

Leading for the Early Years

Principals should understand the entire continuum of childhood development to provide all students with high-quality, appropriate learning opportunities.

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TOPICS: EARLY CHILDHOOD, PRE-K-3 ([HTTPS://WWW.NAESP.ORG/TOPIC/EARLY-CHILDHOOD-PRE-K-3/](https://www.naesp.org/topic/early-childhood-pre-k-3/))

PRINCIPAL, MARCH/APRIL 2022: ALIGNED EARLY LEARNING ([HTTPS://WWW.NAESP.ORG/PRINCIPAL/MARCH-APRIL-2022-ALIGNED-EARLY-LEARNING/](https://www.naesp.org/principal/march-april-2022-aligned-early-learning/)), VOLUME 101, ISSUE 4

Over the last 20 years, local, state, and federal officials have gradually come to recognize that early childhood education matters. In 2018, Congress passed a bipartisan spending bill that increased funding for early childhood education to the tune of \$2.4 billion, and new federal funding proposals promise to create universal access to pre-K throughout the country. Such funding allows states to expand access to early learning, support families, and invest in the early childhood education workforce.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has encouraged states to leverage the recent increases in federal funding by adding their own supplementary investments. And NAESP and the National P-3 Center at the University of Colorado Denver have partnered to support and advise school leaders about the structures and competencies needed to promote quality early learning programs. This work is a great starting point for school leaders who are striving to create highly effective teaching and learning programs in the early grades and to develop cohesive, equitable strategies focused on our youngest learners.

“Leading Learning Communities: A Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades,” developed by NAESP and the National P-3 Center, is a comprehensive resource for school leaders who want to improve the education continuum from preschool through third grade. The six competencies it outlines include:

- **Competency 1:** Understand Child Development and Its Implications for High-Quality Instruction and Interactions, Pre-K–3rd Grade
- **Competency 2:** Develop and Foster Partnerships with Families and Communities
- **Competency 3:** Embrace and Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision
- **Competency 4:** Ensure Equitable Opportunities
- **Competency 5:** Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity
- **Competency 6:** Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Where to Start

Elementary principals can begin by acknowledging that there are two different systems operating in their schools: a birth-to-5-years system that includes pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, and a traditional K-12 system that overlaps it. Together, the two systems address a range of child development, and school leaders should be sure they have a strong understanding of the whole continuum in order to support their students across the two systems.

Leadership preparation typically doesn’t include a strong foundation in child development that addresses the birth-to-5 system in their school, which leaves school leaders trying to apply what might be appropriate for learning in a K-12 system to their youngest learners. It’s difficult to create alignment across the two systems without a strong understanding of the differences in the child development needs of each.

Research has also shown that the early years of a child’s brain development are the most critical. It happens rapidly, and maximizing quality learning experiences during a child’s first eight years dramatically improves their learning trajectory in later years of schooling. Understanding this continuum prepares school leaders to recognize developmentally appropriate pedagogy and best practices, and child development courses and programs such as NAESP’s Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy and the New Teacher Center’s Early Learning Leadership Program can help.

High-Quality Early Learning Experiences

One currently misunderstood practice revolves around what high-quality early learning experiences look like. Children are experiential learners—they learn by doing rather than by thinking. Shared, physical, play-based activities with teachers and peers are especially effective opportunities for learning.

The concept of “play” is also misunderstood or misapplied by many. Effective educators of young children understand that this refers to hands-on engagement, not idle time. It is a critical time for trial and error or informal experimentation. As children learn to understand and manage their emotions and behavior, they develop cognitive skills such as reasoning, attention, memory, listening, and language. Play allows them to progress through increasingly sophisticated levels of thinking and understanding.

While supplying classrooms with appropriate furniture and materials designed for young children enhances experiential learning, it is essential to also support the developmental needs of students during the school day. Expecting children to sit for long periods of time with too much teacher talk or too many teacher-directed activities hinders learning. The best classroom learning environments engage children in busy, active, and productive learning activities. Observational tools are available to help leaders look at their classrooms with the appropriate lens—one that distinguishes between the birth-to-age-5 and K-12 systems differently and appropriately.

Hiring, Placement, and PD

School leaders must hire and place teachers in the grades that match their knowledge and expertise, while keeping the continuum of child development in mind. Frequently, teachers have expertise in either the birth-to-age-5 system or the K-12 system, but not both.

School leaders can help teachers improve their practice through aligned, ongoing professional development and job-embedded coaching that reflects current knowledge of child development and best practices that support early learners. Aligned birth-to-age-5 and K-12 systems offer teachers opportunities to collaborate and learn where children are coming from and expose any persistent gaps in learning.

Supporting Transitions

Effective transitions used to refer to some kind of single-event orientation for families and children or some communication of registration deadlines and processes as students progressed through the birth-to-age-5 and K-12 years. Today, quality transition strategies should reflect the varying and diverse needs of the school community.

Leaders should find out what their families prefer: school-based or home-based involvement. Rural families might need more transition supports and communication, since they might have less access to high-quality early learning programs. Boys, children with disabilities, and children living in poverty are also more likely to experience transitional challenges. Many resources are available to help leaders design strategies to support and promote family engagement during the transition.

One challenge for school leaders is to create policies and procedures that improve and strengthen transition practices between the sending and receiving sides of birth-to-age-5 programs. External early childhood programs occasionally share records with schools, but some research has shown that the receiving teachers rarely use them.

Knowing the early learning programs in your community and communicating and collaborating with them can provide a strong foundation for effective transition strategies. Teachers should have reliable information about the nature of their students' preschool experiences, not just the informal knowledge shared by parents.

School Readiness

It's often said that children need to develop school readiness, but schools need to be ready for the children they receive, too. In the birth-to-age-5 system and the K-12 system, keep in mind that what a child knows and is able to do is often a reflection of their prior learning opportunities, not an indicator of what a child is capable of learning.

This is another reason that early learning opportunities in the birth-to-age-5 system need to be of high quality and differentiated to meet the needs of children at any step in the development continuum. Classrooms can't be one-size-fits-all in terms of teacher interactions, curriculum, and instructional strategies, nor can the school leader's expectations. School leaders need to possess cultural competence, have an ability to establish an inclusive school climate, use data to identify any disproportionalities, and differentiate birth-to-age-5 and K-12 resources and strategies so that everyone has an equitable opportunity to succeed.

Leading for the early years requires administrators to gain the knowledge and skills to ensure that the birth-to-age-5 systems and the K-12 systems within their schools get the attention they deserve and reflect appropriately high-quality teaching and learning across developmental continuums. Fortunately, NAESP, NAEYC, and the National P-3 Center have developed a treasure trove of resources for caring and concerned school leaders to explore.

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