What Works for Third Grade Reading
An Overview of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Working Papers and Suggested Guidance

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This resource is a compilation of evidence- and research-based policy, practice, program and capacity-building options that can move the needle on the major factors that impact children's reading proficiency at third grade. Created by the Institute for Child Success and the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, in collaboration with BEST NC, the working papers address 12 of the North Carolina Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Initiative's Measures of Success. There are four working papers in each of three Pathways goals areas:

Health and Development on Track, Beginning at Birth
- Healthy Birthweight
- Early Intervention
- Social-Emotional Health
- Physical Health

Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- Formal and Informal Family Supports
- Safe at Home
- Positive Parent-Child Interactions
- Reading with Children

High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance
- High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Early Care and Education
- Promotion to Next Grade
- Summer Learning
- Regular Attendance

Each working paper details why the Pathways measure matters for third-grade reading, outlines how it is connected to the other Pathways Measures of Success, defines relevant terms and offers national research-based options that can impact the measure, including polices (federal, state legislative, state departmental, and local), practices (protocols to implement policies, some which might be driving good outcomes, and some which might

> **What is the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Initiative?**
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> NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading (Pathways), is an initiative of the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation in partnership with NC Child, the North Carolina Partnership for Children, and BEST NC.
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> Pathways' vision is bold—all NC children, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, are reading on grade-level by the end of third grade—and all children with disabilities achieve expressive and receptive communication skills commensurate with their developmental ages— so that they have the greatest opportunity for life success.
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> Pathways partners have identified shared, whole-child Measures of Success that put children on a pathway to grade-level reading and used data to determine where NC should move to action first, based on where the needs and disparities were greatest. Information on the Pathways initiative is available on NCECF's website at: www.buildthefoundation.org/pathways.

be obstacles to improving outcomes), and programs and capacities (provider capacity, parent capacity, public understanding and will-building, and array of quality programs to move the measures). All sources are cited.

Guidance for Using the Pathways Working Papers

The Pathways to Grade-Level Reading working papers are intended to serve as a resource for third grade reading and birth-through-age-eight planning processes locally, statewide and across the country. The working papers can help communities:

- Organize their work around measures that impact third grade reading proficiency and consider how those measures—and therefore the strategies to address them—are interconnected
- Learn the research and evidence base around what works in key areas that impact third grade reading
- Understand a variety of policy, practice, program and capacity-building options that have been used in communities across the country to move the needle on outcomes for children and families

The policy, practice, program and capacity-building options in the working papers should not be seen as silver bullets. Research is clear that no one intervention can result in big gains in grade-level reading at the population level. Rather, a bundle of integrated and aligned interventions are most likely to move the needle. Cherry-picking strategies—even evidence-based ones—will not result in the gains communities are looking for.

Research is also clear that improving third grade reading proficiency requires integrated strategies that cover the birth-through-age-eight developmental period and take into account all the domains of children's lives, including health, family and community, and education. Strategies that stand alone and are not integrated into an aligned, birth-through-age-eight, cross-sector system are unlikely to produce clear and lasting results.

The Pathways working papers are intended to inform the next phase of the North Carolina Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Initiative—Design Teams (see box). The strategies laid out in the working papers are *options* for North Carolina, and should not be considered *recommendations*. It is the Design Teams who will consider this resource, and others, to propose strategies for action that are appropriate for North Carolina's context and build on the excellent work already underway in the state on these important issues.

What are Pathways Design Teams?

Pathways Design Teams will create policy, practice, program and capacity-building agendas on key Measures of Success, highlighting what needs to change in North Carolina to see progress for children and families. Three Design Teams will focus on the seven measures of success that were highlighted by the Pathways stakeholders as most important to move to action on first. Those seven measures include:

- Healthy Birthweight
- Early Interventions
- Formal and Informal Social Supports for Families
- Positive Parent-Child Interactions
- Social-Emotional Health
- High Quality Birth-to-Eight Care and Education
- Regular Attendance

The reader is urged to use the working papers as a well-resourced and well-referenced starting point. It may be necessary to dig more deeply into the policy, practice and program options and examine their ratings across clearinghouses or research compendia.

Core Challenges from the Research

Review of the broad literature that addresses the Pathways measures of success reveals a series of recurrent challenges in summarizing and presenting evidence that can be useful for a broad group of stakeholders. Two of these challenges are noted below.

Challenges in Defining Policy, Practice and Programs

Reading across the vast and rapidly evolving literature related to the development, well-being and academic success of young children within the context of their families reveals an overlap in definitions and examples of "policy," "practice," and "program." For example:

- The **practice** of creating family-based plans to guide staff behavior with child-welfare engaged children and their parents becomes a **policy** when encoded in legislation, regulation or administrative policy.
- The core elements of an evidence-based parent-child intervention **program** may include a specific set of **practices**, such as working from a family-based plan.

The Pathways initiative offers the following general definitions of "policy," "practice," and "program" to help readers to distinguish among them and to see how they are connected.

- A public **policy** is defined by the National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center as "a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives."[i] The distinguishing characteristic for a public policy is that it is anchored in some level of governmental action. It could be enacted in law, or included within regulations or agency policy manuals. It may exist at any level of government across the federal, state, county or local levels.
- A **practice** is defined by the National Institute for Justice and also by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration as "a general category of strategies or procedures that share similar characteristics in order to achieve a similar purpose."[ii] The defining characteristic here is that the content is applied in action and involves a way of working.
- A **program** is defined by the National Institute for Justice and also by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration as " a planned, coordinated group of activities, processes, and procedures designed to achieve a specific purpose. A program should have specified goals, objectives, and structured components (e.g., a defined curriculum, an explicit number of treatment or service hours, and an optimal length of treatment) to ensure the program is implemented with fidelity to its model."[iii]

Challenges in Defining Levels of Evidence-Based Programs and Practice (EBP)

A related and perhaps more important challenge involves the various ways in which levels of evidence are defined and categorized for the purposes of classifying a practice or program. Across disciplines, sectors and stakeholder groups, there is agreement that using the best evidence possible provides the greatest opportunity to design or replicate, implement and evaluate programs and practices capable of achieving desired outcomes for children and their families.[iv] Yet, according the Promising Practices Network, while "the field of child and family studies has become savvier in designing and publishing research studies...the research evidence supporting these programs can be of varied quality. This can be

problematic, because there is no single set of standards against which EBPs are evaluated in the field of child and family services."[v]

Across the vast and evolving literature on improving children's development, well-being and academic performance, a wide array of terms is used to describe the level of evidence on which various policy, practice and program recommendations may be based. These include such terms as "evidence-based," "evidence-informed," "research-based or -informed," and "promising" programs, practice or policies. Importantly, even across the various information repositories (also called "clearinghouses" or "catalogues"), the ways in which programs are classified and the evidence levels by which they are rated varies.

An example from the What Works Clearinghouse is illustrative. The gold standard of evidence-based research is a randomized control trial study (RCT), a research design in which individuals or clusters of individuals are randomly assigned to two or more groups. These studies, while the clearest and most rigorous way to determine causality, are very expensive to conduct. They require a program or practice be standardized and implemented in exactly the same way to assure validity. To be defined as Evidence-Based by such repositories as the What Works Clearinghouse, programs or practices must show positive, statistically significant results from *multiple* RCTs. Importantly, however, these outcomes do not have to be the same. A program may show positive impacts on reading test scores in one RCT. This program will be considered evidence-based by the What Works Clearinghouse even if a second study finds no positive effects on reading test scores but some positive effects on a different outcome.

The Pathways working papers identify "evidence-based" and "promising" programs and practices. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices defines an evidence-based practice or program as one "based on rigorous research that has demonstrated effectiveness in achieving the outcomes that it is designed to achieve." Rigor is defined as "aspects of study design, statistical analysis, attrition, measurement and other factors related to the internal validity of an effectiveness study." A promising practice or program will have some evidence of effectiveness but may lack some elements of rigor.

Information for the Pathways working papers was drawn from clearinghouses that rate programs and practices based on effectiveness data. In each working paper, the citations include specific reference to the source of the data or rating that is being reported. The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare provides a useful list of 11 repositories, a description of the content rated, and the terms used to describe rating categories. Across sources, programs or practices are rated using different terminology, and a program listed as best in one clearinghouse might not be similarly rated by another.[vi]

These Papers are a Work in Progress

There is often tension between the fields of Research and Communication, and these papers are no exception: Pathways is still working to make the ideas and research easily communicable to all relevant stakeholders. Pathways also plans to have the working papers professionally designed to better showcase them. At the same time, Pathways and partners are eager to share this excellent information right away with communities and states across the country.

Given those competing priorities, Pathways is making the papers available now marked **DRAFT**. They will be re-released as FINAL in the fall of 2017 and will be made available on the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation website at www.buildthefoundation.org.

[i] Kilpatrick, Dean G. (2000), Definitions of Public Policy and the Law, National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center.

[ii] National Institute of Justice. (n.d). Glossary. Retrieved on June 27, 2017 from https://www.crimesolutions.gov/Glossary.aspx#P. This definition is also cited by SAMHSA at http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/glo ssary.aspx#P

[iii] National Institute of Justice, op cit.

[iv] Woodbury, M.G. & and Kuhnke, J. (2014). Evidence-Based Practice vs. Evidence-Informed Practice: What's the Differences. Wound Care Canada. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260793333_Evidence-based_Practice_vs_Evidence-informed_Practice_What's_the_Difference

[v] Mattox & Kilburn, What is Evidence-Based Practice," op cit.

[vi] Guide to Comparing Clearinghouses for Evidence-Based Programs. (n.d.). California Clearinghouse for Evidence-Based Child Welfare Practice. Retrieved June 27, 2017 from http://www.cebc4cw.org/files/CEBCGuideToComparingClearinghousesForEvidence-BasedPrograms.pdf