



Learning Frontiers
PreK to Grade 3

RESEARCH REVIEW 2023



ABOUT LEARNING FRONTIERS

The Learning Frontiers Pre-K to Grade 3 research team conducted three studies in Nebraska between 2016-2022.

Research Goal

The goal of this work was to gain a better understanding of areas that are open to change or improvement to inform practice and policy decisions that support equitable and effective early learning opportunities for all students.

Studies

Three studies conducted across rural and urban settings in Nebraska sought to address educational policies, classroom experiences and transitions from pre-K through third grade.

1. Policy and Practice Study

- Descriptive study of systems-level policies and practices that support early learning.
- Data contributed by: 14 Nebraska communities.

2. Classroom Observation Study

- Classroom observation study to identify teaching practices and other classroom-level malleable factors associated with children's school readiness and achievement in preschool and early elementary school.
- Data contributed by: 1,215 students and 310 teachers from 21 Nebraska urban and rural school districts and 2 community agencies.

3. Longitudinal Study

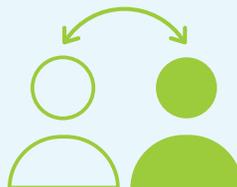
- Longitudinal study to identify malleable factors associated with early learning and school achievement over time from preschool through the early elementary school grades.
- Data contributed by: 357 students and families from 171 Nebraska urban and rural school districts and community agencies.

IMPACT AREAS

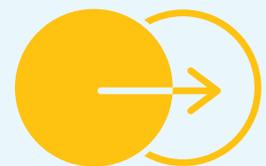
Findings from the Learning Frontiers studies uncovered three impact areas with potential to positively contribute to children's learning and development:



**Classroom Experiences
& Learning Opportunities**



Relationships



**Sustained High-Quality
Experiences**

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1 Classroom Experiences and Learning Opportunities

Takeaway: High-quality early learning experiences from pre-K to third grade matter for children.

- Classroom environments that contain intentional and effective experiences, such as peer interactions and classroom learning opportunities supported by adults, allow students to better access and use information, engage with instructional content, and develop academic and social skills that foster future success.
- The use of scaffolding, a teaching method that gradually supports students as they learn and develop new skills, predicts positive attitudes toward learning, greater social skills and fewer problem behaviors compared to didactic instruction.¹
- Rural schools would benefit from additional educational resources and community resources to support students.²
- Children benefit from public investments in affordable high-quality early learning experiences.²



2 Relationships

Takeaway: Sustained, high-quality relationships are essential for children's learning.

Relationships among families, students and teachers during the early school years are important for learning and development. Relationships between parents and teachers, and between teachers and students, are foundational for promoting children's academic, language and social-emotional skills, especially for children from diverse backgrounds.



Teacher-Child Relationships

- Positive teacher-child relationships are associated with improvements in children's social behavioral skills, both immediately and over time.³
- A decrease in teacher-child interaction quality or an increase in teacher-child conflict across grades is associated with poorer outcomes, including children's lower social competence and higher levels of problem behaviors.³

Parent-Teacher Relationships

- Positive parent-teacher relationships during the school year are associated with gains in children's social-behavioral outcomes.³
- Communication between parents and teachers is stable during pre-K and decreases through the end of kindergarten.⁴
- Parents' support of children's learning at home increases from pre-K through kindergarten, while parent participation in school activities and events increases during pre-K but decreases through the end of kindergarten.⁴
- Sustained relationships between parents and teachers during the transition from pre-K through first grade are associated with fewer problem behaviors over time.³ Furthermore, the home-school connection is associated with reducing the skill gap between Black and Latine children in teacher-rated problem behaviors.⁵
- Parents in rural communities report providing less support for children's learning at home and less communication with teachers than their urban counterparts.⁴

3 Sustained High-Quality Experiences

Takeaway: Consistent, high-quality early learning opportunities promote positive child development.

Fostering high-quality student experiences and educational environments requires alignment and continuity among school-based structures, policies, practices, curricula and assessments across pre-K to third grade. These factors promote smooth student transitions and educational experiences across grade levels.

- Sustained, positive student-teacher relationships across transitions from pre-K to first grade predict improved social skills.³
- When students move between schools, there is less consistency in what they are being taught, which is a barrier to learning.²
- Promoting economic security and providing additional resources to families helps promote early learning and development.²



CITATIONS

¹Boise, C., Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Iruka, I. U., Witte, A. L., & Prokasky, A. (2021, April 7–9). *Classroom approaches related to children's academic and social-emotional outcomes in early elementary school*. In S. M. Sheridan (Chair), *Teacher practices and individual student experiences: Measuring influences on pre-kindergarten through third grade students* [Symposium]. Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Virtual Conference, United States.

²Iruka, I. U., DeKraai, M., Walther, J., Sheridan, S. M., & Abdel-Monem, T. (2020). Examining how rural ecological contexts influence children's early learning opportunities. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 15-29.

³Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Boise, C., Witte, A., Koziol, N., Prokasky, A., ... & Kerby, H. (2022). Relationships as malleable factors for children's social-behavioral skills from preschool to grade 1: A longitudinal analysis. *Early Education and Development, 33*(6), 958-978.

⁴Sheridan, S. M., Koziol, N., Witte, A. L., Iruka, I., & Knoche, L. L. (2020). Longitudinal and geographic trends in family engagement during the pre-kindergarten to kindergarten transition. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 48*(3), 365-377.

⁵Iruka, I. U., Sheridan, S., Koziol, N., Schumacher, R., Kerby, H., Prokasky, A., & Choi, D. H. (2022). Examining malleable factors that explain the end-of-kindergarten racial/ethnic gaps. *The Elementary School Journal, 122*(3), 378-410.

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report summarizes findings from the Learning Frontiers: Pre-K to Grade 3 project led by the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln as part of the Early Learning Network. This project is funded by the United States Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (Grant #R305N160016).

Learn more at learningfrontiers.unl.edu



The nationwide Early Learning Network seeks to advance the understanding of policies and practices that narrow opportunity gaps in early childhood education and maintain early learning success as children transition from preschool to elementary school and beyond.

