

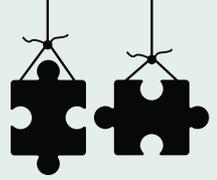
Meet Children Where They Are



An early childhood education continuum focuses on more than academics alone to foster student success



By Kelly Cobb



Great things are happening in the Coffee County School System. We're undergoing a paradigm shift in the way we pursue early childhood education, and it is producing a powerful impact on our youngest learners.

Over the last year, I participated in a year-long learning program for administrators, the NAESP Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy, through a joint partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools, and the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The course is designed to improve understanding among school and district leadership of child development and the pre-K–3 learning continuum, as well as help administrators improve instructional leadership practices.

I am grateful to have been a part of such an excellent professional learning opportunity. Our administrators and teachers are now more aware of how children develop, especially in the pre-K–3 early learning continuum. More importantly, we learned to better address our learning strategies to the children—meet them where they are—when they enter kindergarten. Our focus is no longer solely on academics; schools in our district have shifted to a whole-child development and learning approach that includes cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and academic learning domains.

Collaboration and Feedback

One valuable lesson we learned in building out our pre-K–3 continuum is the importance of school leaders building a collaborative working environment that supports professional growth, efficacy, and learning for teachers and support personnel. School leaders must focus on conducting appropriate and meaningful classroom observation and supplying ongoing teacher feedback.

Job-embedded professional learning experiences have helped our teachers deepen their knowledge of the different stages of child development and learning domains and the most effective ways to communicate the importance of social and emotional learning to stakeholders. Job-embedded professional development is beneficial when it addresses the individual needs of the classroom teacher and is grounded in day-to-day practice.

High Standards

Another lesson we learned while building a pre-K–3 continuum is that effective leaders

embrace new learning and are committed to high standards of quality. The district has embraced the concept of high-quality early learning for all children, no matter where they might be when they enter school. Ultimately, the goal is to develop and implement learning communities that foster achievement and prepare all students for success in school, work, and life.

Children's performance levels during the pre-K–3 continuum are significant predictors of later success in school and life. The best way to guarantee high-quality instruction every day, we found, is to offer a range of strategies that includes developmentally appropriate practices and authentic learning opportunities. Young children benefit most from teachers and administrators who have the skills and judgment to foster student development in all learning domains.

In planning developmentally appropriate practices in a pre-K–3 continuum, the curriculum is a critical tool in helping young learners achieve significant educational goals. The interactions occurring throughout the day between teachers and students are essential to the design of learning experiences and how teachers adapt their teaching pedagogy. Feedback and formative assessments also have a substantial effect on children's learning and success.

Effective leadership in the pre-K–3 continuum sets high expectations, deepening understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) throughout the school, district, and community.

Leaders Listen

Leaders need to be good listeners and know how to articulate the value of early learning and inclusive early education to parents and stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, and support personnel alike need to be able to thoroughly explain the “whys” and “hows” of changes installed in the pre-K–3 continuum.

Coffee County is working to provide the best learning opportunities for our students by building a seamless transition for the pre-K–3 continuum, DAP, and assessments for the youngest learners, advocating on students' behalf and educating stakeholders on how a young child's brain develops, grows, and learns. In the words of Maria Montessori, “Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society.” 

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An evaluation of the Academy revealed that participants experienced significant growth in each of the six Pre-K–3 leadership competencies. Ninety percent of respondents reported that the academy helped them to “better meet the needs of vulnerable children.” For more information on the Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy, visit www.naesp.org/prek3-leadership.