potentially related agencies, but rather a small yet influential group of leaders who could come to decisions and act swiftly.
2. A **Professional Learning Community (PLC)** where selected school districts would learn about models and best practices in child development, early learning, and community engagement, and how to create seamless transitions for children as they progressed in their development. Each district would identify a handful of 'anchor' participants, including the principals of their participating elementary schools, who would provide continuity throughout the year.

The Reading Gap Facts

- ▶ *At 18 months, vocabulary disparities start to appear.*
- ▶ *Poor children hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers.*
- ▶ *By the age of 3, high-income children have twice the vocabulary of low-income children.*
- ▶ *Starting in the fourth grade, children stop learning to read and begin reading to learn.*

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2012-2014

3. **Coaching and Technical Assistance** to support the districts in taking the new knowledge gained in the PLC and applying it on the ground in their school communities. Each district would be assigned a single coach who would work with them throughout the year. The first phase of B3 Fresno County (the 2013-2014 school year) would be a 'design' or planning phase, where the districts would develop implementation plans for their community's birth through third grade continuum. In phase two (starting in the 2014-2015 school year and

continuing for several years), the districts would be provided grants to implement their B3 plans.

The Design Team set First 5 Fresno County's Strategic Plan period (2015 to 2020) as the timeframe for the project.

B3 Fresno County: The First Year

Selecting the Challenge Grant Districts

In April of 2013, the Design Team released a Request For Applications (RFA) seeking school districts that were ready to take on the B3 Fresno County Challenge and pilot this new model for addressing the reading gap. Each district selected would be provided a \$10,000 grant to support their participation during the year one planning and design phase and more substantial funding to implement their plans the following year.

Nine out of the thirty-three elementary school districts in Fresno County submitted proposals in response to the B3 RFA. Priority was given to those applicants that demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the relationship between early childhood development and learning and the third grade reading benchmark, and that had a track record of policy and funding decisions in support of this agenda. The following five districts were selected to participate:

- Central Unified School District
- Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District
- Fowler Unified School District
- Fresno Unified School District
- Kings Canyon Unified School District



Each district identified one or two schools on which to focus their B3 planning work and a team of district and school site 'anchors' to be their frontline participants in the work ahead.

These five "Challenge Districts" and their chosen schools represented a wide variety in terms of size and geography, but shared similar challenges in terms of trying to raise the academic achievement of their many disadvantaged students. (See the demographic chart on page 5.)

Professional Learning Community

A total of seven Professional Learning Community sessions were implemented over the course of the year between September 2013 and April 2014. With the exception of the final Capstone session, during which the Challenge teams shared their completed implementation plans, each PLC focused on a single concept or critical aspect of an effective and comprehensive birth through third grade continuum (e.g., utilizing data, supporting the success of English Language Learners, etc.) Each PLC featured presentations by highly regarded content experts, reference and resource materials for the participants, and facilitated peer discussions.

Over the course of the year, there was strong evidence that the PLCs helped the five Challenge Districts gain new insights concerning two fundamentally new ways of thinking about their educational mission. First was the notion that the seeds of learning were established from birth onward, and second, that non-traditional partnerships and arrangements represented important new options for them to advance their B3 work.

Coaching

A professional coach was provided to each Challenge District team during the year to help them reflect on the content provided during each Professional Learning Community and apply it in their school communities. The coaches, highly respected experts and practitioners in the early learning, education,



District	Schools	Student Characteristics 2013-2014			California Standards Test English Language Arts Proficient 2012-2013		
		# of Students	Free & Reduced Lunch	English Language Learners	All Third Grade Students	Free & Reduced Lunch	English Language Learners
Firebaugh - Las Deltas	Hazel M. Bailey	758	94.3%	58.8%	38%	38%	14%
Fowler	Marshall	442	75.6%	41.2%	65%*	58%*	64%*
	Fremont	475	75.8%	22.1%	36%	34%	4%
Kings Canyon	Lincoln	407	93.6%	60.4%	18%	19%	7%
	Washington	418	83.3%	44.5%	29%	31%	0%
Central	Biola Pershing	220	94.5%	47.3%	23%	24%	6%
	Madison	747	90.6%	28.5%	17%	15%	0%
Fresno	Slater	724	97.8%	16.9%	12%	12%	25%
	Heaton	560	97.1%	22.1%	15%	15%	23%

* = only scores for 2nd graders available

and community initiative arenas, provided individualized technical assistance to help their assigned districts and schools to shape how a birth through third grade continuum could be implemented in their specific school communities. They also conducted several visits to their assigned districts and schools, provided numerous phone consultations, and attended each of the Professional Learning Community sessions, where they facilitated peer-learning dialogues.

The Policy Cabinet

Concurrent to the planning and learning activities occurring within the Professional Learning Community, the Design Team convened the B3 Policy Cabinet with the charge of formulating system and policy solutions that would advance the B3 Fresno County agenda. The Directors of the Fresno County Departments of Social Services, Public Health, and Public Housing, the Fresno County Community Action Agency, and the Fresno Compact (STRIVE) agreed to join the five Challenge District Superintendents on this Cabinet.

Throughout the year, the Policy Cabinet members forged partnerships among themselves that quickly resulted in new services being made available to the districts and schools. Examples of this include: the Fresno Housing Authority making

arrangements to host parent orientations and education sessions put on by the school districts at their public housing sites; Fresno Unified School District making its "Parent University" curriculum available to the other Challenge Districts; and the Economic Opportunity Commission establishing more formal linkages to its Early Head Start and Head Start sites.

The Cabinet members also identified nine strategic priorities for their future collective work together. Among these was the intent to better weave their systems together to create opportunities to share data and information regarding the clients they serve.

In the course of one year, Housing Authority leadership went from not being sure their mission had anything to do with reading proficiency to moving swiftly on plans to establish a new early childhood learning center at one of its public housing sites.

B3 Challenge District principal

Challenges and Lessons Learned

During the first year of B3 Fresno County several lessons were learned, some that will help inform refinements of the B3 Fresno County design in subsequent years and others that could be instructive to those in communities attempting a similar effort.

Leadership, Leadership, Leadership. The B3 Fresno County effort would not have been possible were it not for the leadership exerted by the Design Team to create this innovative effort, the district superintendents who had the vision and will to move their districts in a different direction, and the public agency department heads who took the initiative to begin reengineering how their agencies worked with schools.

Organize and convene strategically. It is important to take into account the purpose of a collaborative group when deciding on size and membership. Large comprehensive groups can serve networking and informational purposes well, but smaller, more strategically defined groups are more likely to agree and take action on collective decisions. The Design Team were strategic in deciding whom to invite to participate in the Policy Cabinet. The purpose of the group was 'action,' which required a small nimble group capable of coming to quick consensus, not 'representation,' which would result in a larger group that might find it difficult to achieve common ends.

Large systems and agencies present communication challenges. Agreements made at the highest levels of large institutions are not always communicated swiftly throughout the organizations. Innovation and significant shifts in public agency and school district systems and policies made at the executive level, particularly in the context of coalition meetings, often do not transfer cleanly to the operational levels of these organizations. It is therefore important to establish communication and follow-up mechanisms to address this.



Take into account the longstanding cultures of school districts and public agencies when trying to foster innovation and change. External change agents, funders, and other initiative sponsors seeking to implement new strategies and innovations involving schools and districts should take into account the concrete challenges, pressures, and environments within which educators must operate. During B3 Fresno County's earliest stages, it was particularly important to approach the educational community with a spirit of partnership and understanding. Messages such as 'we are in this together,' and 'you are not expected to do this alone,' followed by actions that exemplified this, were critical in gaining full acceptance and buy-in.

Expanding focus into the early learning arena can mean a steep learning curve for some districts. Just as there was great diversity in the size and geographic locations of the five Challenge Districts, there were also major differences in the extent to which the districts understood early childhood development. While the larger districts had explored greater linkages and alignment with the early care and education system, for some of the smaller districts it was unfamiliar territory. This underscored for the Design Team the idea that 'one size does not fit all' and the importance of providing individualized technical assistance, coaching, and support in order to help the districts and schools progress. Looking back, although considerable time was spent on foundational child development knowledge, more education and more time to reflect on that learning with peers was needed.

Cash match as a strategy for growing school district investment over time. The requirement of a hard cash match that would increase each year of the multi-year project resulted in two positive effects. First, it increased the likelihood that the districts applying were authentically interested and already committed to an early learning agenda since they were willing to invest district resources in it. Additionally, it allowed the Challenge Districts to grow their investment over time, in

step with their growing capacity to change their approaches to early learning. The cash match requirement in the first year was \$1 of district investment for every \$3 of funding. In year two the ratio would grow to \$1 to \$2, and year three would require a \$1 to \$1 match. Ultimately, all districts met the cash match requirement to continue in the B3 effort, though the requirement did contribute to frustration among some districts as they struggled to make decisions that impacted other programs.

The value of peer dialogue and learning. The original design for the B3 Professional Learning Community placed a high premium on presentations by highly respected content experts and leaders in the early childhood development and learning field. While these experts did have much valuable knowledge to share, the presentations received mixed reception from the participants and did not necessarily lead to concrete changes back at the Challenge school communities. In the final analysis, the most valuable and actionable learning was achieved during the small group peer-to-peer dialogues that were facilitated over the course of the year.

The importance of coach preparation. Each of the B3 Fresno County coaches brought years of early learning experience and working with schools and districts to the effort. However, they also each had different areas of expertise and interest and varied styles of interaction. They were introduced to their assigned districts rather quickly and with only a short time of preparation. While all of the districts welcomed the extra resource the coaches represented for them, there was a wide variance in how effectively the coaches were able to help the districts capitalize on their specific knowledge. More up-front time would have been useful in creating better matches between the coaches and their districts.



Conclusion and Looking Ahead

At the culminating “Capstone” Professional Learning Community session held in April 2014, the Challenge Districts shared the B3 concepts that they would begin to implement during the 2014-2015 school year. The Policy Cabinet members described their commitment to re-engineering the educational and social service systems touching the lives of the county’s children and families.

We have become pregnant-women stalkers, reaching out to any expectant woman we see in the community...starting the learning and development process...not waiting until the five-year-old arrives at our door.

B3 Challenge District principal

While everyone realized that having a significant impact on third grade reading proficiency rates was a long-term enterprise that would take a concerted and focused effort over time, a palpable feeling of celebration, hope, and shared accomplishment filled the room. It was clear that huge transformations had occurred regarding how the educators in the room viewed their work. The boundaries between the preschool and school doors and between schools and community were blurred. There was a collective recognition that the foundations for later academic success were laid in the prenatal period and strengthened in the child’s earliest years.

While the final outcome of the Challenge will not be known for several years, there is a general consensus among the participating educators and public agency leaders that the Birth Through Third Grade Challenge represents an opportunity that is worth their investment of time, effort, and resources. The Design Team will continue to support and guide the effort and evaluate its progress toward the ultimate desired outcome of significantly raising the third grade reading proficiency rates.

- i. California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Results, California Department of Education, 2011 [<http://star.cde.ca.gov>]
- ii. Preliminary Monthly Labor Force Data, January 2014. Employment Development Department, State of California.
- iii. American Community Survey, United States Census, 2006-2010.
- iv. United States Census, 2008-2012.

- v. Campaign for Grade Level Reading, 2013.
- vi. "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," Snow, Burns & Griffin. 1998, National Research Council.
- vii. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education 2009.
- viii. Key Concepts: Brain Architecture, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. 2014.
- ix. Ibid.

Birth Through Third Grade Challenge Design Team

