

The  
**Power**



of  
**Pre-K**

**M**ove over kindergarten—pre-K has emerged as the base of vital early learning. Author Robert Fulghum popularized the idea that everything we need to be successful in life we learn in kindergarten. But in the past 25 years, the foundation for early learning has shifted to pre-K. This movement capitalizes on 50 years of research backing a focus on early learning as a means to not only appeal to a child’s natural inclination for learning, but also to prevent children from falling behind.

This Michigan school supports early learners through a unified, pre-K-3 umbrella approach.

By Rebecca Stephens

As teachers, we know that fostering a love of learning early can sustain children through life’s problems. As leaders, however, facilitating a pre-K program can be challenging as educators work through professional development, program integration, curriculum alignment, and seamless education issues. Not every teacher, nor school, is ready for what could be a fundamental shift in the culture of a K-3 program.

For curriculum-heavy kindergarten programs, bringing a pre-K on board can substantially alter perceptions about what children need to know, and how much control they are able to exert over their own learning. When fully integrated, a pre-K program can remind us of some of the most important things about teaching and learning: the power of choice and student-centered learning. Students who have time to explore and make choices learn on many levels simultaneously. When teachers allow time for choice, they provide opportunities for their own observation of students, fostering a deeper understanding of how those students learn.

As an administrator in a mid-sized urban school district with approximately 13,000 students, publically funded pre-kindergarten came at a time when we were seeing a decrease in student achievement, as well as an increase in retention rates and referrals for special education. As a district, we were experiencing a declining population, severe funding cuts, and

an increasingly disenfranchised population base. The integration of two pre-K classrooms at Gier Park Elementary School in Lansing, Michigan, six years ago served as a stimulating exercise in program development.

#### Integration Help

As part of its efforts to integrate pre-K into the school, Gier Park signed on to participate in the FirstSchool Initiative, a reform approach to early education that is part of the pre-K-3 movement to support educators and schools in improving how they engage and teach early learners. The FirstSchool approach emphasizes the use of data to improve instruction, collaboration as a basis for professional learning communities, and an alignment across the primary grades from pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Our involvement in FirstSchool united our staff by allowing us to explore who we are, how we are perceived, and what we want and need to change in order to give our students the best possible learning experiences. The central focus on pre-K-3 as part of the FirstSchool Initiative engaged the staff in considering the school experience from the child’s perspective, and provided data as evidence for what the classroom experience was like for randomly selected students. By actively appraising their own classroom, as well as the school culture, teachers used reflection as a means of examining their own practice.



The data ignites this reflective process and allows collaboration to enhance teachers' practice both horizontally and vertically within the pre-K-3 program.

The umbrella under which all this inquiry into our teaching practice takes place is the concept of creating a seamless educational experience throughout the pre-K-3 program. That means delving deeply into the data for the pre-K program to see what is happening, how that experience is different once students transition to kindergarten, and how we can take the foundational approaches of choice and student-centered learning and maintain that emphasis throughout the K-3 student experience. What is happening in pre-K works, so why not carry the approach into K-3?

Even though research supports the early learning model, the impact is maximized if the pre-kindergarten classrooms are completely integrated into the K-3 program. One of the biggest challenges has been doing just that: integrating the pre-K classroom—the teachers, students, and parents—into the rest of the building-wide program. Differences in schedules, professional development, and financial compensation for teachers created a chasm between the pre-K staff and the rest of the K-3 staff. Initially, we knew these teachers and students existed because we saw

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them every day. But they were simply housed in our building, with no real connection to our K-3 program.

The first step in the integration process is bringing the staff together—both pre-K and K-3—to explore the common denominators of each program and acknowledge the program gaps (play time vs. direct instruction, for example). Professional learning communities play a major role in facilitating this process; but it cannot end there.

In order to solidify the integration of the pre-K program, part of each staff meeting needs to focus on it, and transition goals need to be determined early on, with an on-going conversation that accommodates individual student and family needs. What is learned about families early on can make a big impact on student success as they enter the K-3 program.

To aide in pre-K-3 integration, pre-K classrooms can periodically partner with K-3 classrooms on projects. This student-level collaboration is a fundamental practice that provides a solid return: Pre-K classrooms that interact with K-3 classrooms can form a relationship not only between students, but also between teachers and their classroom spaces.

### Transitional Issues

Principals should prepare for transitional issues that exist between pre-K and kindergarten.

- **Parent Involvement.** As part of the requirements of Michigan's Great Starts Readiness Program (GSRP) that serves 30,000 at risk pre-K students, Gier Park's pre-K

parents are expected to participate in their child's learning, including daily connections with teachers. As parents drop-off and pick-up their students, they have the chance to speak to the teacher and get a good sense of how the day went for their young learner. In kindergarten, the emphasis shifts from an inclusive, parental-involvement policy to an expectation of stepping back and letting the teachers take over.

- **Home visits.** Required multiple times during the year under GSRP, home visits nurture the home-school connection and provide parents with learning activities to work with their children during the out-of-school hours. There are no required home visits in kindergarten and beyond.

- **Class size.** The transition to kindergarten means independence and moving parents to the background. From pre-K to kindergarten, class size increases by as much as 60 percent, from 16 to 25 students.

- **Curricular pressure.** While pre-K is a partnership, the transition to kindergarten may include a dramatic decline in the association parents have with the school and the classrooms. Curricular pressure is the number one factor cited by most teachers as the reason many of the parent-student activities cease.

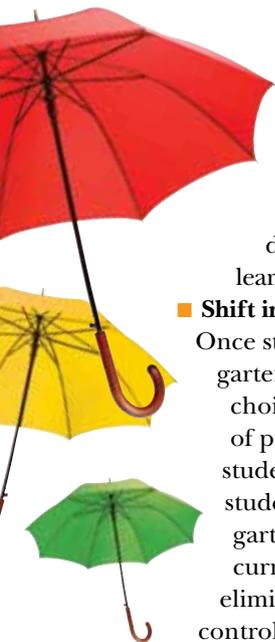
- **Data.** The data from pre-K reminds us of the importance of getting, and keeping, parents involved in the seamless education of our students. Our data about the transition also highlighted the prominent shift from student-centered learning in pre-K to

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/SeptOct13](http://www.naesp.org/SeptOct13)

Visit the FirstSchool Initiative website for an in-depth description of the program's **philosophy and framework**.

Explore **NAESP's Early Childhood Education webpage** to find resources and policy statements on P-3 alignment, including recommendations from NAESP's Task Force on Early Learning.



didactic, teacher-driven learning in K-3.

■ **Shift in teaching approach.**

Once students enter kindergarten, the time allotted for choice becomes an inverse of pre-K. True choice is student centered, and when students enter kindergarten, teachers feeling curricular pressures often eliminate choice, or exert control over what choices are available, steering the activity more toward academics.

While curriculum is important, and providing maximum opportunity for student progress is essential, a better balance may provide for more student-centered learning. The byproducts of student-centered learning include more students engaged in conversations, which facilitates their oral language development and fosters reflective learning. Children love to talk to each other, and their ability to learn from each other is immeasurable. They ask each other questions, and they push each other toward new ideas and interests, sparking thoughts and understandings.

**Professional Development and PLCs**

As the transition continued, Gier Park educators found several solutions to integration issues, namely professional learning communities (PLCs) and data-driven decision-making.

The GSRP program provides substantial professional development for pre-K teachers, which helps to maintain a high level of quality teachers. The flip side to that issue is the isolation of the pre-K teachers from the rest of the staff, often pulling them out of the building on days when the K-3 staff works collaboratively. Both sets of teachers benefit from the professional development provided, and yet their time for collaboration is taken away, leaving little to no time to work together during the regular school day.

PLCs became a way for us to pull everyone together, grade level and whole staff, in order to do the work of teaching: collaboratively plan by aligning the curriculum within each grade level and between each grade level as a means of creating the seamless education of all students pre-K-3. The pre-K team joined the K-team during PLC time, which finally provided the opportunity to talk about transitions from pre-K to kindergarten, plan activities, share ideas and ways to integrate more choice, and come to a deeper understanding of how the curriculum for these youngest learners aligns with kindergarten curriculum.

**Data-Driven Decision-Making**

Data-driven collaboration allows teachers an opportunity to solve problems, and the most obvious problem we face as teachers is the horizontal and vertical alignment of curriculum to instructional practice. When we collaborate, we share ideas, issues, approaches, and solutions, and we build trust in our colleagues to become partners in this journey with our students.

Aligning our instructional practice within and across grade levels builds on the concept of seamless education, where transitions are smooth and provide little to no disruption in the forward progress of all students. By collaborating on research-based best practice, and using our PLC time to plan lessons, building on what we know of our students and the data, we are more likely to consistently present curriculum within each grade level, and maintain that consistency across grade levels. As a staff, we are in the process of making this approach a reality.

**Unified Philosophy, Common Approach**

After two years with FirstSchool, and a year of working in PLCs with a seasoned facilitator, we are much closer to a unified philosophy and common

approach, placing choice and student-centered learning at the heart of our teaching. In early November 2012, we had a lively discussion about our most recent data, and the idea of play as a choice for students in the classroom. We were participating in an activity that drew from the lessons we could learn from wolves, concentrating on the fact that wolves use play as a means of teaching and learning about their pack members. It was a revelation that impacted every teacher, and our pre-K team certainly had a great deal to contribute to the conversation.

What we learned that day incrementally changed our program to allow time each day for play as a way of providing students with an alternative approach to learning. Several teachers began teaming up their classes to play games that integrate skills, both social and academic, and allow students to learn from their peers.

**Best Start Possible**

There are roughly 2,400 days of school between the first day of pre-K and the last day of high school, and it is staggering to realize how much children grow in the 14 years of education they experience, and how much we, as educators, can influence that growth. The foundation upon which all their learning is built begins at the very young, very impressionable age of four years old, when students enter the pre-K program in their public school district. We have this golden opportunity at a time when a child is most ready to engage in the learning process without hesitation. What and how they learn early on will forever impact their future as students. Let's make sure they get the pre-K they need in order to get the best start to carry them through the rest of their school days. ☐

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**Rebecca Stephens** is principal of Gier Park Elementary School in Lansing, Michigan.