

From Sandbox to School to Success

Benjamin Mays, former president of Morehouse College, eloquently put into words why early childhood education is the linchpin of future academic success: “A child must learn early to believe that she is somebody worthwhile, and that she can do many praiseworthy things.” Schools that focus on building an early childhood education program with Mays’ prescient words as their motto make the progression from sandbox to school to success available to all students. The words of this college president about the importance of early education should be hailed today by all principals.

Results of the Perry Preschool program for 3- and 4-year olds, released nearly 50 years ago, continue to underscore the importance of early childhood education. Over the years, we have come to understand that a developmentally appropriate curriculum taught in the early years by highly qualified teachers has lasting and significant benefits for young children—from higher income levels as adults to family stability in their homes.

Today, as results from this longitudinal study continue to be touted, principals, other education leaders, and policymakers are making the connection between top-notch early childhood programs and continued success in school and in life. We know we cannot wait until grade 3, when NCLB accountability testing is in full swing, to get students up to speed. Instead, we realize that it takes a continuum of high-quality early education, beginning in the pre-K years and taught by teachers who understand age-appropriate curriculum, to help children reach their highest potential by grade 3 and beyond.

When we view schooling as a continuum of learning—from pre-K through college—pre-K and kindergarten teachers become much more than babysitters and play becomes purposeful. Young children are ready and eager to explore and examine their world through hands-on science, number games, and the wonderful world of books. Art projects can open doors to creativity and imagination. Through relationships with teachers and one another, children learn important social skills, such as cooperation and sharing. Participation in physical games and activities helps develop motor skills. These activities are the stepping stones young children will use to do, in the words of Mays, “many praiseworthy things.”



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Mays made the connection between what children need to learn early on and future academic success. We all must move more quickly now, with data in hand, to see this promise come true for all children. In 2005, NAESP released *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, which recommends six standards to help principals and other

educators to put early childhood education at the head of the class. Central to these standards is the need for high-quality, universal pre-K and programs as the critical first stage in the continuum of learning. Principals must reach out to early childhood experts who can help develop age-appropriate curriculum for young learners and who can help

design and implement meaningful professional development programs for teachers assigned to early education. We must do all we can to support early childhood teachers and not fall prey to the “it-isn’t-real-education-yet” mentality. Summer is a great time to offer teacher and administrator workshops designed to promote high-quality early education practices.

Bill Rich, principal of McFall Elementary School in Michigan, encourages his teachers to participate in professional development offered by the intermediate district, as well as attend summer institutes and workshops. Rich, whose school includes pre-K-2, also pairs up an experienced teacher with new hires. Rich’s

hiring strategy, however, is to prescreen by finding teacher candidates with academic backgrounds in early childhood education. “Colleges are doing a much better job at preparing their students to work in the field of early education,” said Rich. He and his staff also keep in close contact with the district’s second- and third-grade building so they “are all on the same page when it comes to ensuring that all kids are successful.” For Rich, “the schools must be ready for the kids as much as the kids must be ready for school.”

Engaging parents as their youngsters take first steps down the path of schooling is another critical factor in early education. As cultural landscapes of our schools change, we must constantly build bridges between school and home to support not only young children, but all children as they embark on their school careers. Principals also should create coalitions with community organizations engaged in early education in order to make the continuum from sandbox to school a smooth transition.

We have a consensus on the importance of early childhood education. Let us mold that consensus by creating top-notch early education programs that will be the launching pads to lifelong learning. 