

## **PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON PREK-3<sup>RD</sup> STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND CLASSROOMS**

### **FINDINGS FROM A SERIES OF FOCUS GROUPS**

**PREPARED FOR NEW AMERICA**

**BY THE FDR GROUP**

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#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This report is based on findings from five focus groups conducted across the country with early childhood educators, mainly elementary school principals.<sup>1</sup> The research was commissioned by New America and conducted by the nonpartisan public opinion research firm FDR Group.

The purpose of the research was to gain a richer understanding of what's taking place in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms from the perspective of the administrators who are responsible for staffing, evaluating, setting learning goals, and cultivating their school's vision. The research will be used by New America to inform its ongoing research, policy papers, blogs, and commentary as part of its Early Education Initiative.

The key findings are:

1. Both academic learning and other early childhood learning (e.g., socialization, creativity) are essential in the earliest grades, according to principals, but the pendulum has swung too far toward the former and children are losing out.
2. Although PreK-2<sup>nd</sup> grades are typically not mandated for statewide testing, principals are under pressure to ensure that the teachers in these grades prepare students sufficiently to meet 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency standards.

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<sup>1</sup> Several directors of PreK programs also participated in the focus groups. In this report references to "principals" also includes the views and experiences of PreK directors unless otherwise noted.

3. Principals say there's an equity problem in PreK. High quality PreK exists, but the children who are least likely to have access to it are the ones who need it most – i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, English language learners, immigrants, and the poor.
4. There's room for improvement in alignment between PreK centers and public school kindergartens.
5. Moving weaker teachers to the earliest grades may be tempting, but principals view it as short-sighted and say the practice is on the decline. Still, some principals describe 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as a “dumping ground.”
6. Principals suggest that experience in early childhood education is important but not essential when it comes to staffing the primary grades. They point to teacher preferences and specific personality traits as more critical.
7. Teaching credentials sometimes tie principals' hands when it comes to staffing decisions. Credentials for PreK teachers may not be as rigorous as those for K-8 teachers.
8. Formal training for principals centers on things like management, human resources, and budgeting. There is virtually no focus on content knowledge or early childhood learning or development. For the most part, principals say, they learned on the job.
9. Principals say they would prefer to spend more time being instructional leaders and interacting with children and teachers in classrooms, but instead their time is spent on administrative duties and handling emergencies.

What follows is a description of the research methodology, the detailed findings with corresponding quotes, and some observations and suggestions for future research. Attached at the end of the report are the screening specifications used to recruit focus group participants and the moderator's guide.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The FDR Group convened five focus groups with early childhood educators to explore their views about and experiences with PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> students, teachers, and classrooms. The focus groups took place between February and April 2015, one each in San Francisco, New York City, Austin, Minneapolis, and Orlando. In total 46 educators participated, including 38 principals and two assistant principals in public elementary schools, plus six directors of PreK programs (public and private). A detailed screening process was used for recruiting administrators (screening protocol attached).

The focus group participants were diverse in terms of:

- Race and ethnicity (mostly white but also several African American per group)
- Having a mix of both men and women (except in the two groups that included PreK directors, which consisted of only women)
- Experience as administrator (from first year to those with 20 or more years)
- Type of school (urban, suburban, rural; high and low socio-economic status)
- Grades taught as teachers (from PreK through high school)

Ann Duffett, PhD, of the FDR Group, moderated the focus groups, analyzed the data, and wrote this report. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. That is to say the inclusion of some topics depended on the knowledge, interest, and experience of the interviewees, while other topics were asked of everyone. Our charge was to capture the views and experiences of these educators in their own words, and verbatim quotes are the data used to inform the findings. We found the participants to be interested and fully engaged in the conversations. All were assured of confidentiality, and so names of neither people nor schools are included here.

The focus groups were held in and recruited by professional facilities. In general, the facilities recruited potential participants using their own opt-in databases that include thousands of people who have signed up to participate in focus groups. The databases grow by word of mouth, community outreach, and advertising. Facilities also reached out directly to local school districts and other community resources to find early childhood educators who would meet the screening qualifications. Each group lasted approximately two hours.

A few words of caution about the nature of qualitative research: Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring people's spontaneous views on a given topic and for uncovering underlying values that help explain why people feel the way they do. From a policy or communications strategy standpoint, they provide information on how to frame information to effectively appeal to the values and mind-sets that underlie beliefs. But, although focus groups are tremendously helpful for listening to people talk about issues, for uncovering the sources of their opinions and motivations for action, and for generating hypotheses for further research, they cannot determine how many people hold a particular view. These findings reflect the views of the focus group participants and cannot be generalized to the population of early childhood educators as a whole.

### III. KEY FINDINGS

#### **Finding 1.**

**Both academic learning and other early childhood learning (e.g., socialization, creativity) are essential in the earliest grades, according to principals, but the pendulum has swung too far toward the former and children are losing out.**

Academic expectations for young children are high and have been getting more rigorous in recent years. Principals recognize the importance of preparing PreK and kindergarten children for the academic rigors of today's public school classrooms, yet most bemoaned the loss of time devoted to free play and talked about the negative consequences for creativity, imagination, problem solving, and social skills. A few suggested that the pendulum is swinging back to include more time for play. Still, principals worry that too many young children are not developmentally ready for the academic rigor that is currently expected of them. A common refrain heard in the groups: 'Kindergarten is what 1<sup>st</sup> grade used to be.'

#### *More rigorous in recent years*

I taught kindergarten for 8 years and seeing the change. When I first started they had to know all their letters and 50% of their sounds,

where now they have to know all their letters, all their sounds, and be able to read the site words on list A. – Principal, Orlando

Like the ELA for kindergarten – writing full sentences earlier. It used to be that if they could write a sentence by the end of kindergarten we'd be happy. – Principal, Orlando

Part of the issue is that so much more is expected of kindergarten today. It used to be not that big of a deal if a kid couldn't write their name. They would learn in kindergarten. Now they are coming out of kindergarten writing sentences, some of them. The range of skill has clearly grown. – Principal, Minneapolis

Students come out of kindergarten reading and that didn't used to be an expectation 10 years ago.... There was a lot more play time embedded in K, exploration. – Principal, Minneapolis

The expectations for them coming out of kindergarten two or three years ago [was different].... Now....they've got to be to a certain level to be at the college ready standard, to be able to be ready for 1<sup>st</sup> grade. So much more structure. Much more a focus on academic strengths and foundations for math. – Principal, Austin

I see now kindergarten as being more rigid. We do have core standards and things now. I see that being much more rigid by not giving children more flexibility, by not giving them more chances to play and explore and everything. I definitely see that kindergarten now is more rigid. – Principal, New York City

### *Importance of play; children losing out*

I hear about what's going on in kindergarten [and I think], "Why aren't you letting them play? Why aren't you letting them play? That's how they learn." – PreK Director, New York City

I think the benefit of creative play too, the creativity that is involved with that, the natural problem solving that kids learn to do through play. Socialization through play, there's a lot of things we lose a little when we take that away at this early age. – Principal, Minneapolis

I have to be honest. We don't have the kitchens or the house anymore in kindergarten because there was no time for that. – Principal, Orlando

On the first day of school the 1<sup>st</sup> graders sit down and they have a written problem in front of them that they have to solve. They definitely get very high level learning from them, but we are even missing that playing with manipulatives to understand math concepts, and it is very

structured even in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. They do well, they are successful, but I do feel like they are missing that social element too. And I think they're missing a strong learning aspect as well by just jumping right into something rigorous. – Principal, Austin

### *Pendulum swinging back*

Just about the early literacy demands – we originally over-reacted and took our kitchens out of the kindergarten classes because there wasn't time to play house any more, but now they're pushing back in and saying, "How do we integrate our centers to hit those academic cues?" Play is so developmentally important to those kids. – Principal, Austin

We've actually made a push for play in a way we never had before. We took a big teacher training over the summer and pushed the idea of free open play for kids especially in the younger grades where we had taken it out because it had become so academic. The kindergarten is basically what 1<sup>st</sup> grade used to be 10-15 years ago. – Principal, Austin

### *Children not developmentally ready*

I still ask why are we pushing abstract thought younger and younger when developmentally they are still in that concrete phase. That's what I ask every day. We are expecting kindergartners to have a thinking process like adults, and it's just not seeing the forest from the trees. – Principal, Austin

I see a real deficit in the ability that kids have to collaborate and take turns and be fair and all of those things that we want our kids to be able to do – even at 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade levels. Because we haven't let them play enough. – Principal, Austin

In Austin, there was a principal who disagreed about the lack of time devoted to play in the earliest grades. She described what they do in her district to meld "free play time" with academic learning.

I don't know. I think there's lots of opportunities for play. I don't think it necessarily has to be a center. For example, in our push for play we put what we called STEM carts in every classroom, and it's these big shelves with all these different levels of manipulatives that kids play with, different kinds of building blocks, different kinds of erector sets, different kinds of devices to put together. We wanted kids to be able to play and cooperate together and have those moments, but also be building STEM skills, and so we added those in as part of free play

time for all of our grade levels, and they look different at every grade level. But it is one of the ways we can put play back in, and kids can use their imagination, but they are also experiencing problem solving, collaboration, and early engineering skills. – Principal, Austin

## **Finding 2.**

**Although PreK-2<sup>nd</sup> grades are typically not mandated for statewide testing, principals are under pressure to ensure that the teachers in these grades prepare students sufficiently to meet 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency standards.**

The prevailing perception among the principals in these focus group was that their teachers and schools are evaluated almost solely based on students' standardized test scores. Whether or not this perception is correct, the pressure principals feel to improve state test scores has far reaching consequences for students, teachers, and principals themselves.

*Pressure on students:* According to principals, students are required to take too many tests, especially ELL and academically struggling students. Thus, testing takes time away from teaching for the students who most need classroom instruction.

When I was a principal 18 years ago versus now, because of NCLB demands and expectations of the state with Ready to Read by 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, there's a pressure for people to drive our kids more so that there is less opportunity for kids to put on a play or do more of the creative stuff. – Principal, Minneapolis

So we have our ELL program and our intervention program. And we have to prove that they work, so we test those kids more, so they get less instruction [and they're the ones who need it most]. Access Testing – shut everything down for 30 days.... That loss of instruction is the biggest piece for our strugglers. – Principal, Minneapolis

I'll be honest with you. If you are in a very affluent community you are not working and sweating every day to close the achievement gap. But I've worked in Title I bilingual schools, the work is a little bit different. And when you are working to close that achievement gap, you are looking at your numbers and your data so much more often than when you are working in a community where the scores just come because kids come to school ready to learn every day. – Principal, Austin

*Pressure on teachers:* Principals sense that teachers in tested grades resent being evaluated based on student achievement when teachers in PreK-2<sup>nd</sup> are not. In the tested grades, there's pressure to focus on testing rather than teaching; in the non-tested grades, principals sometimes worry that rigor may be lacking.

It is true they don't have the accountability that the other grades have, so even when you have master teachers in the younger grades to monitor.... When a teacher doesn't have this accountability throughout the year, even if they are wonderful teachers.... If you are only looking at progress monitoring tools it is not the same [as state tests]. – Principal, Austin

We had a colleague who moved a teacher and the next year she got a state award for the most growth, just by one person moving into that 4<sup>th</sup> grade math spot. So the pressure's on in a situation like that when you are the one. Because the data really is the result...it is very personal. A lot of people in our building, in our district are paranoid about some of those highly visible spots. – Principal, Minneapolis

I have a couple of teachers at my school, that was their intention right from day one. They wanted certification only to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because they never wanted to be placed in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade or 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom so they avoid it.... There are some people out there that don't see themselves in the testing grades and really want to avoid it. – Principal, Orlando

My first year there I had teachers coming in to see me every day saying, "Please don't move me up to a different grade," because they were afraid to go up to an intermediate grade. – Principal, Orlando

The hardest thing is that my 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers have to teach the standards. And they know they are going to be assessed. In my K, 1 and 2, I still find fluff. I still have to go in and say, "Why are all the children sitting on the floor and you are regurgitating the alphabet, not every child needs to be sitting on the floor singing the ABCs." I think that is what I have noticed between primary grades and intermediate. The intermediate teachers understand that they are going to be held accountable when that test comes out. The primary teachers work just as hard and understand the standards, but I don't think they understand that rigor to have the students ready for grades 3, 4, and 5. – Principal, Orlando

*Pressure on principals:* Principals report that schools face closure or restructuring when targets are not reached, not to mention decline in their public reputation. This results

in pressure to improve student standardized test scores at the expense of other important things. It also causes the district to micro-manage principals and leaves them with little autonomy. Principals report that they are sometimes drowning in data.

The state assesses the PreK separately. So generally if you are going to have an unsuccessful PreK program you have a year to turn it around or they will close the program on us. We don't put the challenging teacher that cannot do the job in PreK. – Principal, Orlando

NCLB has caused some desperation. We have to get this better or they'll close our school. We have to get better or we are all out of here. There probably is a place where some of that stuff does happen. I just think that it would just be a terrible practice. – Principal, Minneapolis

Our district is different, it is very compliance driven and getting in there [to evaluate] so many times. Our administration at the district level has done an in-depth survey and gotten feedback from the teachers and the principals. And the feedback has been a very strong consensus that we have been spending too much time doing the paperwork and the compliance instead of the informative type of evaluation and conversation. – Principal, Orlando

It is finding the time to take that information that is in there. For the teachers to have that data in their hand and to go back and look and say, "OK, now what do we do with it?" On our calendar, there's no opportunities unless we have subs, or in our 45 minute PLC, to do that. Those are once a week; you just get started, and it's time to stop.... Time is a huge issue. There's a lot of good information. It's just there's almost too much information. – Principal, Austin

Paralysis by analysis I call it. We have so much rich data. And you can catch yourself going down a rabbit trail, chasing the data in one direction. – Principal, Austin

### **Finding 3.**

**Principals say there's an equity problem in PreK. High quality PreK exists, but the children who are least likely to have access to it are the ones who need it most – i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, English language learners, immigrants, and the poor.**

There was universal agreement among the principals in these focus groups on the importance of high quality early childhood education as fundamental to future school

success, as well as a belief that free PreK is necessary to ensure all kids – regardless of economic status or any other demographic variable – start kindergarten ready to learn. According to principals, too many youngsters in their districts do not have access to quality PreK, mainly due to affordability or availability. Principals worry about the result, which is two tiers of youngsters: those who are kindergarten ready and those who are not. Yet, principals face challenges when reaching out to target 4-year-olds in their communities who would most benefit from PreK.

#### *Free PreK is necessary for equity*

There needs to be free preschool, and especially in neighborhoods where students are English language learners, they are impoverished.... In a neighborhood like mine, TK can mean you start kindergarten the same way the kids on the other side of town do. You know your sounds. You know your alphabet. You're ready to start putting words down. So I think that's the intention behind it, but I don't think that it's the right one. It's not. It needs to be free preschool. – Principal, San Francisco

We love to have kindergarteners be able to read by the end of the year, but the reality is what she said, they are coming in at very different [stages], it is not a level playing field. But if you had PreK for everyone, you would see kids going into kindergarten with all the letters and sounds so you can begin that process. – Principal, Austin

The fact that not all children go to PreK as they do to kindergarten, so the expectations are that's kind of a bonus for those kids. I think having strict standards for PreK is hard when not every child has that opportunity. – Principal, Austin

The barrier I've seen is a financial barrier. Some kids would participate but the parents don't have the access to the programs. – Principal, Minneapolis

They just added a half day and we had every day and all day/every day for a fee for a long time. Basically we were creating or exacerbating the achievement gap. People who couldn't afford it got half as much kindergarten. People who could afford it got all day/every day. So by the end of kindergarten we had to act like that was OK but realistically we are creating the gap. – Principal, Minneapolis

#### *Quality varies*

I see a huge difference in our kindergarteners between those who had zero preschool and those that had some preschool and those who are

part of our district community ed preschool. There are three separate striations that I see..... A lot of them already know how to read when they come out of the community ed version. A lot of the others know somewhat how to read, they know their letters, they've got a sense for it. Those that have had zero experience, a lot of them can't write their name. – Principal, Minneapolis

We have data showing that all my students that came into PreK and the ones that have stayed with us up through 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade right now...it shows that those students have made great gains compared to their peers that did not go to PreK. Same demographics. Same socio-economic status. So I think we have hard data. Same data that we've looked at longitudinally where students that come into our school district, if they stay with us, achieve much better than their peers, same socio-economic demographic background.... You give us any kid and they stay here and we'll do great things with them. – Principal, Minneapolis

#### *Outreach challenges*

We are 64% free and reduced in our district, high Latino, Somali population so it is vitally important that we get those kids in early so we can find out what their needs are and help prepare them for kindergarten. One of the things we've been talking about even the last few days is finding a way in our district to identify those students even earlier through the welfare system.... Principal, Minneapolis

In almost every one of our 24 elementary schools there was a number of kindergartners who had come through without anything on their radar – no preschool, no early childhood special ed, and they are wildly needy.... So we came up with an expedited evaluation process because these kids had the potential to just create chaos in the schools for the first two weeks. – Principal, Minneapolis

#### **Finding 4.**

##### **There's room for improvement in alignment between PreK centers and public school kindergartens.**

Interaction between the public schools and center-based PreK programs is informal and for the most part dependent upon long-standing relationships with feeder schools or efforts initiated by individual PreK directors. This is partly because principals and directors are over-extended but also because there do not seem to be structures in place to facilitate communication. As a consequence, PreK directors seem to be relatively uninformed about

kindergarten-level academic standards. PreK programs housed in public schools fare better: they are structured to prepare students for kindergarten readiness, and their teachers communicate regularly, work as a team, and are familiar with the standards expected for the next level.

*Informal interactions, uninformed*

We make it a point to find out when those kindergarten orientations are in the schools that they [feed] 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. – PreK Director, New York City

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. – PreK Director, New York City

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. – PreK Director, New York City

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. – PreK Director, San Francisco

*PreK programs housed in public schools fare better*

Our PreK teachers are working closely with kindergarten, first, and second, so now there's more conversation about that connection between the expectations of PreK and kindergarten. So the kindergarten teachers are learning a lot from the PreK teachers and vice versa, so it's a little bit more of a seamless transition even though the PreK is vastly different than kindergarten. – Assistant Principal, New York City

Because with all the transitioning going on in education, it's like, “OK, what should I have these children knowing by the time they get to you?” And then the kindergarten teacher wants to ask the 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, “What should they know by the time they get to you?” So that collaborative effort is.... It keeps everyone in the know. – Principal, New York City

We try to do a lot of events and invite the world and give things away and feed them and we always have a good list. We do have a position for the person who is supposed to be the community outreach person, but we always use that position for other things and they don't get really to spend as much time out there like they should, and we're always reminding people, “Go out, go out, go out.” – Principal, New York City

One of my PreK teachers is on the English Language Arts [committee] aligning Common Core. She's on the team with my kindergarten teacher and my 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers, so we're trying to really include her in. – Principal, San Francisco

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 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 1<sup>st</sup> grade is talking to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.... So there is a lot more communication, and there has to be more. – Principal, Minneapolis

In Minneapolis our preschool is part of our school so it is aligned. – Principal, Minneapolis

We make those kids part of our school where they are going to our assemblies, playgrounds, and they are in our cafeteria. So that the kids that stay at our school in kindergarten are far better prepared than kids that go to some of the best day cares 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 PreK skills that they should be getting ready for kindergarten. They talk with the kindergarten teachers and they know what is expected; it is not

guesswork there. So I think it is a very strong transition to our program. – Principal, Orlando

The exception is you have kids coming from preschools outside of our school. I don't know what alignment that occurs there. – Principal, Minneapolis

### **Finding 5.**

**Moving weaker teachers to the earliest grades may be tempting, but principals view it as short-sighted and say the practice is on the decline. Still, some principals describe 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as a “dumping ground.”**

One question going into the research centered on the extent of the practice of moving weaker teachers from the tested grades (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>) down to the non-tested grades (PreK-2<sup>nd</sup>), the thinking being that principals would be tempted to place their strongest teachers in the grades with the highest level of accountability. Many principals acknowledged that the practice takes place and expressed empathy for their peers who might consider this option. But they also readily pointed to an obvious consequence – that students in the primary grades would inevitably suffer as a result – and that teachers who were moved to a different grade against their wishes might be ineffective. Stacking the deck in this way, according to principals, would not solve real learning problems since every grade level is important and builds off each other.

My principal and I went through a phase of that and then we shifted back. We just feel that it's really important to have a balance on all grade levels, so we're very careful of having newer teachers with more experienced teachers on a grade level so that they can mentor one another and work together, but we did experience where we tried to put all of our stronger teachers together and then our early childhood grades were suffering and then we started going back, so we really work to have even distribution. – Assistant Principal, New York City

We've been having a conversation about how important the kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade are, and why not take the best teachers and put them there, but there are some teachers who may be great but maybe not for kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. And then it's, “What do we do in these testing grades? What are we going to do with those kids?”... If you have a really rotten kindergarten teacher...it could be detrimental to your education for the rest of it. – Assistant Principal, New York City

I was just thinking. We never moved a teacher down that absolutely didn't want to do it. They had to be somewhat inclined to want to or it'd be a disaster. – Principal, San Francisco

You have to be careful because you are tainting upstream. Shooting yourself in the foot. Are they going to provide those foundational pieces so that when they do get to 3<sup>rd</sup> they are going to need? Sometimes it is a fit, sometimes it's the dynamic of the team they're in, in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, or sometimes they've taught primary grade before and they've gone up and now they want to go back. There are just a lot of variables with that. – Principal, Austin

Several principals wanted to clarify what they saw as a flawed premise of the question – that in fact a more likely reason for moving teachers is not that weaker upper-level teachers would be moved down to the primary grades, but rather that the stronger PreK-2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers would be placed in the upper grades to make better use of their highly valued literacy expertise. Principals say they see too many 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade students in their schools with poor reading skills, and they are always on the look-out for strong reading teachers to help get these borderline and struggling students up to speed.

I moved a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher to 4<sup>th</sup>. It is the flip side of that. You've got a really good literacy teacher doing differentiated reading groups at a higher grade, which doesn't always happen. Some of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers aren't as good at differentiating as the teachers of younger students. – Principal, Minneapolis

A good teacher can teach any grade level and teach anything because there was a time when middle school and high school kids were not reading at those levels. Those principals were then coming and rating our best primary teachers and recruiting them to go teach at the high school levels. And they still do it. It happened all the time. But now that the accountability is across the board, it has kind of evened out. It doesn't happen as often. But back when it was bad we lost half our 1<sup>st</sup> grade team here because one went to middle, the other went to high school. – Principal, Orlando

This is what I know for sure: kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup>, and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, you are learning to read. Third, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, you are reading to learn. It is true. If you have a weak teacher in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, that's that child's last opportunity to get those foundations down. – Principal, Minneapolis

I had one woman in kindergarten and she was so phenomenal and I needed her in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and she went on to become a phenomenal 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. I've taken some 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and also moved them up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. We had a deficiency in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade where many kids lacked sufficient decoding skills. And those teachers know how to do it. – Principal, Orlando

To defend that statement, 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. – Principal, Austin

The concept of Grade 2 as a dumping ground arose spontaneously – principals themselves pointed to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as an easy spot to place weaker teachers. Their reasoning: it is not a tested grade like 3<sup>rd</sup>; it is not one with as heavy an emphasis on literacy as kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup>; (relatively) little new learning takes place at the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. Some principals suggested that the practice is less likely to happen these days, because every grade needs a high quality teacher in order to prepare students to be college and career ready. Principals know that these days there's no grade where students can afford to have a knowingly weak teacher for a year.

I've heard that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teams become the weakest team. 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 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, they are going to continue to fall behind, that the chance of them catching up is not very high. – Principal, Austin

So many teachers want to teach 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Oh, it's a plum. Just for some of the reason you are talking about, they don't have to deal with the state testing, they don't have to deal with the raw recruits either. It is a beautiful year if you are effective because you can move kids way far from where they are. – Principal, Austin

If you look at the rigor of the standards, often times the amount of new learning in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade is less than some of the other grades. I've heard that and had it pointed out to me. So I can imagine somebody, if you think about it, a lot of your kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> graders who are really doing very well. You just have a few 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, and if it is not a whole huge amount of new learning. Third grade has a huge amount of new learning. So 2<sup>nd</sup> grade arguably could be the grade where there's not as much at stake. Frankly with acceleration – if a kid is really flying – the one grade I say to skip would be 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Never have them skip kindergarten. Never have them skip 1<sup>st</sup>. I have had some skip 2<sup>nd</sup>, go

from 1<sup>st</sup> straight to 3<sup>rd</sup>, and it's been successful. – Principal, Minneapolis

Because every grade is sacred and your 2<sup>nd</sup> graders are going up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade next year and you need to have those skills in place and I can't afford them to have a bad year, it doesn't matter. – Principal, Orlando

*[Moderator: You have strong primary teachers, so you move them up. What happens to the teachers that weren't as strong?] You move them to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Unfortunately that is the grade. You have to be careful because you put all the low quality in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade then you have issues when they get to 3<sup>rd</sup>. It is kind of that in-between grade you are just following up with 1<sup>st</sup> grade skills. Third grade is a big transition year academically. So often times when you have a teacher you can't get rid of, sometimes that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade is that dumping ground unfortunately. – Principal, Orlando*

## **Finding 6.**

**Principals suggest that experience in early childhood education is important but not essential when it comes to staffing the primary grades. They point to teacher preferences and specific personality traits as more critical.**

Many factors influence teacher hiring and staffing: student enrollment, state credentials, students' needs, teachers' strengths. But in the focus groups, personality traits such as patience, nurturing, and affinity for young children, along with teacher preferences, emerged as far more critical and influential factors when placing teachers in the primary grades. Only a handful of principals pointed to content knowledge – e.g., literacy expertise, specialty in early childhood – or prior experience in grades PreK-3 as must-haves. In contrast, for teacher placement in the upper elementary grades, principals prioritize knowledge of subject matter over personality traits and teacher preferences.

### *Many factors influence hiring/staffing*

Sometimes you're desperate, because we've had teachers leave in September and then you go to look and you take what you could get. The last person this year to get hired by the other two APs, she was a kindergarten teacher and we put her in 4<sup>th</sup> grade because we needed a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. – Assistant Principal, New York City

The kind of teaching you do in early elementary is very different from what you do in upper elementary. Teachers have to be able to manage many different levels of learning groups at the same time, reading groups for example, whereas a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher may not necessarily be pulling all the different reading groups, the different levels. There's a lot more juggling with 6 year olds learning to read than with 6<sup>th</sup> graders practicing reading. – Principal, Austin

Where's their heart lie? To me I'm not going to hire somebody in kindergarten if I feel to me their heart isn't in a primary classroom. Then they are not going to want to aspire, do whatever it takes. Teaching the primary grades gets very challenging. – Principal, Austin

I also want a teacher who can teach the content area. If you have a teacher in 5<sup>th</sup> grade who is not comfortable teaching fractions, you know, you only get one chance to really learn that concept. Or I don't want a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher who really has no concept of how to teach phonemic awareness. It is a delicate balance. Just because you have a license [raised eyebrow]. – Principal, Minneapolis

*Personality, preferences more influential than content in primary grades*

I find that people kind of gravitate to either the elementary school, the middle school or the high school, kind of different personality. People in high school just love it and people in elementary school can't understand.... People kind of tend to go into one category. – Assistant Principal, New York City

I am telling you there's just a different personality for the primary teachers. – Principal, Austin

Specific candidates told me during the interview, "I'm only interested from the kindergarten to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. I don't think I will be a fit for fourth." Because I think they already know...what would be the best age group for them. – Principal, San Francisco

Some teachers are better with different age groups.... Some teachers are more nurturing and patient with a younger grade. And some teachers are better at working with adolescents in 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade. While they can do either, some people have a specific niche or skill. – Principal, Minneapolis

In four out of the five groups, there was one participant who caused heads to nod with a spontaneous comment along the lines of: I can train any teacher in curriculum or pedagogy, but I can't teach them to love kids.

I would definitely say that even if they don't have the experience, do they have that passion, motivation, desire? What does that look like? That's something you can feel in someone. Even through a 45 minute interview you can sense that – that's above everything else. Experience can happen. – Principal, Austin

Relationships, motivation, and their skills. If you have someone who maybe is a little rough around the edges on their skills, we can develop that. But you can't develop motivation, you can't develop the other two. So...if you can get all three you are golden. – Principal, Minneapolis

I was going to say all those things are great. We look for someone who is nurturing, because we say that you can't teach. 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 kind of like children a little bit, you can't teach that. You can teach them how to teach math or reading. – Assistant Principal, New York City

Because 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 as opposed to patience. – PreK Director, San Francisco

## **Finding 7.**

**Teaching credentials sometimes tie principals' hands when it comes to staffing decisions. Credentials for PreK teachers may not be as rigorous as those for K-8 teachers.**

Grade bands for teaching credentials vary (e.g., PreK-2, K-5, 1-6, 1-8), and among these principals, no single range emerged as necessarily better than the others in terms of teacher quality. They indicated that credentials can be limiting when it comes to the practicalities of staffing classrooms, although several liked the idea of narrower ranges because of the vastly different developmental stages and student learning needs between the early and later elementary grades. Principals wrestle with the trade-off between the need for flexibility in staffing and the importance of having teachers with appropriate grade level content knowledge.

*No particular credential perceived as providing better quality teachers*

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 certification for the other, and if you pass this one and not that one, then that's what you can [teach]. – Principal, Austin

Regardless of what the certificate says we have to parse out where their strengths are and what they are able to do. – Principal, Austin

*Support for narrower grade ranges*

I would like to see an intermediate licensure. Something not the same as middle school. Because I think those kids are not middle school kids. They have different needs than a middle schooler, but they don't have the same needs as primary children. I would like to see primary maybe to grade 2 or 3, and then the intermediate and then high school. – Principal, Minneapolis

*[Regarding Birth-to-3 credential]* In our district they really frown on hiring anybody with that license because it is too limiting. I have always felt that's wrong, because that's where I want that expertise of just that developmental age of some of our primary [students]. – Principal, Minneapolis

*Credential as limiting, wrestling with the trade-offs*

Jodie: It's nice to have the flexibility with the wider certificate and let us decide. – Principal, Austin

Having a specialty in reading or having a specialty in math, I'm looking for that. It means they are priding themselves on that, that skill. So, I am looking for that too, not just, "Oh, they have a K-5 license, I can fill the position." – Principal, Minneapolis

She was one of those PreK-3 certified, and I would have put her in 5<sup>th</sup> grade if I could. – Principal, Orlando

If I have two candidates and one has PreK-3 and one has K-6, and they are equal candidates, I would probably hire the K-6 because you have more options. You can't move that teacher to 5<sup>th</sup> grade even if you wanted to because they are limited to that primary certification role. – Principal, Orlando

Worthy of note: There was some indication in the focus groups that credentials for PreK teachers may not be as rigorous as those for K-12. The topic was not explored fully, but it may be one ripe for further investigation. For instance, in Austin, one principal said, “All of my [public school] teachers are certified teachers, but we also have what we call child development center – not at my campus, but in my district – that is preschool that parents and teachers’ kids can pay to be in those programs. Those teachers are PreK teachers but they are not necessarily certified school teachers, and they are not seen as the same.”

### **Finding 8.**

**Formal training for principals centers on things like management, human resources, and budgeting. There is virtually no focus on content knowledge or early childhood learning or development. For the most part, principals say, they learned on the job.**

Although some had taught in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms, many principals who participated in the focus groups had no experience with early childhood education before taking on the elementary school principal role. Some downplayed the need for such experience, but others said it is important. For instance, it provides credibility when evaluating teachers; specialized pedagogy and content knowledge (in particular, for teaching reading) is important to have; and an understanding of the developmental and emotional needs of younger children is necessary. Most (if not all) of the principals in these groups had served as assistant principals, special education teachers, or instructional coaches and viewed these positions as their practical training for becoming a principal.

### *No formal training*

I don’t think the program, at least 19 years ago at the U, 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? – Principal, Minneapolis

I’d say very little [on early childhood development]. What was different to me was it was different courses such as law and finance, that I never had. – Principal, Austin

My first day as an AP my principal handed me three books on reading and structure. “Here are the three books you have to have read while you are working this week.” Principal, Orlando

#### *No prior experience in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>*

You just have to own those things. I am not an expert in early childhood nor in elementary, and so learning the standards and learning developmentally, and the criers and runners the first week...I was like, “What? Ninth graders don't do this. If they run, I just call their parents.” So that for me was like, oh, how do I deal with a crying kindergartener and how do I get them back to class? Luckily I have an assistant principal and literacy and math coaches who are amazing. – Principal, San Francisco

So I was a middle school teacher, and I became, at one time, a K-3 principal. And so I 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. – Principal, Minneapolis

When I was preparing for my first AP assignment, my superintendant 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?” No preparation. Thank God my principal was a kindergarten teacher. And I was with her for four years and she mentored me. – Principal, Orlando

#### *Benefit of having prior experience in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>*

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. Yep, you're right, you're right. – Principal, Austin

Kindergarten, I visit them just as often. But since I taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade for so many years I don't feel as comfortable giving advice to the kindergarten teachers the way I might with a new 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. – Principal, Orlando

#### *Practical training through other positions*

I always said out loud, “Thank God I started out as a special education teacher in a community that was poorly funded.” That was the best

experience ever because it taught you flexibility. It pushed you to be as creative as you could be, as energetic as you could be because you have to keep the children involved in order to have a successful day. – Principal, New York City

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. – Principal, Minneapolis

## **Finding 9.**

**Principals say they would prefer to spend more time being instructional leaders and interacting with children and teachers in classrooms, but instead their time is spent on administrative duties and handling emergencies.**

Principals identify “instructional leader” as their most important role and consider it their responsibility to keep teachers motivated and shield them from distractions so their focus can remain on students. But when principals described a typical day at school, they talked about state mandates and district requirements, prescribed teacher observations, demanding parents, and mountains of paperwork. They resent the amount of time they spend on compliance-driven tasks that they do not view as meaningful to student learning.

I see myself as really the instructional leader in the school and the teachers, helping them, supporting them. They have so many demands on them right now, time and just planning. – Principal, San Francisco

It's changed in the last three years. I'm more of an administrator. Teacher training is what I love, and I love being in the classroom doing training for teachers, but the politics have just taken over. It's more of administration now and I have a lot of people that are doing the other stuff. – Principal, New York City

We spend far too much time in my district in terms of paperwork and compliance, and the more time I spend in the classroom, the more time I'm there after hours catching up because the compliance has not ever stopped and it's worse. And actually for me it's a reason to retire because I'm not as inspired by the work as I was ten years ago, and I'm actually really fast at the paperwork, but it's eating away at my soul. – Principal, San Francisco

Where I am this time of year, this particular year, I just feel like I am a manager. It has been an interesting year. I have spent a lot more time with personnel issues, which takes away your time from working with teachers. I would love to be the instructional leader, but realistically I don't feel that way this year. – Principal, Austin

It is very much a requirement now [teacher observations]. We have to walk into each and every classroom at least once every three weeks and record on an I-pad an evaluation of some level.” – Principal, Orlando

The regulations have made it such that teachers get very frustrated. We get very frustrated because we want to do certain things, but we have X amount of hours in a day and everything's paper now. You have to produce paper. You have to have outcomes. You have to have results. It stifles what you really want to do. – Principal, New York City

#### **IV. OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

These findings strongly suggest that principals are witnessing a change from years past when there may have been less concern about rigor in the earliest grades, to the emerging perception that rigor in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> is essential for preparing students to reach state mandated 3<sup>rd</sup> grade benchmarks and future school success. In fact, many principals in the focus groups spoke about the pressure that even teachers in the non-tested grades are under. Yet, many also bemoaned the loss of play time. We learned that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade could conceivably be an easy spot to hide weak teachers. And one principal talked about the “fluff” he still comes across in his kindergarten classrooms. Future research may want to explore the extent of this contradiction, in particular the unique case of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. The discomfort evinced in the focus groups and the fact that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as a dumping ground emerged naturally in the conversations suggests that this topic is especially worthy of examination.

It was fascinating to see how teaching credentials, which are meant to be an enhancer of teacher quality, may in fact be an obstacle to talent at all grade levels in the nation’s classrooms. How to structure the teaching credential process to best serve the needs of the primary grades would be another worthy topic to explore.

Two overarching findings arose with regard to content knowledge. First, it is noteworthy that principals appear to be either overlooking or downplaying content knowledge in favor of what some might perceive as soft skills when staffing their PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> classrooms. Second, if there is a widely agreed upon body of knowledge regarding early childhood education – and there surely is – why does there appear to be no systematic effort to pass it along to elementary school leaders in their formal training?

Given the greater emphasis on PreK that we are seeing at national, state, and local levels, along with the continuing push for high academic standards in public schools, the lack of alignment between free-standing PreK centers and public school kindergartens is an issue that should be on the radar of policy makers and practitioners alike. If institutional structures or district mandates to encourage coordination currently exist, they did not come up in these focus groups.

Finally, Finding 9 states that “Principals say they would prefer to spend more time being instructional leaders and interacting with children and teachers in classrooms, but instead their time is spent on administrative duties and handling emergencies.” This is a perennial complaint heard across many different studies of administrators, and it is important for that reason. While principals on the whole may welcome more opportunities to be instructional leaders, any future reforms must be mindful to make recommendations that make sense and that do not set up already over-committed principals for failure.

## V. SCREENER: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ SOURCE: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

Hello. I'm calling from \_\_\_\_\_. We'd like to invite you to participate in a focus group. It will take place on **DATE/TIME**. A light meal will be provided, and you'll be paid **XXXX** at the end of the discussion. If you're available, I'd like to ask you a few questions.

### ***Description of potential focus group participants:***

- **Principals.** *A principal in a public elementary school who has responsibility for staffing decisions.*
- **Preschool Directors.** *Title could be along the lines of "director" or "administrator" or "site coordinator." What's most important is that this person operates and manages an accredited preschool program that includes 3-year-olds and/or 4-year-olds and that this person has responsibility for setting learning and development goals for children. The program must be preschool with an educational component and not simply childcare or daycare.*

### **Q1. SEX**

☐ Female      ☐ Male

### **ASK Q2-Q6 FOR PRINCIPALS**

**Q2. How many years' experience do you have as an elementary school principal in a public school?**

- ☐ 1-2 years      TERMINATE
- ☐ 3-5 years      CONTINUE
- ☐ 6-10 years      CONTINUE
- ☐ 11+ years      CONTINUE
- ☐ Not an "elementary" school principal/not public school      TERMINATE

**Q3. Is your public elementary school K-through-5<sup>th</sup>, PreK-through-5<sup>th</sup>, or something else?**

- ☐ K-through-5<sup>th</sup>      CONTINUE
- ☐ PreK-through-5<sup>th</sup>      CONTINUE
- ☐ Something else      \_\_\_\_\_ CONTINUE if K-3; if no K-3, then  
TERMINATE

**Q4. As principal, are you responsible for staffing decisions, or is that responsibility mainly handled by somebody else at your elementary school?**

- |  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, as principal I am responsible for staffing decisions                     | CONTINUE  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> [I'm responsible for staffing decisions, but school district does the hiring] | CONTINUE  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No, it is handled by somebody else  | TERMINATE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Something else _____  | [ASK US]  |

**Q5. What is the name of your school?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Q6. Before you became a public school principal, what grades did you teach as a classroom teacher, if any?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> None; I was never a classroom teacher | <input type="checkbox"/> Grades 1 <sup>st</sup> to 5 <sup>th</sup>  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PreK or Kindergarten                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Grades 6 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> |

**ASK Q7-Q11 FOR PRESCHOOL DIRECTORS**

**Q7. What is your title?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Q8. How many years' experience do you have as a director or administrator of an accredited preschool program or early childhood learning center?**

- |  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 years                           | TERMINATE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3-5 years                           | CONTINUE  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6-10 years                          | CONTINUE  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11+ years                           | CONTINUE  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not a "director" or "administrator" | TERMINATE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not in an "accredited" program      | TERMINATE |

*[NOTE: To be included, a potential participant must say "yes" to 3-year-olds and/or 4-year-olds below; also record the other categories for info purposes.]*

**Q9. Does the preschool program or early childhood learning center where you currently work include: (Read each item)**

- |                        | <u>YES</u>                 | <u>NO</u>                |
|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Newborn to 2-year-olds | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3-year-olds            | <input type="checkbox"/> * | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4-year-olds            | <input type="checkbox"/> * | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5-year-olds or older   | <input type="checkbox"/>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |

*[NOTE: To be included, a potential participant must say "yes" to at least 2 of these items.]*

**Q10. In your current position, do you have any responsibility for: (Reach each item)**

- |   | <u>YES</u>               | <u>NO</u>                |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hiring teachers                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Developing and selecting curriculum                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Providing feedback to teachers                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Setting learning and development goals for children | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Coordinating learning activities                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Q11. Is your current program or center located in or directly affiliated with a public elementary school, a college or university, a corporation or business, some other type of organization, or is it a stand-alone program?** *[no quotas, for info purposes]*

- ☐ Public elementary school
- ☐ College or university
- ☐ Corporation or business
- ☐ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Stand-alone program

## **VI. MODERATOR'S GUIDE: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

### **I. Introduction**

Let's get to know one another a little bit. Do you recognize each other? How long have you been a principal/director? What grades/ages did you teach? What are the grades/ages in your current school? What kind of community does it serve?

How do you define early childhood education? [Some people think early childhood includes the years before Kindergarten, others think it spans as far as 8 years old/3<sup>rd</sup> grade. What do you think?]

What do you think has to be in place in school to make sure children get off to a good start in PreK, to get them ready for Kindergarten?

Along the same lines, what do you think has to be in place in Kindergarten classrooms to make sure children are ready for 1<sup>st</sup> grade?

Have you ever walked into a PreK or Kindergarten classroom and thought "no, no, no"? What troubled you? What didn't you see that you should have? What did you see that you shouldn't have? (What's most important to you?)

### **II. Learning goals, instruction**

What should a child know and be able to do at the end of PreK? At the end of Kindergarten? At the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade?

Thinking back to 5 years ago, 10 years ago, would your answer be the same or different? In what ways?

Has testing in the later grades changed what your school or program is doing in K-2? In PreK? How so?

Some people say that important elements of early childhood learning (play) are being edged out by a focus on reading and math. How much truth is there in that? Where do you see this happening, if at all?

What are the benefits to an emphasis on play? What are the disadvantages? How do you define play in a PreK or Kindergarten classroom?

What are the benefits to an emphasis on reading and math literacy? What are the disadvantages?

Worksheets, skill drills, textbooks – can these be developmentally appropriate for PreK? K? How do you use them in your classroom?

What's your philosophy of early childhood learning? How does your philosophy drive the learning environment at your school or center?

In your school, what are the things you think your PreK and K are doing especially well? Which need improvement? Which is most important?

- Developing foundational cognitive skills in literacy and numeracy
- Developing social and emotional skills, ability to form relationships
- Developing a love of learning

Think about the 1 or 2 absolutely best teachers in your school today – the shining stars. Who are they and what grades are they teaching? Write down their names if it helps you think of them.

Some people are saying that elementary school principals in recent years are under pressure to put their best teachers in the tested grades (the ones that count for school accountability). Do you think there's truth to that?

- How much of this do you think is due to testing? How widespread is it? Most likely to happen in high poverty schools or in any school?
- If the best teachers were to be moved in your school, which grades do you think they would be moved to? How about the teachers who are deemed lacking / not cutting it – which grades would they be placed in? [We've heard in other groups that 2nd grade tends to get the weaker teachers. How much truth is there?]
- How would you go about convincing me that the following is a better approach: The focus should be on preventing children from falling behind in the first place, so it would be more effective to put the best teachers in younger grades. (What do you think is the cause of resistance to this approach, besides testing?)
- In what ways have you seen PreK-3 as building blocks for later success? How do you know the investment pays off? Is it worth waiting for?

Walk me through the last time you made a change to move a teacher of the upper elementary grades to the lower. What was the reason for making that particular move? [test scores, teacher preference, school needs, early childhood certification, teacher effectiveness, difficulty in filling slots]

### **III. Staffing and hiring**

What's the overall quality of the pool of candidates applying for job openings? Do you have an embarrassment of riches, of great talent, or something different? How well versed are they in early childhood learning & development?

What do you look for in a good teacher? Does it differ depending on grade or age they teach? [Probe: What knowledge, skills, training or characteristics matter most for PreK? K? 1<sup>st</sup>?]

Do you think a good teacher could be effective in any elementary grade, or do you think there are special skills that are needed for various grades? What skills in what grades? [Focus on skills vs. personality?]

How do you evaluate your PreK, Kindergarten, 1st-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers? What criteria do you use to assess your teachers and staff? (observation, student test scores, rubric?) How often do you get into the classroom to observe teachers? What's most important to you?

Describe the last time you saw a stellar teaching performance – what grade was it, and what was the teacher doing? How about an especially weak observation – what did you see?

When you hire for PreK or Kindergarten:

- Do you think it's necessary for teachers to have early childhood experience or expertise?
- How important is it to have deeper specialization in early childhood to teach in a Pre-K or K classroom?

#### **IV. Transition & alignment**

So the families and kids are coming to you. To what extent are you in touch with the administrator or teachers in the feeder PreKs/ elementary schools that your students generally attend?

How does the handoff work? What has to happen? How do they transition? What are the trouble spots, bumps in the process? What's working really well? Is there a standard operating procedure in place or does it depend on the child? Probe:

- Meet with parents beforehand
- Talk with teachers in grades above/below
- Review child's records
- Hold orientation at convenient time
- Welcome parents into the classroom throughout the year
- Registration early, allow kids to come
- Personal communications with parents (not form letters)
- Provide books/supplies for free or low cost

How good a job do you think teachers in the earliest grades are doing when it comes to coordinating well with later grades? How much do you encourage this type of coordination? What can be done to facilitate it?

How do you ensure there's a seamless learning experience – both for parents and children? Is it easier when schools are housed in same place? (How?)

Do you know what your local community-based PreK programs are teaching, what kids were taught before getting to your school? How does this affect what you do? Is there anything in place to align your curriculum with those of feeder PreKs?

How have the Common Core State Standards influenced what you teach? Is there curriculum alignment from PreK to later grades?

**ASK DIRECTORS:**

- Do you know what the transitional K and Kindergartens are teaching, what your kids need to know? How does it affect what you do? Or do you have your own base of knowledge about what kids need and that's how you decide where to focus?
- To what extent do you see yourselves as being in the same profession or are you operating on different criteria of what is good, what to shoot for, what you're trying to accomplish for the kids? In other words, are you thick as thieves or silent partners, or adversaries?
- Do you know what the actual curriculum is in the Kindergartens your students typically attend?

**V. Relationships/bridge building**

Do you talk or meet with each other (principals and directors)? We're all dependent on the work the previous level did with the children. Do you guys know what each other needs? How do you know what's going on in each other's PreK and Kindergarten classrooms? How do you communicate – if at all? [Probe: Were procedures in place or did you create them? How often do you meet? Is it formal or informal? Who initiates?]

Other than parents, is there anybody else that matters as far as preparing kids for coming to your school? Who? Are you in contact with them? How do you communicate? [Probe: The business community? The neighborhood groups? Faith-based organizations? Social services? Higher education and teacher training?]

Are there segments of the children population in the neighborhoods you serve that require special focus on your part? Or are particularly challenging? What can you do to prepare for them? How do you find out about the learning needs of kids coming into your school?

**VI. Student assessment**

What do you think is developmentally appropriate in terms of testing for 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds? 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds?

Thinking about what goes on in your own school today, how do you know a child in the early grades is actually learning what they are supposed to?

What is the assessment program that you currently use? How satisfied are you with it? What works well, what needs improvement? Who decides which assessment to purchase? [It is aligned with CCSS?] Is it same for PreK, K, 1?

What methods do you use for assessing learning?

- Diagnostic, formative, benchmark, summative assessments?
- Does your school have data teams or PLCs focused on PK-3?
- Does your state have annual accountability testing for K? KRA – kindergarten readiness assessments? How useful are they? Can you share an anecdote about your experience using KRAs?

How well prepared do you feel on assessment? Where did you get the training – in graduate school or is it more recent?

What kind of guidance or professional development has your teaching staff received on assessment? How well prepared are they?

## **VII. Professional development & training**

What was missing from your training, from your preparation for this job, when you started? Was there anything that you were especially grateful for in your training – something that you were very well prepared to do? What are you better off learning “on the job”? Which do you think need to be emphasized before becoming a principal?

When you were training to be a principal, did any of your coursework focus on child development, especially of children in the youngest grades? What kind of professional development have you taken since becoming a principal? Anything specifically about early learning? Was it active or passive PD? Have you participated in an EC leadership course? How satisfied were you with what it focused on?

Thinking about the elementary school principals that you come in contact with...do you think they have adequate expertise in early childhood learning? What would you change/want improvement in?

And how about the professional development being offered to your staff. Where is it strong – and what’s missing? Is it typically onsite or away from school? In the classroom? Are there coaches or mentors that teachers can go to for advice?

## **VIII. The profession**

How do you define your primary role as principal/director? [Probe: instructional leader? Teacher evaluator? Early learning leader? CEO?]

How would you break down your time in a typical day – in general terms? [operational, paperwork, human resources, substantive/ instructional] Are you satisfied with the balance as it is? What would you change, if anything? What would you say gets too much of your attention? What’s getting short shrift?

Describe an ideal day for you – not a typical day, but a day where you are doing what you are best at. How far is this from a typical day? What would you need to have in place to get the ideal and the typical closer?

Elementary school principals have a tough job -- having to be knowledgeable and understanding of the needs of both the birth-to-5 years and the K-6 years. How has that been for you? What's the toughest challenge?

### **IX. Closing questions**

Generally speaking, what is your school discipline policy? How does it differ from grade to grade, if at all?

Early childhood learning/education is an important issue. When you look at the broad picture – in terms of society – who is trying to push the issue to the forefront, who has good ideas? Who should be pushing harder? (Probe: elected officials? Professional associations? Union? Parents? Business community? Social services?)

What's the current political environment like when it comes to early childhood learning? Is there adequate funding for PreK or full-day Kindergarten? Support for it or pushback? From who, what groups are vocal? Have you seen changes to licensure and accreditation for educators – are changes in the right direction or wrong direction?

Anything that I should have asked you about but didn't?