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BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Elementary Principals are Key to Strong PreK-3rd
Grade Classrooms



Principal Preparation and Development

Connecting Pre-K and the Early Grades

Hiring and Staffing

Academics and Play

Why Principals Matter

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INTRODUCTION

In the first five briefs, we explained the findings from New America’s focus groups with elementary school principals. The first established the importance of principals acting as early education leaders. The second focused on principals’ understanding of developmentally-appropriate practice in the early grades. The third examined how principals approach the hiring of early childhood teachers. The fourth highlighted the role that principals can play in bridging pre-K and the early grades. The fifth highlighted the dearth of

early childhood content in principal preparation.

This final brief provides specific recommendations that could begin to address these issues. We explore promising ideas for 1) improving principals’ knowledge of child development and the ways young children learn best and 2) establishing and strengthening connections between pre-K—regardless of the setting in which it is offered—and kindergarten. To conclude, we offer four recommendations for states and school districts.

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

IMPROVE KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The findings from our focus groups (see box on page 2) clearly signal that principals need better preparation, professional development, and support from districts and states to be strong PreK–3rd grade leaders. Participants said they felt that their preparation programs did not fully prepare them for their role as elementary school principals. Without formal training, many were left to learn about early education on their own, and consequently, their opinions of how young children learn best varied. While the principals expressed a strong desire to be effective instructional leaders, many felt they lacked the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill this role. Most principals recognized the importance of strong teaching in the early grades, but needed more guidance and training on how to best support teachers and students in these grades.

Start with Principal Preparation and Licensure

One of the easiest ways to educate principals on early learning is to reach them through their preparation programs. Illinois is a pioneer when it comes to preparing principals to be strong early education leaders. In its 2014 report *What Do We Know About Principal Preparation, Licensure Requirements, and Professional Development for School Leaders?* the Center on Enhancing Early

Learning Outcomes found Illinois is currently the only state that requires elementary principals to have preparation in early childhood education. Illinois recently replaced its K–12 principal license with a P–12 principal license, bringing pre-K into preparation requirements for all principals,

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regardless of their experience or which type of school they plan to lead. Early childhood content is now woven throughout the curriculum, as opposed to being covered in a separate class.

Another important part of Illinois’s reform was the move to a performance-based internship and competency-based assessments.¹ Instead of requiring that principals intern for a specified number of hours, the state decided that “it was more important to define the knowledge and skills that candidates needed to learn and demonstrate competency through authentic internship

experiences.”² During the internships, prospective principals are required to engage with instruction at all grade levels, including pre-K. They also must demonstrate that they meet a host of competencies, some of which are specific to early learning.³ The new law, passed in 2010, also ensured that the state’s certification exam included early learning content.⁴

As discussed in brief five, multiple studies have found that preparation programs across the U.S. are ineffective at readying principals for school leadership.⁵ But while revising principal preparation can help to create a pipeline of school leaders who have a better understanding of appropriate expectations for PreK–3rd, it does not solve the whole problem. The current principal force needs opportunities to learn on the job.

Reach Principals Through Professional Learning

While no other state has revamped its principal preparation like Illinois, a handful have invested in professional learning opportunities around early learning for existing principals. This can be an effective way to reach those who are already leading schools and a way to maintain principals’ knowledge and improve their practice over the years.

Minnesota is one of a handful of states that has used Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge

(RTT-ELC) funds for this purpose. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is working closely with the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association to host a five-day Principal Leadership Series which gives school leaders the opportunity to learn how to build strong PreK–3rd grade programs in their schools and communities.⁶ The Principal Leadership Series is based on *Leading Pre–K–3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* published by the National Association for Elementary School Principals.⁷ There are 65 principal-led teams participating in the first cohort of this series, representing practically every region in the state. MDE is already planning a second cohort based on strong interest from other principals. In the second offering, participants attend multiple full-day seminars to develop leadership skills and complete online modules on PreK–3rd professional practice and competency. The final aspect of the series is focused on system organization, where superintendents, principals, teachers, and community partners form teams and create meaningful action plans for moving from alignment to coherence between early learning, kindergarten, and the primary grades. When RTT-ELC funding expires at the end of 2016, MDE hopes to continue this work through either state or private funding.⁸

Other states, including Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington have instituted similar professional learning institutes to increase school leaders’ knowledge of early education.⁹ The programs vary from state to state in terms of size, intensity, and funding sources, but most enroll principals with other leaders, such as early education directors, and they focus on child development and alignment of pre-K and the early grades of elementary school.

While these types of institutes have the potential to be effective, they also have limitations. For one, they tend to be voluntary, meaning the principals most likely to choose to attend are those who already have some interest in early education.



ESTABLISH AND STRENGTHEN CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PRE-K AND K

There is limited attention at the district or state level to how to bring elementary school principals and child care center directors together to develop relationships and foster staff collaboration and coordination. But in a few places there are efforts to encourage linkages between public elementary schools and other pre-K providers.

Washington state, for instance, created WaKIDS to facilitate the transition between pre-K and kindergarten. The process includes three elements: family engagement, whole-child kindergarten entry assessment, and early learning collaboration. The State Department of Early Learning is actively encouraging principals to make contact with the child care programs in the areas surrounding their schools. The state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Department of Early Learning entered into a partnership with Child Care Aware of Washington to help principals identify and build partnerships and collaborations with potential feeder child care providers to help smooth the transition into kindergarten. In 2015, this effort was piloted in all 39 counties in the state.¹⁰

Oregon is another example. The state created and funded Early Learning Hubs to strengthen alignment between early learning and elementary education by creating partnerships between providers of early learning services, child care providers, and elementary schools. In some communities, these partnerships have led to instructional and curricular alignment efforts and shared professional development for pre-K and kindergarten teachers.¹¹

The federal government has played a role in encouraging stronger coordination between what happens before, during, and after kindergarten. Earlier rounds of Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants focused primarily on helping states build systems to support children from birth to age five, but the last two rounds encouraged states to connect and coordinate their birth-to-five systems with what is happening in elementary schools.

FOUR ACTIONS FOR STATES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO BETTER SUPPORT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

- 1. States should incorporate early childhood education into principal preparation.** In order for school leaders to truly support early learners and their teachers, principals should graduate from preparation programs and begin their positions well-versed in child development, early childhood curriculum, developmentally appropriate practices, and methods for family and community engagement. More states should follow Illinois's lead and specifically incorporate early childhood content into the licensure and accreditation process. Another way for prospective principals to gain valuable preparation for this role is to participate in an internship or some other type of clinical experience. Only so much of what principals need to know can be learned inside of a higher education classroom; much of the difficult work that they will encounter is better learned in the elementary school building.
- 2. States and school districts should provide ongoing professional learning opportunities related to early education.** In-service training

is the best way to reach the principals already working in schools. They need formal training to be able to provide specialized feedback for PreK–3rd teachers, to understand the appropriate expectations for young learners, and to build a strong culture of family engagement beginning as early as possible. Some states have implemented voluntary professional development for principals, often in conjunction with other teachers and school leaders, around alignment of curriculum, instruction, and professional development across the PreK–3rd continuum. This can be effective and meaningful if done well, but it should be required instead of voluntary for principals who do not have a background in early education. States should help fund professional learning related to early education, with a priority for reaching principals who do not have a strong background in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades. Federal funds can also support this type of professional learning through Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (explained more below, in

action 4). Because principals have such a strong impact on student learning, it is crucial that states make this kind of ongoing professional development a priority for all elementary school principals.

3. States and school districts should invest in opportunities to bring elementary school principals and center directors together.

While more and more elementary schools have pre-K classrooms housed on campus, for the foreseeable future there will be incoming kindergartners who did not attend a program on site. Many families, for a variety of reasons, will opt to send their four-year-olds to child care centers, family home providers, or care in a less formal arrangement. This means principals and teachers have to look beyond their school building to understand children's previous learning experiences. States and school districts should provide guidance to school leaders on how to identify and reach out to likely feeder community early education providers as well as on how to start conversations about children's transitions, curricula, assessment, instruction,

and discussions of how to better connect pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades.

4. States should take advantage of ESSA to support this work.

The newly reauthorized law has an increased focus on early learning, and includes language explicitly stating that Title II dollars (funds to prepare, train, and recruit high-quality educators) can be used for early educators. Districts receiving Title II funds can now use them to provide programs and activities that increase “the knowledge base of teachers and principals on instruction in the early grades, and strategies to measure whether young children are progressing.”¹² Districts can also use funds to improve “the ability of principals or other school leaders to support [educators] to meet the needs of students through age 8, which may include providing joint professional learning and planning activities for school staff and educators in preschool programs that address the transition to elementary school.”¹³ The law's language also specifies that staff and educators in pre-K programs can participate in professional

Districts receiving Title II [ESSA] funds can now use them to provide programs and activities that increase “the knowledge base of teachers and principals on instruction in the early grades, and strategies to measure whether young children are progressing.”

and professional development. This should become a two-way learning opportunity for both center educators and elementary school educators. School districts could also work with regional child care referral offices to establish relationships and processes for connecting schools and community early education programs. States can establish opportunities for these diverse early learning leaders to come together for joint professional development

learning activities, and it seems to open the door to programs located off school grounds that might feed into the elementary school. This is one avenue for districts to establish relationships and improve transitions between local child care centers and elementary schools, closing the gaps between the steps of the early learning staircase.

Notes

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