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TRADEOFFS:

Elementary Principals on Hiring and Staffing in the Early Grades



Hiring and Staffing

Academics and Play

Why Principals Matter

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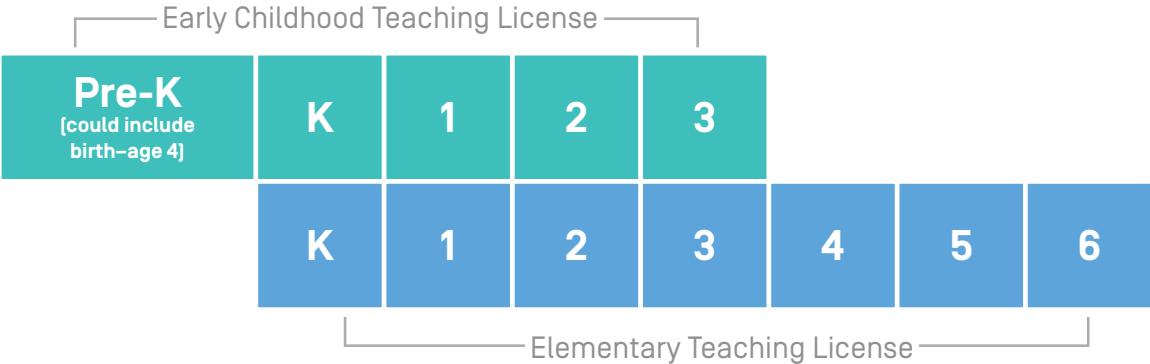
INTRODUCTION

Picture a sunny day in March: newly-minted and veteran teachers pour into the atrium of a renovated school building looking for jobs in the district. Principals and assistant principals stand in front of their school banners explaining their schools' mission, goals, and hiring needs for the coming year. Promising candidates are given on-the-spot interviews. Principals quickly review job seekers' credentials and then see if their educational philosophies align. If all goes well, a principal may ask a teacher to conduct a sample lesson at a later date to see how she interacts with children.

Hiring decisions are guided by a school's needs, a teacher's experience and philosophy, and professional licensure. However, licensure can often be tricky for a principal, because, especially when it comes to pre-K, kindergarten, first, second,

and third grades, requirements vary greatly by state. (See Figure 1) For instance, in Minnesota, an early childhood education (ECE) teaching license spans birth to third grade. The North Star State has another license for elementary teachers that spans kindergarten to sixth grade. Kindergarten, first, and third grade teachers in Minnesota can possess either the ECE or elementary license.¹ In Texas, there is one ECE/elementary teaching license that spans age three to sixth grade.² Alternatively, in South Carolina, the ECE license spans pre-K through third grade. The state's elementary license spans second to sixth grade. This means kindergarten teachers are required to hold the ECE license. Teacher education programs that prepare candidates for teaching licenses spanning kindergarten through fifth grade are more likely to focus on equipping teachers with strategies more appropriate for older children.³

Figure 1 The Overlap in Many States: Where Early Childhood and Elementary Teaching Licenses Tend to Converge



HOW PRINCIPALS HIRE: A PREFERENCE FOR BROAD LICENSES

Strategies for hiring and staffing in the early grades emerged as a key issue for principals in New America’s focus groups. Principals said they valued teachers with warm personalities, strong literacy instruction capabilities, and broad licenses that spanned a large number of grade levels.

Elementary school principals said in our focus groups (see box on page 4) that they prefer teacher candidates with licenses that cover a broader span of grades because they value staffing flexibility. One principal from Austin said, “it’s nice to have the flexibility with the wider certificate and let us decide.” Another from Orlando stated, “if I have two candidates and one has a PreK–3rd [license] and one has a K–6 [license], and they are equal candidates, I would probably hire the K–6 because you have more options.” Many principals seek teachers with broad licensing spans because this allows them to move teachers from year to year as needed to fill staffing gaps.

Some principals did not understand how licenses prepared teachers differently. As a principal from Austin said, “I’ve never been a professor of teachers

so I wouldn’t dare to say EC–6 or 1–8 is better than the other. I don’t know what courses are taken to differentiate between those two, other than there’s a certification test for one and there’s a licensure [test] for the other, and if you pass this one and not that one, then that’s what you can [teach].”

Some principals, however, did recognize a value in early childhood education specialization. One Minneapolis principal, for instance, disagreed with the practice of hiring teachers with a broader licensure span, stating, “in our district, they really frown on hiring anybody with that [Birth–3rd grade] license because it is too limiting. I have always felt that wrong, because that’s where I want the expertise of just that development age of some of our primary [students].” Another principal from Minneapolis agreed, saying, “I would like to see an intermediate license. Something not the same as middle school. Because I think those kids are not middle school kids. They have different needs as primary children. I would like to see primary maybe to grade two or three, and then the intermediate, and then high school.”

In Pursuit of a Better Understanding of Principals and Their Roles as Early Education Leaders

New America's Early and Elementary Education Policy team was interested in understanding principals' perceptions of what should take place in pre-K and early grade classrooms and if and how they see their role as early education leaders. To that end, New America commissioned the FDR Group, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm, to convene five focus groups around the country with elementary school principals to explore views about and experiences with PreK–3rd grade students, teachers, and classrooms.

The focus groups took place between February and April 2015, one each in San Francisco, New York, Minneapolis, Austin, and Orlando. The geographically-diverse groups answered questions on the staffing and hiring of teachers, the transition between pre-K and kindergarten, student assessment, professional development, and the role of the principal. The first two focus groups, in

San Francisco and New York, also included directors of early childhood programs in order to dig into the relationships between public school and non-public school programs. Specific examples of questions posed include: "What matters most when it comes to hiring a new PreK–3rd grade teacher or placing a teacher in an early grade classroom? What do you expect a child to know at the end of kindergarten or first grade? When it comes to literacy assessment, what kind of guidance do you give or training do you seek out for your staff? Do you see value in making connections between pre-K and K–3?"

In total, 46 educators participated, including 38 principals and two assistant principals in public elementary schools, plus six directors of pre-K programs (public and private). The FDR Group's report on our focus groups can be found at:

www.newamerica.org/education-policy/principals-corner

WHAT PRINCIPALS VALUE IN TEACHER CANDIDATES FOR THE EARLY GRADES

After principals review a potential hire's licensure, they evaluate a candidate's fit with the school. As a principal from Austin put it, "regardless of what the certificate says we have to parse out where their strengths are and what they are able to do." In the focus groups, personality was a strong factor for principals considering a teacher's fit for a particular

grade, especially for the early grades. For these years, principals said they wanted to hire teachers with high emotional intelligence. They cited various teacher attributes that they look for, such as the ability to be nurturing, patient, passionate, adaptable, and creative.

Many principals said they valued these attributes over content knowledge. A New York assistant principal said, “we look for someone who is nurturing, because we say that you can’t teach [that]. You have to come with that. We can show them this is the math; this is the book, but those other things you can’t teach. If you don’t understand children, if you don’t like children a little bit, you can’t teach that. You can teach them how to teach

math or reading.” A principal from San Francisco agreed, saying, “in education, anybody can learn anything from a book. You can teach someone how to [teach], but I cannot give you . . . an attitude to be a people person or to have understanding.” The importance of hiring a teacher with the right temperament for the early grades seemed to be paramount among many principals in the focus groups.

HOW PRINCIPALS STAFF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN THE EARLY GRADES

In addition to hiring for open positions, each year principals must also reevaluate their staff’s grade level placement based on school needs, each teacher’s strengths and weaknesses, and teacher preference. When principals staff an elementary school, they often have to make some difficult decisions and tradeoffs that impact students. Principals in the focus groups discussed the pressure to have strong teachers in third through fifth grade due to federally-mandated tests in reading and math instituted under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Some principals, for instance, acknowledged that moving weak teachers to certain grades was a practice. One Orlando principal flat out said, “often times when you have a teacher that you can’t get rid of, sometimes . . . second grade is that dumping ground unfortunately.” A principal from Austin had the same assessment: “I’ve heard that second

grade teams become the weakest teams. First and kindergarten are focusing on literacy so you need great teachers there, and then you need them in testing grades as well. And, I think research is showing that if students aren’t on grade level by second grade, they are going to continue to fall behind, [and] that chance of them catching up is not very high.” In fact, students who finish the third grade without mastering the majority of grade-level skills have a difficult, if not impossible, time catching up academically, placing them at risk for school dropout and other negative life outcomes.^{4 5}

However, many other principals abhorred the practice of placing weak teachers in any of the early grades including second because they viewed it as short-sighted. One Austin principal put it like this: “you have to be careful because you are tainting upstream. Shooting yourself in the foot. Are they going to provide those foundational pieces?” A

Minneapolis principal echoed this sentiment, stating, “this is what I know for sure: kindergarten, first, and second grade, you are learning to read. Third, fourth, fifth, you are reading to learn. It is true. If you have a weak teacher in second grade, that’s that child’s last opportunity to get those foundations down.” Many other principals agreed with this logic. A principal from Orlando said, “every grade is sacred and your second graders are going up to third grade next year and you need to have those skills in place, and I can’t afford them to have a bad year.”

Some principals moved highly effective teachers from the early grades to later grades to help bring fourth and fifth graders up to speed on basic literacy skills such as phonics. As a Minneapolis principal explained, “I moved a first grade teacher to fourth. . . . You’ve got a really good literacy teacher doing differentiated reading groups at a higher grade, which doesn’t always happen. Some fourth and fifth grade teachers aren’t as good at differentiating as the teachers of younger students.” A principal

from Orlando agreed, saying, “I had one woman in kindergarten and she was so phenomenal and I needed her in fourth grade, and she went on to become a phenomenal fourth grade teacher. I’ve taken some first and second grade [teachers] and moved them up to the third grade. We had a deficiency in third grade where many kids lacked sufficient decoding skills. And those teachers know how to do it.”

Some principals, like one from New York, said they believed that the practice of moving strong early elementary teachers up to the later grades could hurt children in the earlier grades: “we’ve been having a conversation about how important the kindergarten and first grade are, and why not take the best teachers and put them there . . . if you have a really rotten kindergarten teacher . . . it could be detrimental to your education for the rest of it.” Agreeing with this sentiment, a principal from Austin stated, “I would say I’m going to put my best teachers in the lower grades because that’s where kids are learning to read and not reading to learn.”



ANALYSIS: STAFFING DECISIONS SHOULD REFLECT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY GRADES

Principals in New America’s focus groups understood the importance of hiring and staffing decisions for the overall success of their schools. Many principals agonized over making the right staffing and hiring choices for the academic and social well-being of *all* their students. There are many tradeoffs that principals have to make when determining a teacher’s grade level position or hiring new staff.

Principals discussed their very practical need to hire elementary teachers with broader licenses for greater staffing flexibility. However, this thinking is at odds with the research that shows specialization in early childhood education and child development is beneficial for teachers in the early grades.⁶ Narrower licensure spans that sync with periods of child development may help to put more teachers in classrooms who have specialized training in the kinds of instructional strategies that are appropriate for a specific age group.⁷

Some principals in our focus groups were not well-versed in the differences between licensure requirements. The lack of understanding that some principals have regarding the coursework involved for a particular expertise underscores the need for

greater transparency in the field between the early childhood education and elementary licenses.

Principals in our groups also placed a high value on hiring teachers in the early grades for personality type over content knowledge. Placing greater emphasis on hiring early elementary teachers with a specific personality type over teachers who had a clear understanding of how to deliver developmentally-appropriate content is in conflict with the recent *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8* report. This report highlights the complexities of content delivery in the early childhood years, stating, “Unfortunately, when care and education professionals underestimate children’s abilities to understand and learn subject-matter content, the negative impact is greatest on those with the fewest prior learning experiences”⁸ There is a great need to develop early childhood educators with child development expertise and content expertise to maximize student learning in the early years.⁹

Content knowledge and delivery is essential in the early grades as children are beginning to categorize information around them through observation. Early childhood educators, up through third grade,

must be very intentional about how they deliver content to young children. For instance, when working with a small group of pre-kindergartners or kindergartners on a lesson to determine which objects float and which ones sink, teachers could introduce academic language and concepts, such as how to make a prediction or hypothesis, but they could also lay the foundation for more complex concepts like density through guided discovery.

The principals in our focus groups also discussed the placement of strong and weak teachers in their schools and how this placement impacted the early grades. Whether it was moving strong early education teachers up to the upper elementary grades to teach reading, or moving weak teachers down to early education in order to avoid federally-mandated testing, principal staffing decisions raise concerns about how these tradeoffs affect students

in the early grades and their sustained academic gains from school entry through upper elementary. Both practices can lead to some negative consequences, particularly if less-effective teachers wind up in kindergarten, first, and second grades. Strong teachers are needed in every grade.

Staffing and hiring decisions are complex and tradeoffs need to be considered, but principals should be careful not to undervalue the early elementary grades, inclusive of pre-K, because the foundational skills built in these years are imperative to students' future success in school and in life.

Notes

¹ “Minnesota Profile: Certification for Teachers of Children Birth Through Age 8,” NAEYC, February 2014, <http://www.naeyc.org/files/policy/licensure/MN.pdf>.

² “Texas Profile: Certification for Teachers of Children Birth Through Age 8,” NAEYC, February 2014, <http://www.naeyc.org/files/policy/licensure/TX.pdf>.

³ Laura A. Bornfreund, *Getting in Sync: Revamping Licensing and Preparation for Teachers in Pre-K, Kindergarten, and the Early Grades* (Washington, DC: New America, March 2011).

⁴ American Federation of Teachers, “Waiting Rarely Works: Late Bloomers Usually Just Wilt,” Reading Rockets, WETA Public Broadcasting, 2015, <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/waiting-rarely-works-late-bloomers-usually-just-wilt>.

⁵ LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/19401/transforming-the-workforce-for-children-birth-through-age-8-a>.

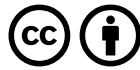
www.nap.edu/catalog/19401/transforming-the-workforce-for-children-birth-through-age-8-a.

⁶ Laura A. Bornfreund, *Getting in Sync: Revamping Licensing and Preparation for Teachers in Pre-K, Kindergarten, and the Early Grades* (Washington, DC: New America, March 2011), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/getting-in-sync/>; LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/19401/transforming-the-workforce-for-children-birth-through-age-8-a>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/19401/transforming-the-workforce-for-children-birth-through-age-8-a>.

⁹ Ibid.



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