



# EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A PRINCIPAL'S GUIDE TO ALIGNING  
THE STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS.



## STRONG START

This article is the first in a series focused on aligning early learning communities.

**H**igh-quality early learning sets young students on the path to lifelong success. Research has documented the effects of preschool and pre-kindergarten—from supporting students’ social and emotional development to narrowing the achievement gap.

Recent federal policy—including Head Start reauthorization, the Early Race to the Top program, and the introduction of the bipartisan Strong Start for America’s Children Act—as well as the expansion of state-supported pre-K has also brought renewed attention to the promise of high-quality early childhood education for *all* children.

To support principals in creating school conditions that support early learners’ needs, NAESP has developed an updated, practical guide: *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice*. This standards document describes new competencies that are grounded in the knowledge that one of the most critical spans of a child’s lifetime is from age 3 to age 8—or pre-K-3. Brain research shows that during this time, children learn and grow at varying rates, reaching key developmental milestones *throughout* their early schooling years.

*Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities* outlines an approach to high-quality early childhood education that is critical to laying a strong foundation for learning. Strong programs incorporate play, creativity, early literacy and numeracy, music and art, physi-

cal activity, and time to nurture each child’s social and emotional growth.

Principals have an important leadership role in advancing early childhood education that properly aligns learning throughout the early grades. Principals are responsible for creating a continuum of research-based, age-appropriate learning experiences for young children that include a focus on social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, and creativity, as well as academic skills.

Principals should review the framework and leadership competencies, and then reflect not only on their practice, but also on their early learning program’s ability to foster intellectual curiosity, personal responsibility, and critical life skills.

### SIX LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

**1 Embrace the pre-K-3 early learning continuum.** Operating within a patchwork of early learning programs, funding streams, goals, standards, and levels of quality, effective principals help their learning communities define a pre-K-3 continuum that transcends the boundaries of preschool and K-12 systems to create a seamless learning experience for children from age 3 to grade 3.

Principals should understand this bigger picture, but also go beyond simply acknowledging its importance. It is essential that the school and community embrace the pre-K-3 continuum. Educators must expand the concept of “learning community” to include collaboration among external, as well as internal, stakeholders. Principals should communicate the long-term value of early learning and the benefits of inclusive early learning to parents and community stakeholders.

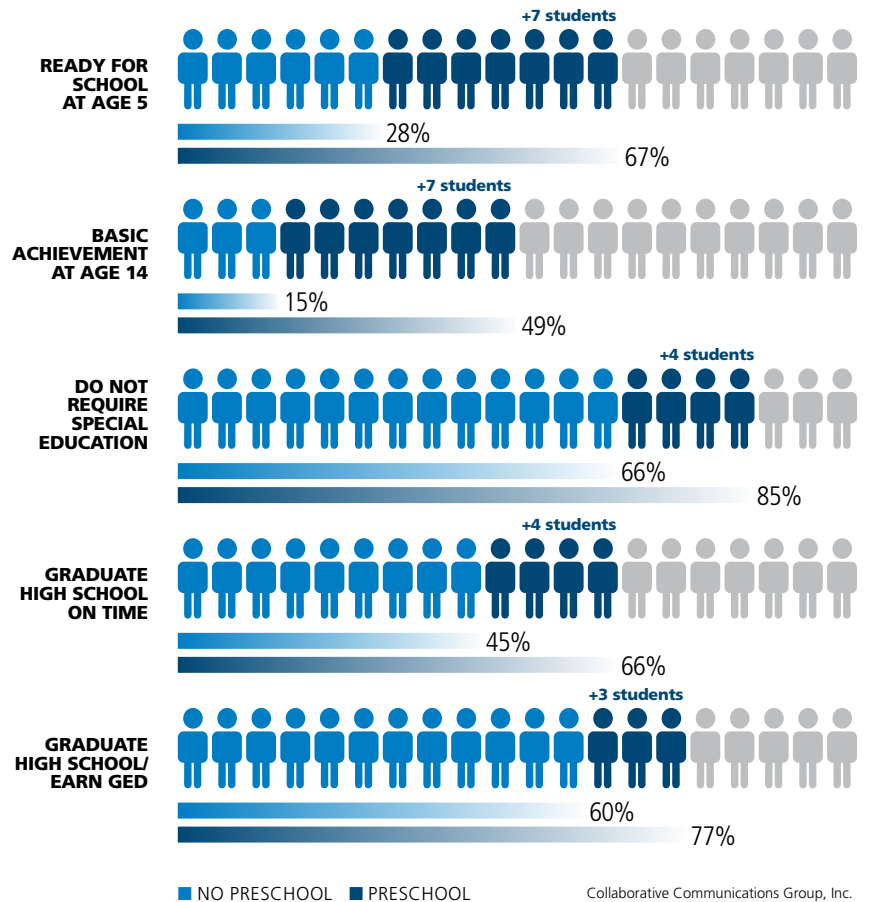
Encouraging this learning continuum also requires proper alignment of funding, resources, and governance. If structures aren’t in place to support pre-K-3 alignment, strategies to implement early learning in schools won’t be as effective.

## 2 Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching.

Learning gaps emerge early, particularly among disadvantaged students and those living in poverty. These gaps can widen over the course of the elementary grades and throughout a student’s learning career. Principals must work with teachers to intervene—supporting students in the early years by setting a consistent framework for learning from age 3 to grade 3. This includes aligning standards, curricula, instruction, and age-appropriate assessments in pre-K-3 to set vertical and horizontal compatibility in instruction.

Working with teachers, principals must identify curriculum that is relevant, engaging, and, comprehensive—going beyond math and English language arts to include the untested subjects. Principals can encourage effective instruction by bringing together professional communities of practice that empower teachers to learn from each other and better set vertical and horizontal alignment.

## HOW WOULD EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CHANGE THE LIVES OF 20 CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY?



## 3 Provide personalized learning environments.

Principals must also help teachers create supportive, personalized learning environments for students. Such learning environments create a welcoming and nurturing climate in which children are regarded as learners with individual needs, each with different skills and interests, who work at their own pace and move to mastery of different learning and developmental milestones at varying rates. Active learning in personalized environments requires educators to use a variety of learning tools and technologies in ways that add relevance to children’s learning.

Blended learning is a key strategy to support students in leading their

own learning, as well as for providing differentiated and adaptive learning structures to meet individual needs. Students in the early grades can use technology to develop basic skills, while the older students focus on creating, researching, and developing projects. Principals must facilitate the use of technology and digital learning in classrooms, ensuring that teachers develop their ability to reach students and support their ongoing needs.

## 4 Use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning.

Principals must not only understand, but also be able to articulate the goal of assessment in the early years, which is to improve



*a loss*  
**beyond words.**

Your school library, your community.

School libraries are much more than literacy centers. They serve as a safe environment to explore and learn, access new information technologies, and collaborate with peers. When a school library program is destroyed by a natural disaster, the students and the community feel the immediate loss of a valuable resource that reaches far beyond books. Since 2006, the American Association of School Librarians, with funding from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, has given more than 1.5 million dollars in grants to over 150 school libraries across the country affected by natural disasters.

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An ALA, AASL, NEA program  
funded by Dollar General  
Literacy Foundation



## SCHOOLS NEED TO CULTIVATE A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING FROM AGE 3 TO GRADE 3.

instruction and learning. To build understanding of assessment needs throughout pre-K-3 learning communities, principals must support teachers in using multiple forms of assessments, along with observations, portfolios, and anecdotal records. Principals should encourage open and collaborative discussions about assessment data with parents and community stakeholders to gauge program effectiveness and determine what is needed to help students achieve both cognitive and developmental success.

**5 Build professional capacity across the learning community.** Effective principals build collaborative working environments that support the professional growth of all who work in them. They know that in order to improve the learning of children, every member of the learning community must continuously learn—including teachers and principals themselves.

Districts should build principals' professional knowledge about what is age- and developmentally appropriate across the continuum. Principals need to know how to best educate students at each grade level. This need for professional learning extends to teachers as well. Schools should support ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers along the continuum. Finally, professional learning communities need to focus on authentic work that genuinely addresses the needs of a pre-K-3 continuum.

**6 Make schools a hub of pre-K-3 learning for families and communities.** Effective principals know that children's success at school starts at home. That's why they must work with families, pre-kindergarten programs, and community organizations to build strong pre-K-3 links. Linking early learning and elementary

learning can help children and families experience smooth transitions and continuity of practice across early care and elementary school settings so that children thrive through their early elementary years.

To achieve this goal, effective principals engage a number of partners in meeting the social, emotional, academic, and physical needs of students and their families, which serve as a natural extension of a school's work.

Schools need to develop a welcoming environment and sense of belonging. They need to cultivate a shared responsibility for children's learning from age 3 to grade 3. In communities without expanded pre-K grade configurations, there must be meaningful transitions between preschool and elementary school. Children also need out-of-school and summer learning opportunities from age 3 to grade 3.


For instance, Earl Boyles Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, is integrated with parents and the wider community. Principal Ericka Guynes and her staff partner with the Children's Institute and the Early Works Initiative to create a clear vision for what they call a "seamless system" between the early learning program and the K-5 classrooms.

In the early stages of planning, Guynes conducted a community needs assessment with Portland State University to determine gaps in services, identify parental priority areas, and develop short- and long-term

strategies for implementation. The assessment helped the school's staff to establish a common vision around what early learning looks like in a K-12 system and to engage with early childhood experts throughout the process.

With the help of a parent group, Earl Boyles Elementary is now in the process of creating an Early Learning Wing/Neighborhood Center at the school, which will serve as a community hub of supports, resources, and information focused on helping children prepare for kindergarten.

### COLLABORATION IS KEY

Addressing these six competencies is the first step principals can take to guarantee quality early childhood education for students. Communication and collaboration between principals and teachers, as well as among parents, families, and external partners within the community, is essential. It is only through this collaboration that principals can ensure that students build a solid foundation to start their education journey on the right foot. 

The full version of *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* will be available mid-October 2014. Check [naesp.org](http://naesp.org) for purchasing information.