



STRATEGIES FOR

Aligning

Pre-K-3



STRONG START

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

Education researchers, policymakers, and thought leaders provide insight into the principal's role in aligning early childhood education.

By Susan McLester

We've all experienced those "Aha!" moments when a truth suddenly comes to us. For Rhian Evans Allvin, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), one of those moments came at a conference some years ago. A principal there spoke of how he sent out letters to parents of newborns in his district, welcoming them into the learning community and offering a list of available early childhood resources and opportunities. "It was a reminder of the power [that] a principal has to impact the long-term trajectory of a child's life," says Allvin.

percent of four-year-olds are in publicly supported pre-K programs; somewhere around 4 percent are in publicly funded preschool. Only six out of 10 American students have access to full-day kindergarten.

The Challenge of Aligning Separate Worlds

Successfully navigating the pre-K-3 continuum requires a principal to essentially straddle the separate universes of birth to age 5 and K-12, each with their separate histories of infrastructure, preparation, policy, and funding streams. With no one-size-fits-all approach to the pre-K-3 world, the common goal of providing high-quality education to every child and improving outcomes in the earliest years is where the crossover lies. But alignment remains a tough challenge.

"We have a birth through [age] 3 system; we have an infant/toddler system; and we have a three- and four-year-old system that is sometimes tied to the infant/toddler piece, sometimes not," says Libby Doggett, deputy assistant secretary for policy and early learning at the U.S. Department of Education. "We also have pre-K that's tied to schools so this is really the bridge. But we've got to make this bridge work and that's going to require alignment across systems that haven't worked together before," says Doggett.

As an example, Doggett points to the different standards, curriculum, and assessments for the range of early

NAESP's recently released *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* reinforces the importance of this kind of principal participation in family engagement as well as in professional training, evaluation, and other key elements in early childhood education. This article taps into the expertise of key policymakers, researchers, and thought leaders who convened at the October 2014 launch event of this new body of work for a discussion of the policy, practice, and implications of aligning pre-K-3 education.

What Quality Preschool Looks Like

In order to realize the vision of quality preschool for all, school leaders, parents, caregivers, policymakers, and others must share an understanding of its essential elements.

NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly summarizes those elements as follows:

- High-quality preschool that is connected to full-day kindergarten;
- State early childhood and pre-K standards that are aligned and drive state and local education decisions;
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum through grade 3 that is mindful of child development and the social and emotional learning that fosters young children's growth; and
- Assessment practices that are developmentally appropriate and useful to teachers for instruction.

Recent statistics provide a snapshot of the challenges we face to achieve this vision. Currently, fewer than 50

learning programs including Head Start, public pre-K and childcare, private nursery schools, and other organizations that serve young children.

One of the single greatest challenges, she says, is the legacy of traditionally underfunded childcare that leaves the early childhood education system poorly funded. The good news, she points out, is Obama's investment of \$1 billion in Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge funds, which have gone out to twenty states and are helping to align pre-K-3 learning.

State and Local Agencies Taking Initiative

Other proposals for federal funding have been met with gridlock in Congress, though it is encouraging that Obama is committed to advancing a bold agenda of early childhood education. The president's fiscal year 2015 budget allocates \$1.3 billion in mandatory funds, as part of a 10-year, \$75 billion commitment to a voluntary Preschool for All federal-state partnership, and \$500 million—double last year's funding—for matching-funds Preschool Development Grants to states.

Meanwhile, Doggett says, many state and local educators and policy leaders say they simply can't wait for this

federal funding to come along and are playing "catch up" now. For example, Michigan, New York, Alabama, and California, have raised funds or instituted their own state-supported preschool programs. Even individual cities, such as San Antonio and Seattle, have found funding sources, such as grants through the National League of Cities. The grants promote efforts to create a seamless pipeline for children ages 0-8 through uniting and training early childhood care providers, creating very early childhood centers, and more.

Earlier Is Better and Dosage Matters

Approaching early childhood education from the research angle is Kristie Kauerz, who is a research assistant professor at the University of Washington, College of Education, and expert in policy, research, and practice, as well as birth-to-age-5 system building and K-12 reform. Kauerz believes we need to pay closer attention to brain research, which tells us to get the earliest possible start in educating young children.

In line with findings such as "Never Too Late. But Earlier is Better," from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, Kauerz says its crucial to seize our window of opportunity for influencing children's learning trajectories from birth to age 8. "And it's not only that we have the greatest opportunity to influence children, but we can do so at the least cost. So this is the 'prevention versus intervention' argument," she says.

Research also confirms that achievement gaps can appear as early as 9 months of age, according to Kauerz, with longitudinal studies showing these gaps increase as children age.

Based on that research, Kauerz asks, "Why do we wait to start addressing them at third grade?"

Kauerz also identifies dosage as the "magic sauce" for success in pre-K-3, saying that one year of high-quality pre-K is not enough. It needs to be followed by a second dose of high-quality, full-day kindergarten, and high-quality doses of first grade, second grade, and third grade. "We need to move out of this 'silver bullet' approach thinking that just one investment in one year is going to make the difference," says Kauerz.

Preschool Quality Matters

Kauerz believes the right kinds of classroom experiences make a huge difference to successful preschool programs; she says "they must go beyond just access to preschool or a full-day kindergarten." She adds, "We need to look at what goes on inside the classroom because social and emotional skills are as important as cognitive skills, [and] we need to have really comprehensive approaches to child assessment that looks at the whole child, not just their pre-literacy or pre-math skills."

Kauerz and Doggett both agree this area needs work. Preschool teachers have not traditionally had the benefit of training in practices such as mentoring and coaching. Doggett says she's too often seen young children sitting quietly filling out worksheets, and teachers teaching to the test—methods directly opposite of new, research supporting tactics using art, music, and other creative means of learning.

Kauerz also cautions policymakers to take a more mindful approach to traditional policies, such as third-

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/JanFeb15

Download the executive summary as well as the full version of *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities*.

For additional policy perspectives, read "The Path to Lifelong Success Begins With P-3," by Kristie Kauerz and "Spreading the Word on Early Childhood Education," by Helen Blank and Karen Schulman, from the *Principal* magazine archives.

The U.S. Department of Education's Early Learning Web page outlines the department's early learning plan, and features fact sheets and other resources.

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Policy, Practice, and Professional Development

NAESP is leading principals in advocating for federal, state, and district policies that build the capacity of elementary principal leadership within a pre-K-3 continuum. Ask your state and district for the following professional development policies that will help principals prepare for the task of leading pre-K-3 learning communities.

- 1 INVEST IN PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS** that help build principals' understanding of effective pre-K-3 teaching practices, appropriate assessment, and use of data to improve teaching and learning.
- 2 ALLOCATE RESOURCES TO PROVIDE PRINCIPALS WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING** on pre-K-3 developmentally appropriate practices and instructional leadership competencies.
- 3 PROVIDE JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO TEACHERS** along the pre-K-3 continuum. Invest in programs that increase knowledge in all domains—academic, social, emotional, and physical—and in practices that have proved to enhance early learning, including play-based instruction, arts-integration, and blended learning.
- 4 CREATE STATE TECHNOLOGY PLANS THAT ADDRESS THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF STUDENTS IN THE PRE-K-3 CONTINUUM.** As schools continue to transition to blended learning environments, consideration must be given to what is developmentally appropriate. Standards for the use of technology in the early years are also needed, as is support for effective use of technology by educators.

Read the executive summary of *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities* for a full listing of Call to Action recommendations. Access the document at naesp.org/llc.

grade retention laws that put the burden of work on children's backs without providing adequate supports and interventions earlier. "I am a big fan of assessment and accountability, but I think it needs to be done really smartly in these early years so that we are supporting teachers and nurturing children along the way," says Kauerz.

Doggett provides the perspective of the Department of Education, explaining, "We know what quality looks like and we're helping build a great early childhood workforce by trying to align what teachers—preschool teachers, early childhood teachers—are getting in their trainings, what they're getting in community colleges, and what they are getting in universities so that there is a seamless system there."

States' Principal Preparation Uneven, Limited

A 2014 study, *Preparing Principals to Support Early Childhood Teachers*, by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, summarizes what is known about principal licensing require-

ments and professional development in early childhood pedagogy and best practice.

The study finds nearly all states have adopted some form of what's known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, which lay out a set of competencies school leaders need to succeed in improving instruction. Yet neither the standards, nor the states—except Illinois—have included early childhood content specifically in their licensure, accreditation, mentoring, or evaluation processes.

It's exactly this problem that Steve Tozer set out to address when he led the Illinois state task force to put in place a requirement for all elementary and high school principals to be licensed in early childhood education—the first and only in the nation. Tozer is a professor and founding coordinator of the University of Illinois doctoral Urban Education Leadership Program and lead editor of the *Handbook of Research* in the social foundations of education.

Referring to a recent article on kindergarten readiness in a major education journal, Tozer remarked, "We commonly see that our discussions of early childhood practice say almost nothing about school leadership. And in school leadership circles there is very little about early childhood education." According to Tozer, socioeconomic status will continue to be the dominant predictor of student performance in schools until we set about the task of producing great school leaders at scale. "For 35 years, we've known that a really good school leader can go into the most struggling of schools and produce phenomenal learning outcomes in a relatively short time."

Developing leaders and supporting principals who understand the quality of early childhood education is a key lever for improving student learning all the way up the line is a continued challenge," says Tozer. 

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