

Evidence Matters Partnership for Effectiveness in Early Childhood Programs

A university-community partnership is established to investigate, corroborate, and expand evidence on the key elements of early childhood programs. Beginning in June 2021, the Evidence Matters Partnership for Effectiveness in Early Childhood Programs (EMAT-EC) will:

- A. Sponsor and manage internships to advance research on early childhood program effectiveness,
- B. Host meetings, seminars, and training opportunities on emerging and critical topics in the field,
- C. Identify data sets and sources of information for investigating relevant questions and issues,
- D. Engage stakeholders in identifying important questions in need of further evidence,
- E. Provide seed funding to support research training, internship opportunities, and utilization of evidence,
- F. Disseminate findings to communities and policy makers in a variety of formats and products.

Given the high priority on universal preschool education for all 3- and 4-year-olds, ensuring that early childhood programs and initiatives are effective in promoting school readiness and sustaining learning gains is more important than ever. The focus on research training and investigating the most important drivers of effective programs will enhance the capacity of early childhood systems and organizations to act on evidence to improve learning outcomes. This will also inform further planning and scaling efforts.

Research to increase understanding of the impacts of on early childhood programs and their key elements can contribute to sustaining learning gains as programs and initiatives scale up. But it also can redress education gaps and health disparities caused by macro ecological influences including multilevel poverty, economic instability, racism and discrimination, and unequal access to high quality education and health care. To facilitate improving early learning programs and outcomes, the 10 Essential Elements of Early Childhood Programs (10E) were developed and further updated earlier this year (HCRC, 2021; <http://hcrc.umn.edu/news-events/news-and-publications>). They are informed by the accumulated research since the 1960s on the life course impacts of a variety of early childhood programs spanning birth to age 9 years. These may be early education and care, PreK, two-generational and comprehensive programs, and those that continue into kindergarten and school age.

As a framework for EMAT-EC, 10E is described below and summarized in the Figure. It is based on two key principles. First, effectiveness is primarily dependent on the quality and support available in the organization context in which the program is situated. Second, learning gains and longer-term benefits increase as the number of elements present in programs increases. These principles can be measured through surveys and observations, school and community data sources as well as reports by stakeholders. The four categories of elements are (a) access and population, (b) structure and scope of services, (c) professional learning and standards, and (d) P-3 alignment and continuity (Figure and below). As described in Healthy People 2030 (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services; <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health>) five socio-structural determinants reciprocally influence early childhood development, programs and their effectiveness. These are economic stability, neighborhood and built environment, social and community contexts, education access and quality, and health care access and quality. How each and different combinations of 10E are affected by the five determinants in program implementation and effectiveness is an underinvestigated area. The quality of community-based services (both education and health care quality), for example, may directly affect whether learning gains are sustained.

Collaborating Partners

The participating partners and collaborators include the following organizations, departments, and centers within and outside the university. They will contribute to one or more of the above goals as well as be a resource for further planning, training, and research initiatives.

Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (UMN)

Center for Early Education and Development (UMN)

Child Trends, Inc.

Early Childhood Certificate Program, Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Initial Focus

The initial focus of the EMAT-EC partnership will be to sponsor research internships in the summer and/or throughout the school year, convene meetings and training opportunities for students and staff, and to identify relevant data and data sets for investigating the impact of the 10 essential elements on students, families, and communities.

Examples of data sets and sources that are available include: Chicago Longitudinal Study, Midwest Longitudinal Study of the Child-Parent Center P-3 Program, National Survey of Early Care and Education (2019), Minnesota Department of Education School Readiness Data, National Student Clearinghouse, administrative data from a variety of school districts and local and state jurisdictions.

The Human Capital Research Collaborative will provide organizational support in convening partnerships, training and research opportunities, and managing the activities of this initiative. Since training and outreach are major components, the completion of projects and reports that have direct implications for policy and practice are emphasized.

Key Principles and 10 Essential Elements

These are described as follows (see Figure and <https://z.umn.edu/6zzm> for details and evidence):

Principle I. A Supportive and Enriching Organizational and Social Context for Learning is Foundational to Optimal Benefits and Sustained Gains. Programs and broader learning systems achieve their most beneficial impacts within structural and community contexts that are well-supported with a climate of shared ownership. These directly and indirectly influence the social-structural determinants of health (Healthy People 2030).

Principle II. Gains are More Likely to be Initiated and Sustained as the Number of Essential Elements Present in Programs, Schools, and Classrooms Increases. Accumulated research over decades has found that classrooms and programs in which at least 60-70% of the measured key elements are present are most likely to show strong short- and longer-term learning gains.

A. Access and Population

1. Provide universal access for all preschool children.
2. Begin no later than age 4.

B. Structure and Scope of Services

3. Small class sizes and low child to staff ratios ($\leq 17/2$).
4. Sufficient intensity of learning experiences.
5. Optimal duration and length (≥ 1 year).
6. Comprehensive family support services.

C. Professional Learning and Standards

7. Highly trained professionals and on-going professional development.
8. Multifaceted and engaging learning experiences across domains.
9. Accountability system of shared leadership, clear learning standards, & monitoring for improvement.

D. P-3 Alignment and Continuity

10. Coordination and alignment with K-3 to provide a continuous P-3 system of supports.

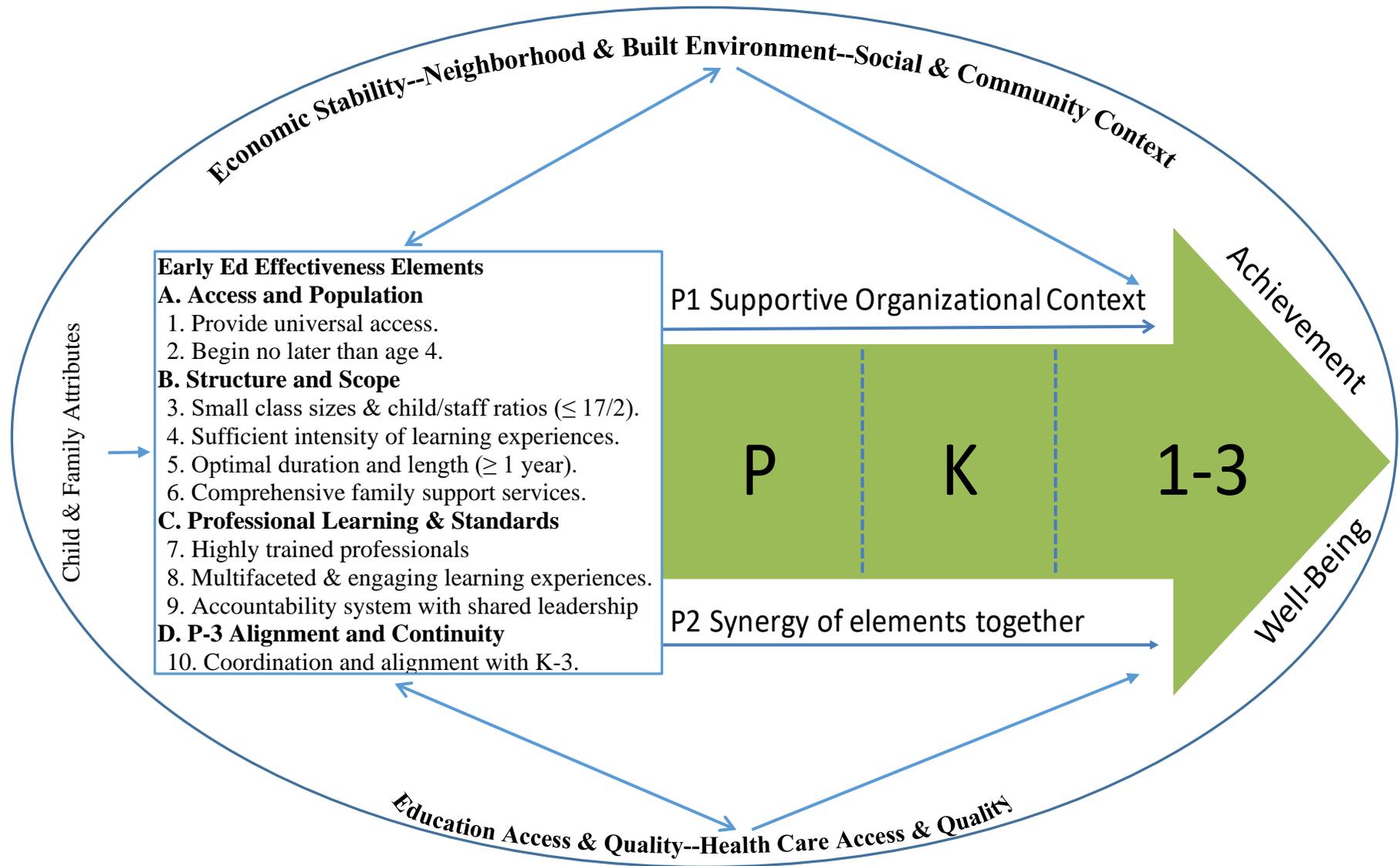


Figure. Ten Essential Elements of Early Childhood Programs and Socio-Structural Influences on Achievement & Well-Being. The 10 elements are derived from effectiveness research since the 1960s but emphasize the past decade. They divide into four categories. Two foundational principles for the elements are a supportive and enriching organizational context (Principle [P] 1) and synergy of elements (Principle [P] 2) such that benefits increase as the number of well-implemented elements increases. The five socio-structural determinants are from Healthy People 2030 and provide a macro context of influences on the entire system. Examples include employment opportunities and social mobility (economic stability), housing quality and crime rates (neighborhood & built environment), and discrimination & racism, neighborhood poverty, and segregation (social & community context). Education and health care access & quality include availability and use of high-quality services and supports (e.g., enriched learning experiences, preventive care).