



KINDERGARTEN MATTERS



Kindergarten serves as a "sturdy bridge" from pre-K to early elementary grades, providing a strong foundation when evidence-based practices support how young children learn best. Recognizing its crucial role in early success, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) and New America's Early & Elementary Policy Program launched *Kindergarten as a Sturdy Bridge* in 2022 as part of the Learning Loss Recovery Challenge. Building on this, CGLR introduced *Kindergarten Matters* in 2024, further advancing efforts to elevate kindergarten through civic action and advocacy. Together, these initiatives highlight the importance of strengthening kindergarten as a transformative year for young learners.

SERIES HIGHLIGHTS

KINDERGARTEN AS A STURDY BRIDGE (2022–2023)

Co-Sponsored by New America

A Pivotal Year: Kindergarten’s Important Role in Students’ Education

October 25, 2022

This GLR Learning Tuesdays discussion features **Swati Adarkar**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Early Learning at the **U.S. Department of Education**; **Ellen Galinsky**, author of *Mind in the Making*; and **Ryan Lee-James, Ph.D., CCC-SLP** Chief Academic Officer at the **Atlanta Speech School**. They discuss why kindergarten is such an important year. Adarkar talks about kindergarten as the sturdy bridge between pre-K and the early grades. Galinsky talks about how, for the sturdy bridge to work, it needs to have a good foundation before and after kindergarten. Lee-James highlights the importance of relationships for building a reading brain. She also discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on children’s learning, but points out that schools were struggling to meet all children’s needs, especially children from marginalized communities before COVID. We need to do better for our young learners. [View here.](#)

Play + Academics + Relationships: Teaching in Ways Kindergartners Learn Best

“How do we get all these wonderful practices that you’re hearing about into the length of day that we have in kindergarten?”

– Nell K. Duke, Ed.D

November 29, 2022

In this GLR Learning Tuesdays webinar co-sponsored by CGLR and New America, **Lisa Guernsey**, Senior Fellow & Strategic Advisor of the Education Policy Program at **New America**, moderates a conversation with a panel of leaders, exploring some of the most important research findings on teaching and learning in kindergarten. **Nell Duke, Ed.D.**, of **Stand for Children**; **Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D.**, of **Temple University** and the **Brookings Institution**; **Anya Hurwitz, Ed.D.**, of **Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL)**; and **Deborah Leong, Ph.D.**, of **Tools of the Mind** discuss what it means to “stop the schoolification” of kindergarten and instead use play to build executive functioning skills, support the development of language skills and more. **Cynthia Crespo** and **Seymonnia Cutkelvin** of **New York City Schools** and **Luis Gallego, M.A.Ed.**, of **Tools of the Mind** provide their perspectives as frontline educators providing instruction to kindergartners and the significance of relationships with both students and their families to support learning and development. [View here.](#)

Learning How States, Districts, and Educators Are Strengthening Kindergarten

"Over the course of the past 15 to 20 years, the concept of kindergarten as building the foundation for students has been lost, and kindergarten has evolved into programming to 'fast track' students toward specific benchmarks... In so doing, programs are trying to put the roof on the house before the foundation has had an opportunity to set."

– Pamela Truelove-Walker, Ed.D.

January 17, 2023

In too many schools, kindergarten classrooms look and feel more like third-grade classrooms than early learning classrooms. This must change; fortunately, there are places across the country from which we can learn. Some state and district officials are working to establish the conditions needed to ensure that kindergartners have learning experiences and environments delivered in the ways they learn best. In this GLR Learning Tuesdays webinar co-sponsored by CGLR and New America, **Laura Bornfreund** talks with kindergarten teacher **Stacy Macri** from New Hampshire; state officials **Pamela Truelove-Walker, Ed.D.**, from the **Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education** and **Anna Severens** with the **Nevada Department of Education**; and school district officials **Jeri Robinson** and **Jason Sachs, Ph.D.**, from **Boston Public Schools** and **Kim Holland, Ed.S.**, from **Gwinnett County Public Schools**. Presenters share how they are building relationships with families, supporting classroom teachers, and making children's early schooling more joyful, meaningful, and seamless. [View here.](#)

Creating Conditions and Environments for Thriving Kindergartners

"The big idea here is that when you think about the nexus of playful learning and safe, supportive and responsive relationships and environments, and then equitable mindsets and practices and policies and systems, the nexus of that is the creation of these fertile conditions in which young children can thrive."

– Natalie Walrond

February 14, 2023

In this GLR Learning Tuesdays webinar co-sponsored by CGLR and New America, **Laura Bornfreund** asks panelists, what do children need to thrive in kindergarten? **Sheresa Blanchard, Ph.D.**, of **SRI International**; **Hedy Chang** of **Attendance Works**; **Rebecca Colbert, Ph.D.**, **RLA**, of the **National Wildlife Federation**; **Ann Kay** of **The Rock 'n' Read Project**; and **Natalie Walrond** of **WestEd** share how a culturally responsive pedagogy, outdoor education, music, equity, relevant learning and much more help make school a compelling space where students and families want to be. [View here.](#)

Promoting High-Quality Math and Science Learning in Kindergarten

"Math classrooms should be spaces where children are encouraged to explore, and teachers are masterful at putting the right questions and tasks in front of them to help them to develop a deep understanding of the math they're learning."

– Jessica Tilli

March 7, 2023

In this GLR Learning Tuesdays webinar co-sponsored by CGLR and New America, **Laura Bornfreund** asks panelists, what is most important when it comes to teaching and learning math and science in kindergarten? **Jessica Tilli** of **The School District of Philadelphia** quotes Sunil Singh saying that educators must become "experts and lovers of their discipline." For **Lauren Solarski, Ph.D.**, of **Loyola University Chicago**, this requires reducing anxiety around math and science for educators. **Douglas Clements, Ph.D.**, of the **University of Denver** reviews research around the components of high-quality instruction, and our panelists unanimously point toward the importance of teacher education and development around math and science. As educators are equipped, they can then support the development of early STEM identities in learners explains **Chih-Ing Lim, Ph.D.**, of **STEM Innovation for Inclusion in Early Education** and **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. **Cindy Hoisington** shares that at the **Education Development Center** they do this by facilitating opportunities for learners to engage, explore, and reflect, providing high-quality math and science learning in kindergarten. [View here.](#)

Investing in Kindergarten as a “Sturdy Bridge”: Philanthropic Opportunities

“We need to build a more aligned system, a system that requires a ‘sturdy bridge’ between the early years and the early grades. This ‘bridge’ is kindergarten.”
- Swati Adarkar

April 18, 2023

In this Funder-to-Funder Conversation, **Swati Adarkar** of the **U.S. Department of Education** introduces the Department’s new PreK-3 agenda, explaining how the agenda was designed to transform transitions into and out of kindergarten, advance an equity lens to better meet the developmental needs of individual children, and deliver the enabling conditions for success. **Laura Bornfreund** of **New America** then moderates a conversation with a panel of philanthropic leaders — **Chrisanne Gayl** of **Trust for Learning**; **Phil Halperin** of **Silver Giving Foundation**; **Sara Slaughter** of **W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation**; and **Bryan Stokes II** of the **Robert M. McCormick Foundation** — who discuss their investments to support children’s success along the birth through third-grade continuum and how those investments work to strengthen the “sturdy bridge” that Adarkar describes. The funders emphasize the need to break down the silos that separate the traditional K-12 and early care and education spaces; their efforts to strengthen the early learning and early grades workforces, including pathways into the teaching profession and growth pathways to help educators secure higher credentials; and efforts to build a leadership pipeline to help early grades teachers become principals and to ensure principal preparation programs incorporate early childhood, dual language learning, special education, and social-emotional learning into their content. As the panelists discuss these topics, they highlight the unique roles that funders can play, including providing risk capital and taking a long view with their investments. [View here.](#)

Investing in Kindergarten as a “Sturdy Bridge”: Place-Based Investments

“...the transition into kindergarten and then transition from kindergarten into first grade. When those transitions and those systems are so misaligned or disjointed, it puts an extra burden on families because they’re not just trying to align to one system. They’re trying to align to different systems that are themselves disjointed, and it just creates additional barriers for families.”

-Vivian Tseng

June 20, 2023

In this Funder-to-Funder Conversation, **Vivian Tseng** of **Foundation for Child Development** moderates a conversation with a panel of philanthropic leaders — **Jonathan Hui** of **The Kresge Foundation**, **Barbara Reisman** of **Maher Charitable Foundation**, **Karla Ruiz** of **Sobrato Philanthropies**, and **Jymil Thompson** of the **John and Janice Wyatt Foundation** — as they discuss their approaches to supporting children’s success along the birth through third-grade continuum. Their investments include the development of a 53-acre cradle-to-career campus in Detroit; advocacy to secure public funding for the statewide scaling of a high-quality preK program using a mixed-delivery approach with a focus on educator training and compensation; systems change and programs to support English learners and their families while equipping educators to deliver rigorous language learning; and kindergarten readiness strategies that engage and support public school systems, community-based providers, and families. The panelists discuss the wide range of roles that funders can play, including investments in early learning facilities, family engagement efforts that bring diverse cultures and languages into K-12 systems, community engagement and listening, professional development for educators, and advocacy for increased public investment in early learning and better compensation for early learning educators. [View here.](#)

Strengthening Kindergarten to Improve PreK–3rd Grade Experiences

“The vast majority of people in our school communities want to create equity oriented educational systems. When we put the pieces together, we create the conditions to act. This joyful, developmentally appropriate aligned equity focus, early learning and elementary continuum. The results are incredibly hopeful.”

-Anya Hurwitz, Ed.D

June 20, 2023

In this GLR Learning Tuesdays webinar co-sponsored by CGLR and New America, moderator **Laura Bornfreund** of **New America** asks panelists what a well aligned, joyful, and developmentally informed preK through third continuum means for dual language learners, children with disabilities, and children from families with low incomes. **Gloria Corral** of the **Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)** explains it this way, “Children’s ability to thrive is based on their ability to feel welcome, for their families to feel welcome, for their culture and the community to be valued.” For **Shantel Meek, Ph.D.**, the Founding Director of the **Children’s Equity Project of Arizona State University**, “There are some really clear, established inequities that we have seen, that have been consistent in services and systems for kids with disabilities in the K-12 system or the preK-12 system.” **Anya Hurwitz, Ed.D.**, of **Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL)** shares her dream that “When we are truly grounded in assets, in seeing children for all of their potential across their multiple languages, cultures, and worlds and seeing teachers for all their potential,” we create a stronger kindergarten and a stronger preK through third-grade experience. [View here.](#)

KINDERGARTEN MATTERS (2024–2025)

Emergent Bilinguals and English Language Learners: The Sturdy Bridge

It's become really clear how important it is in this moment, where so much is happening in education, to leverage kindergarten as that sturdy bridge between early learning – where developmental, culturally responsible practices and family engagement are really core – and the later grades.”

January 30, 2024

– Karla Ruiz

In the first installment of GLR Learning Tuesdays' *Kindergarten Matters* series, CGLR partnered with Sobrato Philanthropies to highlight the role of kindergarten in setting the foundation for multilingual learning. **Karla Ruiz** of **Sobrato Philanthropies** moderates the discussion, engaging **Melissa Castillo, Ed.D.**, from the **U.S. Department of Education** on Secretary Cardona's "Raise the Bar" Initiative and key strategies for supporting English learners. **Anya Hurwitz** of **SEAL** shares insights on the "P–3 Framework," designed to create equitable, research-based pathways for multilingual learners. **Shantel Meek, Ph.D.**, of **The Children's Equity Project** emphasizes the civil rights aspect of dual-language education, citing data on its long-term academic and economic benefits. **Lydia Acosta Stephens** of **Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)** reinforces the importance of celebrating multilingualism from a child's first school experience, highlighting the success of LAUSD's Biliteracy Pathway Awards in fostering language pride and achievement. [View here.](#)

Identifying and Supporting Children With Diverse Learning Needs

“For success in supporting students both at school and at home, it is critical that parents become part of the equation. That means helping the parents understand what is going on within the school and providing the support needed for them to help the students at home.”

March 5, 2024

– Robai Werunga, Ph.D.

In this Kindergarten Matters webinar, **Michelle Knapik** of the **Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation** moderates a discussion on the intersection of policy, research, and practice in supporting children with learning differences. **Glenna Wright-Gallo** from the **U.S. Department of Education** provides insights on Secretary Cardona's Raise the Bar Initiative and its focus on inclusive instruction and intervention. **Nicole Ormandy, M.Ed.**, of **AIM Institute for Learning and Research** introduces Linnea Ehri, Ph.D.'s Phases of Word Reading Development Theory as a framework for identifying early literacy challenges. **Sue Bonaiuto, Ed.D.**, of **EarlyBird Education** showcases the EarlyBird platform, a predictive tool for dyslexia and reading difficulties. **Rafel Hart** of **Educare of Omaha, Inc.** emphasizes developmentally appropriate practices and the Ecological Systems Theory in early childhood education. Finally, **Robai Werunga, Ph.D.**, of the **University of Massachusetts, Lowell**, highlights Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in early literacy, stressing the importance of early intervention, progress monitoring, and family engagement. [View here.](#)

Starting Strong: Developing Foundational Life Skills in Kindergarten

“We really want to emphasize that social-emotional learning happens anywhere and everywhere there are people, we know the critical role that parents and families play, as well as the broader community.”

April 2, 2024

– Aaliyah Samuel, Ph.D.

Carly Roberts of **Overdeck Family Foundation** moderates a discussion on the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) and executive function skills in kindergarten and beyond. **Aaliyah Samuel, Ph.D.**, of **CASEL** highlights SEL's role in academic success and well-being, emphasizing its global momentum and the need to prioritize it post-pandemic. **Elena Bodrova, Ph.D.**, of **Tools of the Mind** discusses the integration of self-regulation practices in classrooms, sharing promising research on its impact. **Kim Paddison Dockery, Ed.D.**, of **KPD Education** describes her collaboration with Ellen Galinsky to develop a "bridge to K" approach that strengthens executive function, literacy, and math skills before kindergarten. Finally, **Erin Helgren** of **Children's Institute** shares efforts in Yoncalla, Oregon, to support kindergarten readiness through parent engagement and community collaboration, ensuring success for all children regardless of economic background. [View here.](#)

Back to School: Reducing Barriers to a Successful Start in Kindergarten

“Small declines in vaccination coverage can have large impacts. It’s not too late to protect our communities. Routine immunization catch up is a goal that we can achieve by working together, and we look forward to partnering with you to support kindergarten readiness by keeping kids healthy in school and ready to learn.”

– Kathleen Holmes

May 7, 2024

Chrisanne Gayl of **Trust for Learning** moderates a discussion on actionable supports for families preparing their children for kindergarten. **Swati Adarkar** of the **U.S. Department of Education** outlines Secretary Miguel Cardona’s Raise the Bar: Lead the World Initiative and emphasizes three Back to School Action Steps: ensuring vaccinations and well-child checkups, simplifying kindergarten enrollment, and supporting transitions and summer programming. **Heidi Schumacher, MD, FAAP**, of the **American Academy of Pediatrics** stresses that kindergarten readiness begins at birth and highlights the role of pediatricians in fostering child development and school readiness. **Jill Sells, MD, FAAP**, with the **CDC’s Learn the Signs. Act. Early** program discusses early developmental screening and the importance of caregiver relationships, encouraging attendees to share resources with families. **Kathleen Holmes** of the **CDC’s Let’s RISE** program closes by addressing the pandemic’s impact on vaccination rates and emphasizes the link between immunization and reducing absenteeism, urging collaboration to keep children healthy and ready to learn. [View here.](#)

The “Sturdy Bridge”: Ensuring a Seamless Transition to Kindergarten

“If we can concentrate on children and families, especially those with challenges to school success, and provide them with solid transition supports, we’re going to experience success.”

– Janice Kilburn, Ph.D.

June 4, 2024

This Kindergarten Matters session, moderated by **Paula Grubbs, Ph.D.**, of **UNC Chapel Hill**, explores strategies for effective transitions into kindergarten. **Stacy Ehrlich Loewe, Ph.D.**, of **NORC** at the **University of Chicago** shares findings from the Head Start to Kindergarten Transitions Project, emphasizing the “four P’s” framework—policies, perspective, professional supports, and practices. **Olivia Christensen, Ph.D.**, of the **Minnesota Department of Education** discusses shifting from “readiness” to the Successful Learner Equation, promoting collaboration among schools, communities, and families. **Janice Kilburn, Ph.D.**, of **South Carolina First Steps** highlights the *Countdown to Kindergarten* program, which includes home visits by kindergarten teachers to ease transitions, while **Sharonda Johnson** of the **South Carolina Department of Education** stresses the role of foundational literacy and family engagement. **Jessie Cuadra, Psy.D.**, of **Families In Schools** closes by emphasizing the importance of reflective practices and linking family engagement to student success. [View here.](#)

Beyond Kindergarten: Transition, Continuity, and Alignment

We are seeing achievement gaps close for children, and I know it’s because we’re being very intentional about the standards and because we’re being intentional about making sure that this is a side-by-side partnership.”

– Bonnie Short

July 9, 2024

This webinar highlights the often-overlooked transition from kindergarten to first grade. Moderated by **Christina Lopez** of the **Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program**, the discussion emphasizes the need for strong family partnerships and a “culture of transition.” **Paula Grubbs** of the **Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute** stresses the importance of this shift, while **Cynthia D. Jackson** of **Educare Learning Network** notes challenges in sharing student data across schools. **David Jacobson, Ph.D.**, of **First 10** and **EDC** highlights vertical collaboration among educators to better align teaching strategies, and **Ryan Lee-James, Ph.D., CCC-SLP**, of the **Rollins Center for Language & Literacy** emphasizes deeper analysis of student assessment data. **Bonnie Short** of the **Alabama State Department of Education** shared how intentional assessment alignment and family engagement efforts are helping close achievement gaps. [View here.](#)

Play-Based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom & Beyond

"In our system, we're trying to change what goes on in the classroom; to have smaller groups, to amplify student voice and choice, [and to implement] all the things that make the classroom space active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, and joyful."

- Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D.

October 15, 2024

Moderated by **Diana Greene, Ph.D.**, of **Children's Literacy Initiative**, this conversation explores the role of playful learning in fostering creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking in early education. **Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D.**, of **Temple University** and **the Brookings Institution**, highlights the benefits of Active Playful Learning (APL), emphasizing the "Six C's" — collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creativity, and confidence — where students show immense growth. Educator **Kristi Kallam** shares how she integrates playful learning across subjects to create an engaging, student-driven environment. **Loretta C. Brady, Ph.D.**, of **Saint Anselm College** discusses technology's role in play-based learning, advocating for its thoughtful integration to empower children. **Kimberly Nesbitt, Ph.D.**, of the **University of New Hampshire** underscores the need for systemic collaboration to scale play-based learning initiatives. **Debbie Leslie, Ph.D.**, of the **University of Chicago**, closes by stressing the importance of teacher support and coaching to effectively implement playful learning in classrooms. [View here.](#)

The First 10 Framework: Exploring Best Practices and Community Innovations

"What's exciting about Conestoga Valley and Woonsocket, in addition to the creative strategies that they've implemented, is how they've built such strong partnerships and the capacity to continue collaborating and innovating."

- David Jacobson, Ph.D.

November 12, 2024

Moderated by **Melissa Castillo, Ed.D.**, with the **U.S. Department of Education**, this discussion explores how Conestoga Valley, Pennsylvania, and Woonsocket, Rhode Island, are implementing the First 10 Framework to strengthen school-community partnerships. **David Jacobson, Ph.D.**, from the **Education Development Center** introduces the framework's focus on collaboration, comprehensive early childhood strategies, and strategic planning. In Woonsocket, **Beth Campanelli** and **Erin Smith** highlight "play and learn" sessions, which have boosted preschool enrollment and fostered parent connections, as well as the "Passport to Kindergarten" program, which eases school transitions. **Michelle Trasborg** and **Jill Koser, Ed.D.**, share Conestoga Valley's approach, emphasizing its diverse student population and initiatives like the "Kindergarten Express," a six-step transition framework. Parents **Mehmet** and **Ecem Cikliablikci**, who emigrated from Turkey, speak about how these efforts eased their child's transition, making the first day of school a smooth and positive experience. [View here.](#)

Kindergarten Briefing and Update

"Implementing these programs and getting the work done is not always easy. But the more we can help each other out and lift [each other] up, the better."

- Lisa Guernsey

December 17, 2024

Lisa Guernsey of **New America** moderated this invitation-only briefing featuring experts from the **U.S. Department of Education** who share the important work that has been completed through the Kindergarten Sturdy Bridge Initiative launched by Secretary Miguel Cardona during the Biden administration. **Swati Adarkar** emphasizes kindergarten as a critical bridge between early childhood and early grades, calling for whole-child, developmentally appropriate practices. She highlights collaboration with Health and Human Services and the work of the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, urging continued cross-sector engagement and philanthropic support. **Jamila Smith** shares initiatives like Ready to Learn, which funds educational media, and the Education Innovation and Research Grant, supporting early learning innovations. **Christy Kavulic** discusses a renewed joint policy on inclusion for children with disabilities, reinforcing the benefits of high-quality, inclusive programs. **Melissa Castillo, Ed.D.**, stresses early dual-language programs, bilingualism benefits, and the launch of a center for multilingualism. **Tracey Scott, Ph.D.**, closes with Student Engagement and Attendance Center (SEAC) efforts to address chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and its link to later reading success. [View here.](#)

Kindergarten in Context: What Makes a Principal an Effective P-3 Leader?

"I make sure that I build those relationships with parents, to highlight that I'm here to work with you and to help support your child. I try to connect families with library resource centers, recreation centers, early childhood centers. We work together."

January 21, 2025

– Paula Bruno, Ed.D.

Moderated by **Kristie Kauerz, Ed.D.**, from the **National P-3 Center**, this session explores how effective P-3 leadership fosters high-quality early learning and promotes equitable, developmentally appropriate practices. Kauerz highlights persistent achievement gaps in education, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and emphasizes the role of strong P-3 leadership in bridging these gaps. **Gracie Branch, Ph.D.**, from **NAESP**, shares resources for principals, like *A Principal's Guide to Early Learning in the Early Grades*, which offers strategies for supporting whole child instruction and fostering family partnerships. Three P-3 principals — **Jacob Ellsworth**, **Paula Bruno**, and **Gwendolyn Payton** — discussed their experiences implementing P-3 leadership in their schools. They emphasize the importance of early academic and community connections, integrating pre-K into the broader school environment, and developing educators' skills to create lasting positive outcomes for students. [View here.](#)

By the Numbers

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