

Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities



We've always said that being an elementary school principal is a big job that just keeps getting bigger. This spring, we took a major step in showing what we mean. At our convention in Baltimore we released a new guide, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. It acknowledges what many of you have known for a long time—that elementary school principals have the best vantage point for observing how many children start school unprepared and how their delayed learning impacts their school success.

As leaders of the critical first years of public schooling, elementary principals need to take full advantage of every opportunity to define for the community the importance of school readiness—the skills or stages of development we hope to see in a five-year-old entering kindergarten. By making this effort to link early childhood learning to the broader education spectrum, principals must reach deeper into the community. While some may see this as another way of stretching the responsibilities of already-strapped elementary principals, it's a necessary role that many principals are already playing with the realization that early action can reap big benefits in the long run.

Connecting to the Community

It's a difficult task. Though some states and school districts have taken wise steps toward increasing preschool access and adding pre-kindergarten programs in elementary schools, many principals are still valiantly pushing for funding or support for full-day kindergarten for all students. What NAESP is advocating in our campaign for leadership in early childhood issues is to connect the wide range of community preschool programs—in churches, child care centers, Head Start programs, community agencies, and elsewhere—to the community's elementary schools.

We hear from principals who have opened lines of communication with private child care providers and other community preschool programs, and who now share what their schools' kindergarten screenings or observations of kindergarten teachers say about the strengths and weaknesses of local children's school readiness. It's a great benefit to both the schools and the community preschool providers and we believe it's a good practice for all elementary principals.

We also believe that principals should follow the example of those who have taken positive action—speaking before civic groups or establishing ties with local parenting programs or community agencies working with young families—to make parents throughout the community aware of what their children should be able to know and do when they start kindergarten.

Our new leadership guide grew out of extensive discussions among principals who have found success working on early childhood issues, a thorough review of research about

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what works with young children and parents, and collaboration with a wide range of groups that serve preschool-age children. In putting this guide together, we learned that connecting with Head Start leaders and the many other local early childhood providers can only strengthen what we can do in early childhood education. There is much we can learn from each other in working toward the same goal of school readiness.

A New Continuum of Early Learning

So what does school readiness mean? What makes for a high-quality learning experience for a three- or four-year-old? Why don't the many pre-kindergarten programs work together or as well as they could?

These are the kinds of questions we hope to encourage principals to answer and share as advocates for an expanded continuum of early learning: a process that starts long before children walk through a schoolhouse door—or even walk at all—and concludes with a successful transition to fourth grade.

We hope you and your colleagues will use the guide and determine how its many ideas and suggestions might be applied in your school or community. As we noted earlier, elementary school principals have a big job that keeps getting bigger, but the bottom line remains molding young children into lifelong learners with the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in school and in life. The sooner we can begin—and the more partners we can enlist—the better.

To order a copy of *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, call 800-386-2377 or visit www.naesp.org. ■

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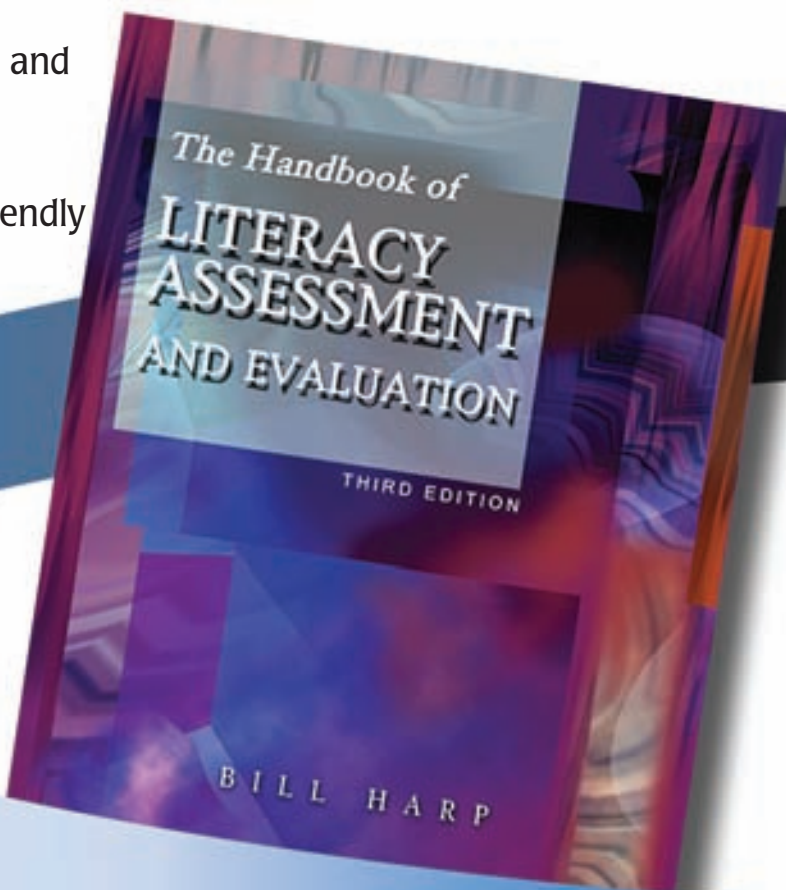
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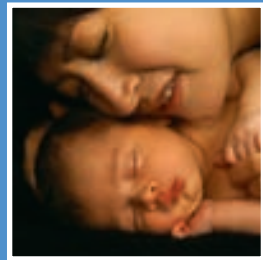
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