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CONNECTING PRE-K AND THE EARLY GRADES:

Principals on Transitions



Connecting Pre-K and the Early Grades

Hiring and Staffing

Academics and Play

Why Principals Matter

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About the Authors



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INTRODUCTION

While children experience many transitions in the early years and grades, perhaps one of the more significant points for children, and their families, is when they move into kindergarten, especially if it is their first time in a public school setting. Although there is a limited body of research on transitions, some researchers and advocates posit that well-connected learning environments from pre-K to kindergarten and to each grade thereafter can make the experience less stressful and mitigate possible negative consequences.¹

Currently, many school districts and schools engage in “low-touch” transition practices such as inviting families to the elementary school to meet kindergarten teachers, sending home information about what children should know to be prepared for kindergarten, and even allowing kindergartners to start their school year earlier to get comfortable before the older children arrive. “High touch” practices would include seeking out information about children’s previous educational experiences and even taking steps to align content, classroom



environments, and instructional strategies across pre-K and kindergarten as well as subsequent grades.

A growing number of elementary schools are home to one or more pre-K classrooms. But for the foreseeable future, public schools alone are unable to meet the needs of all four-year-olds entering kindergarten. The vast majority of children entering kindergarten will continue to come from child care centers, Head Start programs, family care providers, or their own homes. This makes it more complicated, but all the more important, for elementary school leaders and teachers to understand their students' previous experiences and develop relationships with these other child care providers.

Elementary school principals play a central role in making transition planning about more than welcome sessions and kindergarten readiness packets for families.² Principals establish the school

culture, ensure teachers from different grades have time to collaborate and plan together, and can build relationships with external pre-K providers that typically feed their school. This is important for coordination of curriculum, assessment, and environments; sharing data; and fostering opportunities for smooth transitions for children and families.

Two of New America's elementary school principal focus groups (see box below) included directors of community-based child care centers offering pre-K. By including these early childhood leaders in our groups, we were able to ask how leaders in several settings view transitions across pre-K and kindergarten. We posed questions to understand to what extent principals see pre-K as a part of the elementary school when it is located in their building and whether they develop relationships with local non-public school pre-K programs, Head Start, or child care providers that typically feed their schools.

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

HOW PRINCIPALS DESCRIBE TRANSITIONS INVOLVING PRE-K IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING

When pre-K classrooms are located in an elementary school building, improving transitions and strengthening coordination and connection across PreK–3rd is surely easier, although still not a given. In our focus groups, some principals discussed their efforts to align what is taught in pre-K with the early grades and efforts to include teachers and children as a fully integrated part of the school. Principals also discussed some of their transition efforts such as providing “kindergarten orientations” for incoming families.

An assistant principal from New York explained that her pre-K teachers have been “working closely” with kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers, leading to “more conversation about that connection between the expectations of pre-K and kindergarten.” She said, “the kindergarten teachers are learning a lot from the pre-K teachers and vice versa . . . it’s a little bit more of a seamless transition even though the pre-K is vastly different than kindergarten.” A principal from San Francisco echoed this: “one of my pre-K teachers is on the English Language Arts [committee] aligning Common Core. She’s on the team with my kindergarten teacher and my first and second grade teachers, so we’re trying to really include her.”

Aligning pre-K and Common Core was a topic that came up in more than one group. A Minneapolis-

area principal said, “with Common Core we are doing a lot more with the standards and vertical alignment. That makes for natural conversations between the grade levels. You have that alignment so kindergarten is talking to first grade, first grade is talking to second grade. . . . So there is a lot more communication, and there has to be more.” This principal went on to explain how pre-K teachers in the district are “unpacking their standards along with us” to help align the pre-K and K–12 standards.

Other principals talked about how on-site pre-K is integrated into the elementary school. An Orlando principal described how this looked in practice: “we make those kids part of our school where they are going to our assemblies, playgrounds, and they are in our cafeteria.” This principal also saw the value in students attending pre-K at his school and staying for kindergarten. He said that the children who enter his school for pre-K and stay for kindergarten “are far better prepared than kids that go to some of the best daycares in our community. And our kids outshine them because our teachers know what is expected and are taking the kids into kindergarten classrooms and doing activities jointly. . . . Plus, they are truly focused on the pre-K skills that they should be getting ready for kindergarten. They [pre-K teachers] talk with the kindergarten teachers and they know what is expected; it is not guesswork there.”

HOW PRINCIPALS ARE CONNECTING WITH EXTERNAL PRE-K PROVIDERS, AND VICE-VERSA

The Orlando principal did not say whether or not he had attempted to engage the child care centers that typically feed his school. Where relationships between elementary schools and other community early childhood programs do exist, they seem to be largely informal. In some cases, they exist because of long-standing relationships between schools and programs, often because contact was made by a pre-K provider. In the words of one pre-K director in New York:

Usually some time is spent where we will actually invite the teachers to come over, and they talk to the parents and they kind of let them know what to expect when the children are in kindergarten, and they also meet with our teachers. . . . We've been in a community with two feeder schools almost next door for 42 years, so we've fostered a relationship over the years, and we have a good connection with the teachers and the principals and assistant principals at both feeder schools.

Relationships take time to build and principals have many competing demands, as do center directors. Handling concerns from parents, providing feedback to teachers, and meeting various district

and state requirements, for example, all take time and resources. One New York pre-K director explained that time is a huge barrier to smoother transitions from pre-K program to kindergarten in the public school. The director said, "getting better connections to the feeder schools [is needed] because you don't get to do that, and part of that's a matter of time, and even when I contact parent coordinators, they're so busy they can't come in and can't make it happen as well as I would like to."

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Another pre-K director in New York shared frustrations with how difficult it can be to help families find out information about their new school:

We make it a point to find out when those kindergarten orientations are in the schools that they [feed in] to, and I'll do transition

workshops in April–May with the parents. I’ll get the information and we’ll give them the information: it’s at this particular school. This is how they do orientation. Everybody does it different. Sometimes you have to go make an appointment. Sometimes you can just go walk in. We give them the information and encourage them to go, and then they come back and tell us about it, so that’s how we do it.

In some districts, another challenge is the lack of a clear feeder school. One San Francisco pre-K director lamented that

When they leave preschool, they go off to numerous different schools. Because we’re not attached to any of the schools, it does present kind of a challenge. We send copies of assessments and everything off with the kids when they enter kindergarten, so their teacher knows what they’re getting, but we don’t really have a very clear idea of what they do Day One

in kindergarten. I mean, we have the general idea to prepare them for it. . . . But unless we’re attached to the school and we know all of our students feed into this one school, it presents a challenge when there’s six or seven different schools that they leave to.

At least one principal in San Francisco—a fairly new principal with middle school teaching experience—knew that some of her students came from a child care center renting space on her campus and she questioned the program quality. She said, “when I disaggregate the data with my kinder and first [graders] in terms of who attended the center and who didn’t, I don’t see a difference.” But after California started transitional kindergarten (TK), she began to notice a difference: “so the kids coming right from that center, I’m not seeing a big difference, and the kids coming from TK, it’s almost like they’re ready for first grade.” She regretted not having the capacity to reach out and learn more about what the center is doing.



ANALYSIS: LEADERS NEED MORE FORMAL AND CONSISTENT STRUCTURES TO HELP THEM BUILD PRE-K-TO-K TRANSITIONS

Principal leadership can be a key lever for establishing and strengthening connections between pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades of elementary school, whether pre-K is housed on the school campus or not. Not surprisingly, building these connections is easier when pre-K is located in the building. Still, as we learned from the principals in our focus groups, connections between pre-K and kindergarten often lack complexity even when they are co-located. And, they will not necessarily lead to the easy-to-ascend staircase of learning envisioned in our *Beyond Subprime Learning* report.³

In many schools, including pre-K students, and to some extent, pre-K teachers, in school activities has become common. Our principals even pointed to some examples of their pre-K and kindergarten teachers planning together and working to align curriculum. But there are real barriers to deepening this collaboration and making it more ingrained in school culture. The principal may not have direct supervision of the program or the teacher. In many places, pre-K teachers might not have to meet the same teacher licensure requirements or

be compensated on the same salary schedule as their peers in kindergarten through third grade. And, until recently, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that provides professional development dollars to states and school districts did not explicitly include pre-K teachers in development activities funded by this law. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, the new ESEA) does allow this. This new law also emphasizes transitions between pre-K and K, especially from Head Start programs, but also other early childhood programs when possible.⁴

Getting principals to look beyond the programs their school provides is a more difficult task and one that takes capacity, time, and resources. Simply put, building relationships with local child care centers, Head Start programs, and family care is not currently on many principals' radars. While ensuring that the teaching and learning happening in these PreK–3rd grade rooms is coordinated and connected is highly important, so is understanding the kinds of early learning experiences children have before they enter the kindergarten classroom.

Connecting with external early childhood providers could help to facilitate the sharing of information and data, coordinate expectations across pre-K and kindergarten, and foster opportunities for shared learning. But as heard in our focus group discussions and based on our exploration of this topic, these kinds of interactions are the exception rather than the norm.

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Relationships tend to be informal interactions—more one-off information gathering missions rather than strategic communication efforts that could lead to deeper relationships and collaboration. From New America’s travels and conversations with other state and district leaders, we have heard about isolated examples of informal and sometimes more

formal, ongoing, interactions. More often, though, we hear the frustration and uncertainty about even knowing where and how to begin, especially from elementary school principals.

It should not just be child care centers and Head Start programs trying to help their families navigate the new world of kindergarten and elementary school. Principals should recognize the value in establishing relationships with center administrators and building connections between what happens before children enter kindergarten and after. But, for the most part, there is a lack of effort at the district or state level to bring these early education leaders together to develop relationships and foster collaboration and coordination among their staffs.

New America has learned about a few states and school districts that have taken steps to encourage linkages between public elementary schools and other pre-K providers. More research and learning is needed on the kind of efforts underway, how they are working, and under what conditions. In the final brief in this series, we will discuss what we know about these efforts and offer recommendations for broadening and deepening these links across the country.

Notes

¹ LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015).

² Elaine K. McEwan, *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals: From Good to Great Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003).

³ Laura Bornfreund, Clare McCann, Conor Williams, and Lisa Guernsey, *Beyond Subprime Learning: Accelerating Progress in Early Education* (Washington, DC: New America, 2014).

⁴ “Every Student Succeeds Act,” November 30, 2015, <http://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ESSA%20FINAL%20Conference%20Report.pdf>



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