

## THE PRENATAL THROUGH AGE THREE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT



the five work sectors represented in the multidisciplinary P-3 workforce: early care and education, early intervention, social services/child welfare, physical health and mental health. A complete description of the Cross-Sector Core Competencies, along with the Workgroup's implementation recommendations for policy and practice can be found in the documents listed in the reference section of this document. The universal core competencies developed by the P-3 WFD Project were designed to promote shared understanding and collaboration across many disciplines and sectors, and provide the foundation for a cross-sector professional development strategy for professionals serving families prenatally and those with very young children.

When this project began in 2008, competencies development projects around the U.S. acknowledged the importance of thinking across sectors in developing core knowledge and competencies (CKCs) for professionals working with young children, but few efforts reflected a cross-sector approach. Five years later, 45 states have CKCs for at least one professional sector that serves young children and families. Some of these efforts are creating CKCs to support diverse professionals working together in a single service setting, such as early intervention. Others are creating shared CKCs for one group of professionals providing services in different settings, for example, early care and education professionals working in infant care, preschool and Head Start programs. Still others seek to share knowledge from one profession, such as mental health or early intervention, with a multidisciplinary array of direct service professionals.

The P-3 WFD Project is unique in its cross-sector, collaborative leadership and its expanded definition of "service sectors" which creates a broader, multi-faceted approach uniting the multiple professions and service sectors that support children and families in the prenatal to age three period.

***"It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men."*** — Frederick Douglass

The Project's cross-sector, multi-disciplinary Core Competencies Workgroup focused on identifying core competencies for the prenatal-infant-toddler workforce. It reviewed existing professional competencies within each of

## About Us

ZERO TO THREE is a national, nonprofit organization that provides parents, professionals and policymakers the knowledge and know-how to nurture early development. Our mission is to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life.

To learn more about this topic or about ZERO TO THREE, contact Tahra Goraya, Western Office Director.



### ZERO TO THREE Western Office

350 S. Bixel Street, Suite 150  
Los Angeles, CA 90017  
213-481-7279  
www.zerotothree.org

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## References/Additional Resources

**ZERO TO THREE Western Office webpage:**  
<http://www.zerotothree.org/about-us/western-office.html>

### Reports of the First 5 LA Prenatal Through Age Three Workforce Development Project:

First 5 LA and ZERO TO THREE,  
***Core Competencies Workgroup Summary Report: Core Competencies for the Prenatal through Three (P-3) Field.*** Prenatal through Three Workforce Development Project. Available at: <http://www.first5la.org/files/ZTTCoreCompetenciesSummary3.pdf>

First 5 LA and ZERO TO THREE,  
***Policy Brief: Core Competencies for the Prenatal Through Age Three Workforce. Policy and Program Recommendations for Maximizing the Prenatal Through Age Three Core Competencies.*** Available at: <http://www.zerotothree.org/wo/assets/docs/policy-brief-ztt-core-competencies-policy-2012.pdf>

First 5 LA and ZERO TO THREE,  
***Foundations for Success: Shared Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes for the Cross-Sector Prenatal Through Age Three Workforce (Alignment Matrix).*** Available from the ZERO TO THREE Western Office.

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## SUPPORTING A WORKFORCE FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

**I**ncredible growth takes place during the first three years of life. This is a period of rapid development of the brain, as well as in physical, language and cognitive development. It is a time when children establish the foundation for lifelong success, or encounter challenges that can compromise future development. Awareness of the vulnerabilities and opportunities for young children and their families helps professionals identify those at risk and connect them to specialized supports that promote success.

During pregnancy and the first three years of life children and families typically encounter professionals who can support their development, most commonly pediatricians and child care providers. They may also interact with professionals such as home visitors or speech therapists. Infants, toddlers and their families may receive services across a wide array of disciplines spanning the health, mental health, child welfare, early care and education, and early intervention service sectors. Infants and toddlers are well served when all early childhood professionals have competence in their own areas of expertise and also have the skills needed to coordinate and collaborate with the other professions that serve children and families in the early years.

The prenatal through age three (P-3) workforce includes a range of professionals from all five of these service sectors. While each of the disciplines within this workforce has an extensive professional knowledge base and standards, each focuses on just one facet of young children's growth and development. This can create barriers for families and compromise the effectiveness of each of the individual supports.

Current child development science makes it clear that children benefit most from a holistic and integrated approach to their needs. However, practice has not caught up to these findings. There are limited cross-sector professional development opportunities to support integrated, multidisciplinary and cross-sector approaches. Systematized collaboration across sectors in education, professional development and in practice can guide shared efforts to best meet the needs of infants, toddlers and their families across the health, mental health, child welfare, early care and education, and early intervention service sectors.



## A Broad View

On the quarterdeck of a schooner the captain peers into the distance with a single-lens monocular spy glass. He can see the flag of the ship in the distance. Preoccupied with trying to understand if the on-coming vessel is friend or foe, he does not recognize the threat posed by the shoals off to starboard. Nor does he notice that the wind is pushing his ship toward this hazard. While focusing his attention narrowly on the distant ship, he misses important cues of imminent risk. Astronomers today study wide expanses of the sky through telescopes that can look across millions of miles and can identify multiple phenomena, including asteroids streaking toward Earth. When it comes to young children, we need to use a wide lens that will help us take in the whole picture. Cross-sector and multi-disciplinary approaches to serving expectant parents, very young children and their families create the broad view we need to understand and effectively respond to all that influences their health and development.

## WHY CORE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES?

Core knowledge and competencies (CKCs) provide a significant element of professional development systems and program quality initiatives. CKCs include a knowledge base, expectations for professional skills, and defined attitudes or dispositions that support effective practice. CKCs serve several purposes:

- Provide a foundation for professional development design – including instructional practices and other quality improvement efforts
- Provide a foundation for an integrated Professional Development System
- Connect sectors and quality initiatives
- Support the workforce on career pathways from entry level through higher level career options and in work across sectors

The National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives recommends that early childhood core knowledge and competencies:

- Begin with and emphasize child development – specifically:
  - The importance of early experiences and their impact on later development
  - Helping families engage with their children
  - Brain development and the importance of relationships
  - Relationships as the context for learning
- Address dispositions (attributes) of the individual
- Address cultural competence and diversity

Within the five sectors represented in the P-3 Workforce Development Project, each discipline has established core competencies that reflect the knowledge and skill base for that profession. There is much overlap among the expectations of different professions serving young children and families, but many professionals are not aware of the parallels in content, skills and attitudes across the professions serving expectant parents, very young children and their families. Core competencies should guide professionals to an understanding of their own unique responsibilities in serving infants, toddlers and families, and also address the multidisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration and integration of services required to succeed in meeting the multi-dimensional array of needs experienced by young children and their families.

## BARRIERS TO MOVING FORWARD TO CREATE A HIGHLY QUALIFIED AND COMPETENT P-3 WORKFORCE

Members of the P-3 workforce have limited opportunities to develop professional competencies in their work with expectant parents, infants, toddlers and their families, let alone cross-sector competencies. The development of cross-sector competencies is seldom addressed in pre-service education or in-service training. Available professional development opportunities generally address single-discipline issues. P-3 professionals are not often offered opportunities to collaborate with professionals from other sectors in their formal training, ongoing professional development or daily work with children and families. Few professional development experiences build awareness of the

role of other sectors in supporting healthy development, or support learning how to collaborate with professionals from other sectors to address multi-dimensional needs.

Participants in the Cross-Sector Competencies Summit (see Sidebar) identified systemic barriers that limit the development of cross-sector professional development opportunities and cross-sector competence:

- The proliferation of standards and requirements in each professional sector, sometimes dictated by disparate funding and program



### A Call to Action

In April 2013 ZERO TO THREE Western Office and First 5 LA convened 75 local, state and national experts at a Cross-Sector Competencies Summit to review the progress made in creating cross-sector competencies for the Los Angeles County infant-toddler workforce and nationally, and to propose future directions. The recommendations reported in this brief were developed at this event and in previous project convenings. Detailed recommendations for policy, practice, workforce development and systems change are also discussed in a Policy Brief available at: <http://www.zerotothree.org/wol/assets/docs/policy-brief-ztt-core-competencies-policy-2012.pdf>.

- requirements, presents a challenge to integrating approaches and finding common core expectations for the P-3 field.
- Multidisciplinary approaches are not funded routinely or encouraged by funders. In fact, requirements attached to funding within single sectors sometimes work against those wishing to collaborate in providing services.
- Federal and state funding cuts impact capacity for collaboration. Having limited funds to pay for program operations is a barrier to collaboration with other agencies and restricts time available to build or sustain collaborative partnerships.
- Funding cuts to higher education limit the number of elective courses offered and the creation of new content. Students completing extensive course requirements do not have room in their schedules for multidisciplinary electives.
- Funds are limited for field experiences that would expose

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations developed at the Cross-Sector Competencies Summit build on prior recommendations of the Core Competencies Workgroup. These recommendations focus on building awareness and leadership to move the field forward in developing and implementing cross-sector professional competencies.

### Increase opportunities for cross-sector knowledge building and collaboration.

Parents understand that their children are more than their behavior or their special need. Complex family issues create multi-dimensional needs. We need to build professionals who have a holistic, multi-dimensional view of children and families, and understand how to engage services to support them. We can increase opportunities for cross-sector knowledge building, collaboration and learning in pre-service training and in professional practice.

- Align cross-sector competencies with state and national single-sector competencies.
- Increase opportunities for cross-sector knowledge building, collaboration and learning in pre-service training and in professional practice.
- Build cross-sector leadership academies for professionals in advanced career and leadership roles to develop multidisciplinary collaborative relationships and projects.
- Connect P-3 competencies to broader 0-5 and 0-8 efforts.

### Provide decision makers with recommendations that foster cross-sector services for children and families.

Decision makers include policy makers, leaders in practice and higher education, funders and those influential people whose opinions have wide impact. Cross-sector work is emerging and

- students to multi-disciplinary approaches and collaboration styles. Funds also limit access to expert field supervisors who can mentor students.
- Low pay deters some competent new professionals from entering some infant-toddler professions or participating in on-going professional development.

The P-3 WFD Project and core competencies projects around the U.S. face similar challenges: building a common language, identifying common professional expectations, and developing a corps of trainers who can work effectively across sectors to improve professional competence. In order to sustain progress in building a competent workforce, future efforts must integrate cross-sector CKCs with the efforts focusing on single disciplines.

*“Each of the specialists sees only their little bit, but my child is so much more than a little bit.”* — Parent of a child with special needs

not well understood by many decision makers. Leaders must provide concrete strategies to shift the orientation from a narrow field of focus to a holistic view of infants, toddlers and their families.

- Send multi-disciplinary advocacy teams to meet with policy makers and provide concrete policy recommendations that would create and strengthen cross-sector collaboration to meet the holistic needs of young children and families.
- Offer cross-sector leadership training programs for program leaders.
- Approach funders with funding strategies that build bridges between sectors in practice.
- Require cross-sector representation on public advisory and decision-making boards.

### Encourage cross-sector collaboration and multidisciplinary practice in higher education.

Today's leaders set the direction of practice for the next decade – but the leaders of tomorrow are being trained today. Traditional disciplinary education perpetuates single-discipline thinking and practice. Cross-sector collaboration and multi-disciplinary practice need to be inculcated from the beginning of professional training. Unfortunately, budget cuts in higher education have eliminated many programs that support cross-disciplinary collaboration and understanding.

- Fund multi-disciplinary curriculum projects in higher education. Examples: develop cross-walks between single-sector competency systems; bring together multi-disciplinary

- cross-sector teams to align existing coursework; develop new curricula and field experience opportunities that are shared across related disciplines and sectors.
- Offer cross-sector internships and field experiences for students.
- Provide opportunities for experiential learning that put different disciplines in contact with each other. For instance, use child development centers as interdisciplinary learning laboratories. Engage in “cross-sector wondering” – dialogue and case study to understand the multi-dimensional needs of children and families.
- Emphasize collaborative attitudes in professional ethics statements and in practicum experiences.
- Create professional development opportunities that offer Continuing Education Units from multiple disciplines to encourage joint participation.

### Encourage cross-sector collaboration and multidisciplinary engagement in practice.

In order to promote more rapid adoption of multi-disciplinary, cross-sector approaches, today's leaders also need opportunities to work in cross-sector contexts that build relationships and foster shared learning.

- Support communities of practice that bring together cross-sector representatives to share knowledge, build awareness of services, and problem solve on case, community and/or practice issues.
- Fund cross-sector leadership development programs to develop leaders who are committed to cross-sector collaboration and multidisciplinary practice.
- Promote shared decision-making models and case studies as opportunities to meet and work with professionals from other disciplines.
- Create a mindset for “cross-sector wondering.” Ask the question “who else can support this child and/or family?”
- Co-locate services to support families as well as encourage cross-sector awareness-building and collaboration.
- Utilize technology that supports collaboration, such as shared databases, multi-site video conferencing and wiki communities.

### Develop research evidence that justifies further development of cross-sector partnerships and work.

Cross-sector understanding and collaboration are valued in the early childhood field but the evidence supporting cross-sector work is not well-established. A strong evidence base is needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of cross-sector efforts.

- Identify effective programs, evaluate their impact, and communicate their results.
- Present cross-sector work in the research literature of multiple workforce sectors so that commonalities and shared competencies are recognized.

## NEXT STEPS

As the P-3 field moves forward in efforts to build the qualifications and competencies of the prenatal through age three workforce, clearly defined goals are needed that support holistic approaches and multi-disciplinary collaboration. A crucial next step would be to continue obtaining buy-in on cross-sector core knowledge and competencies within the many sectors serving the prenatal through age three population in Los Angeles and in the broader professional community. Partnerships are needed with colleagues working with preschool-age children to build a unified perspective on the needs of children 0-5 and the competencies that support development across the early years. A place to start would be to align existing P-3 core competencies with those for professionals working with preschool-aged and older children.

We need to engage representatives of higher education and professional development efforts to integrate cross-sector perspectives into curriculum development, practicum experiences, program philosophy and ongoing professional development opportunities. Specifically, higher education can be provided resources to develop cross-sector learning based on core competencies in both undergraduate and graduate programs that prepare the P-3 workforce. Organizations that provide in-service workforce training can receive incentives to address the P-3 core competencies and to work with cross-sector teams drawn from community-based programs. Professionals can build on existing knowledge and practice new skills through supports such as on-site coaching or collaborative community-of-practice groups.

Service providers can identify fiscal barriers to coordinated, collaborative service provision. Then they can work with advocates to influence policy makers and funders to remove these barriers and replace them with incentives for cross-sector coordination and collaboration.

The leaders of tomorrow are in training today. Tomorrow's leaders need a broad multi-disciplinary vision of early childhood practice in order to address the needs of the whole child. We can move in this direction by developing, evaluating and publicizing programs that model cross-sector knowledge-building and collaboration. Bridges can be built between sectors if funders provide the resources to develop and evaluate these new approaches. An inventive attitude is called for to create, evaluate and report on effective multidisciplinary approaches so that the evidence base informs emerging policy and practice.