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LEADING FOR THE EARLY YEARS:

Principals' Reflections on the Need for Better Preparation



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About the Authors



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INTRODUCTION

While most adults can name their elementary school teachers and probably even recall specific activities from each grade, most probably struggle to recall much about their elementary school principals. But those principals likely had a larger impact on their lives than they realize. After teachers, principals are the most important in-school factor impacting student achievement.¹ In fact, research shows that school leadership accounts for 25 percent of student learning.² Still, the important work that principals do is often behind the scenes, out of view for youngsters and sometimes even their families.

Effective principals wear many hats: they support instruction, manage school operations, foster the school's learning climate, communicate with families and the community, "fight fires," and are increasingly responsible for helping turn around failing schools. While all of these are critical to the success of a school, a principal's role in supporting instruction by recruiting, hiring, evaluating, developing, and retaining excellent teachers is arguably the most important. To ensure that students are learning, principals must help foster high-quality teaching in their schools by providing teachers with valuable feedback on instruction, and



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

offering worthwhile opportunities for professional learning. It is essential that principals can conduct these tasks across grade levels, recognizing that developmentally-appropriate instruction looks different in pre-K and kindergarten, and even in first, second, and third grade, than it does in fourth and fifth grade.

Unfortunately, it is common for elementary school principals to enter this role with little or no formal training in early education or child development. Principals in New America's focus groups (see box above) said that the most important part of their job is helping teachers provide high-quality instruction. However, many principals had no experience in early childhood and they shed light on how little their preparation programs equip them to be instructional leaders for the early grades. Their formal training tends to focus on the management

and budgeting side of their jobs. Principals revealed that for the most part, they learned everything else on the job.

In 2005, Arthur Levine, who was president of Teachers College at Columbia University at the time, wrote, "the majority of [educational administration] programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities. . . . Their curricula are disconnected from the needs of leaders and their schools."³ Levine found that programs were more focused on getting potential principals in and out of the door quickly than truly preparing them to improve student learning. A series of reports recently commissioned by the Wallace Foundation reveal that not much has changed in the decade since Levine's report.⁴ It is clear that there is room for improvement in principal preparation in general, and preparation for the early grades in particular.

HOW PRINCIPALS FEEL ABOUT THEIR FORMAL PREPARATION

Principals in our focus groups echoed the findings of recent research: they felt that their preparation programs did not fully ready them. As one Minneapolis principal explained, “I don’t think the [preparation] program, at least 19 years ago at the [university], it didn’t prepare me. No way. It was all the book stuff, but the real life, day-to-day . . . what do you do when the fire alarm goes off and it’s 20 below? Those types of things. How do you manage those things?” Many participants shared that they had limited or no experience with early childhood education prior to taking on the elementary school principal role. While not all principals valued the need for such experience, others felt it was important. As one Orlando principal put it,

When I was preparing for my first AP [assistant principal] assignment, my superintendent called me in and said, “I am sending you to an elementary school.” And I looked at him and said, “I am a special educator that loves middle school and you are sending me to elementary school?” [I had] no preparation. Thank God my principal was a kindergarten teacher, and I was with her for four years and she mentored me.

This principal was fortunate to have a knowledgeable mentor, but many new principals were forced to learn about early education on their

own. One Minneapolis principal explained his own challenges in learning what proper reading instruction looks like, which is a key component of effective teaching in the early grades: “so I was a middle school teacher, and I became, at one time, a K-3 [kindergarten through 3rd grade] principal. And so I [had] taught math and some social studies too, but never taught reading. And you know reading is so critical. It took a lot of training. It took me time to learn all of that. If we are going to lead, we need to know that. It was a journey for me.”

The principals in our groups expressed a strong desire to be effective instructional leaders. They consistently named this as the best or most important part of their jobs. However, many new principals felt they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to provide valuable instructional feedback to all teachers. One Orlando principal admitted, “since I taught fifth grade for so many years I don’t feel as comfortable giving advice to the kindergarten teachers the way I might with a new fifth grade teacher.” Multiple principals in our groups echoed this sentiment.

Some principals said that having personal experience teaching young children gave them greater credibility with their teachers. According to a principal from Austin:

It's the credibility. It's the belief that you walked in their shoes. We've had the experience in our district of hiring people that maybe haven't been, haven't had the experience in elementary school, and it has not gone well for a variety of reasons . . . it's something that I do hear my teachers say a lot. "Well, you remember when you were a teacher. . . ." It's a way to check with me too.

that I would not have had had I stepped out of the classroom and directly into an assistant principal position. I was very thankful." Another said, "I've worked with a lot of APs [assistant principals] over the years. The two best came from being instructional coaches because they have that content and that curriculum background that I didn't have when I started, that's for sure."

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Multiple principals in our groups said that holding positions in between being a classroom teacher and a principal was important in preparing to be a school leader. One Minneapolis principal said, "it's a big leap to go from the classroom to being a principal. For me, personally, what helped was the other positions in between. So the staff development, the tech integration person . . . behavior intervention teacher. . . Working with the principal as mentor, where she gave me those opportunities, those responsibilities."

A woman in our Austin group said that her experience as a school counselor "saved" her in terms of preparing for her role as principal. Others felt that principals benefitted from being instructional coaches. One said, "I was an instructional coach for three years before I became an administrator, and I was very appreciative of that experience because I feel it allowed me to have a very solid curriculum base on a K-5 level

Other principals explained the difference that strong mentorship can make. When asked whether he could remember what was missing from training to be a principal, one Austin man responded,

Experiential opportunities. It is trying to teach a soldier to fight without a gun. . . . Whether you get a really good experiential preparation depends on the school and the principal you had because some principals do their job[s] and they want you to take care of your compartmentalized thing, and they don't do anything to nurture you or bring you along.

Whether it was a prior job, a strong mentor, or both, elementary school principals in our focus groups tended to credit experiences other than formal preparation programs with their readiness to lead a school. Most participants felt that the formal training they had received was inadequate.

ANALYSIS: PRINCIPALS NEED STRONGER PREPARATION, INCLUDING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY LEARNING

As the body of research on the importance of early education and its long-term impact on student success continues to grow, federal, state, and local entities are increasing their investments in early education. In turn, more and more elementary schools are offering full-day kindergarten and pre-K programs. Yet, principal preparation has not adapted to align with these changes. Many elementary school principals and assistant principals come into these leadership roles without ever teaching in the early grades or even working at an elementary school. Their preparation programs and state licensure requirements rarely fill these gaps in expertise. While there are multiple areas where state requirements around principal preparation can improve, their focus on early education tends to be largely inadequate.

To effectively oversee pre-K through third grade teachers and classrooms, principals need to have an understanding of child development and how young children learn. For instance, a principal evaluating early grade teachers should be able to recognize that children playing in a toy kitchen area in a kindergarten or even a first grade classroom is entirely appropriate *and educational*. Or that children playing dress up and pretending to run an

ice cream stand are learning important skills. She should be able to observe a pre-K classroom and tell the difference between playful learning and chaos.

Principals should also understand the importance of creating a comprehensive continuum of learning for young students. In *PreK-3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders*, Sara Mead explained that when principals do not have the necessary

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knowledge about early learning, they “may have inappropriate expectations of pre-K and kindergarten students, and may push teachers to teach in ways that do not engage young children or take into account their stage of development. Others may largely ignore pre-K and kindergarten, leaving those teachers isolated from the larger school.”⁵ For

young children to sustain the gains made in pre-K and kindergarten, it is essential that schools create a cohesive pre-K through third grade continuum of learning and supports. Principals should be leaders in fostering such a continuum.

Having teaching experience in the early grades can have clear benefits: not only does it mean principals are more likely to understand what appropriate instruction for young children looks like, but it increases principals' (and their teachers') confidence in their ability to be instructional leaders. Principals are likely to be more effective instructional leaders when they have teachers who value their insight and judgment. Of course, it is nearly impossible for principals to have experience teaching every grade that they are responsible for evaluating. But it is realistic to expect preparation programs and professional learning to fill gaps in

their knowledge or experience and ensure they gain the skills they need to be effective leaders.

A strong knowledge base and opportunities for experiences in early childhood education would allow principals to better support instruction in early grade classrooms. By incorporating early childhood content into preparation programs for new principals and by providing ongoing professional development for existing principals, policymakers could help to ensure that elementary school leaders are able to identify and encourage developmentally-appropriate instruction and make personnel decisions that value the needs of young learners.

The last and final brief in this series includes more detailed policy recommendations surrounding elementary school principals and the early grades.



Notes

¹ Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, September 2004), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Documents/How-Leadership-Influences-Student-Learning.pdf>.

² Sara Mead, *PreK–3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, April 2011), <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/FCD%20PrincipalsBrief7.pdf>.

³ Arthur Levine, *Educating School Leaders* (Princeton, NJ: Education Schools Project, March 2005), <http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf>.

⁴ *Improving University Principal Preparation Programs: Five Themes from the Field* (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2016), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/principal-training/Documents/Improving-University-Principal-Preparation-Programs.pdf>.

⁵ Sara Mead, *PreK–3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, April 2011), <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/FCD%20PrincipalsBrief7.pdf>.



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