



achievement tests in third grade and seventh grade, but they also had fewer grade retentions by age 15 and fewer special education placements by age 18.

The Role of Principals

While comprehensive P-3 approaches such as those described above require buy-in and leadership from a broad range of stakeholders (e.g., teachers, classroom aides, families, community organizations), elementary school principals are central to their success. As noted earlier, principals are key to setting the tone of priorities both inside and outside of their buildings.

Effective elementary school principals build and support relationships with multiple stakeholders. For example, principals can increase the number and strength of partnerships between schools, local early learning/preschool programs, and families.

Principals can strengthen the consistency and depth of those partnerships to ensure that they are focused on creating high-quality instruction and learning environments for young children, as well as meaningful and mutually beneficial to all participants.

Principals are also key players in fostering and providing support for teamwork among teachers. They support regular, inclusive, and shared professional development among teachers in both age/grade-level (horizontal) and cross-grade (vertical) teams that, again, extend beyond school walls to

include teachers in community-based preschool programs. They engage and support teacher teamwork by instituting regular common planning time; review and analyze student-, classroom-, and school-level data; and involve teacher teams in setting professional development agendas.

Principals can also be effective instructional leaders, working in partnership with teachers to understand and ensure developmentally appropriate and differentiated instruction to support young learners. Principals are central to balancing developmentally appropriate teaching and learning with specific academic expectations. To be effective instructional leaders on behalf of young learners, principals should participate in annual professional development related to the learning and development of children from birth through age 8 and spend consistent time in P-3 classrooms, providing constructive and supportive feedback to teachers.

Comprehensive P-3 approaches hold tremendous potential to dramatically change the trajectory of achievement gaps and to set young children on sturdy pathways to educational and lifelong success. Elementary principals are a lynchpin in this work. **P**

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New School, New Pre-K Challenges

I have always considered myself to be a transformational leader. So, I readily accepted the challenge when I was offered the opportunity to serve as the new principal of a well-established Montessori school with a pre-K program. The public school had performed well as a Montessori environment, but had not aligned its instructional practices with district curricular standards and benchmarks.

We needed to merge the Montessori curriculum with more traditional practices to meet district and state testing requirements. Additionally, I was tasked with providing pre-K students with a standards-based curriculum that would help them develop the necessary skills to master content by the time they reached kindergarten.

Before I could lead the school through any transformation, there would need to be a major paradigm shift. Little did I know that the first hurdle to overcome would be my own inexperience with Montessori and pre-K programs.

Learn the Ropes

My first step was to visit local, private Montessori schools and form a strong relationship with the local university that provided Montessori teacher training. I needed to learn as much as possible about Montessori schools and their core beliefs. I initially struggled with having to rethink my own training as a teacher and principal to embrace a new way of learning and teaching.

I also met with state education officials responsible for pre-K instruction and day care regulation. Many of the operational guidelines and rules governing



pre-K programs, staffing formulas, playground equipment, and even applicable fire codes were different from those required for kindergarten and other elementary students. My most beneficial training came during my frequent visits to local day care centers that offered pre-K programs. There, I was able to see pre-K programs in practice and get useful information from professionals already doing the work.

Build Relationships

The next step was to build trusting relationships with all stakeholders. Montessori families are passionate about their schools and quickly rejected any suggestion that they do anything similar to traditional instructional practices. I made myself available to parents to discuss their concerns and to attempt to alleviate any fears. I brought in district leadership to assist with parent discussions, and invited parents into classrooms. I helped parents see that our merged curriculum was true to Montessori methods, while also meeting district curricular standards.

I also worked to assure parents of pre-K students that their children were in a safe and progressive learning environment. Some parents questioned whether a male principal with experience in elementary and middle schools could relate to such young children. I had to let parents see me as a caring individual who had their children's best interests at heart. For example, I immediately made a personal phone call to every parent to introduce myself and to share how excited I was to be the new principal. During the call, I invited parents to come meet me during a reception, and promised that I would be accessible and maintain an open door policy, which I did. I also made it a point to be highly visible so that everyone could see my interactions with the

children, greeting every child as they arrived at school every morning, for example. In addition, I held frequent, informal "principal chats" where parents could come talk with me about concerns and any ideas they had about our school.

Additionally, I spent time with the pre-K students in their learning circles and classrooms to build trusting relationships with them. This was challenging, because many students were not used to being nurtured by a man.

Assemble a Team

I established a leadership team that helped interview and select new teachers and staff. The team was comprised of representatives of our professional staff, support personnel, a parent from each grade level, two well-respected community members, and a couple of local business owners. We selected two fourth-grade students to serve on our leadership team as well. This mix ensured that every voice was being represented. This group also taught me basic Montessori instructional practices and helped to develop the alignment of our Montessori curriculum with the district standards. Since the school had previously only offered a strict Montessori program, implementing the district's standards-based instruction was challenging. The teachers and I developed and modeled traditional and Montessori lessons during biweekly professional development sessions that helped us to align our curriculum with the district.

Upon reflection, I wish I had come into the position with experience working with pre-K students and programs rather than having to search for answers. I advise other principals who will be leading pre-K programs for the first time to:

- **Make connections** with officials and others who monitor and regu-

late pre-K programs, which will help save time, prevent a great deal of frustration, and make for a much smoother transition.

- **Spend time with pre-K-aged children** prior to beginning the assignment. The time spent will provide a better understanding of their specific needs.
- **Listen to suggestions** offered by parents and other stakeholders about new changes. Listening not only results in receiving their buy-in, but also provides invaluable feedback.

Together, we were able to transform the program into a more successful experience for children, which was most important at the end of the day. □

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