Evaluation of the 2017-18 Implementation of the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy Pilot in Alabama

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Overview of the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy

Our nation's education system includes a discontinuity at the point where most school districts begin teaching our students. Students moving from Pre-Kindergarten into Kindergarten face abrupt changes in expectations and in the structure of their learning day and environment. There tends to be less play and more homework. In a way, it is not unlike the difficult transition that students face later as they move from middle school to high school.

The gap and lack of articulation between early childhood programs and early elementary schooling can slow down the intellectual development of our youngest students. To address this break, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has identified leadership competencies for the school leaders overseeing education in these early childhood settings, and developed a curriculum and an Academy to help school leaders master these competencies.

During the 2017-18 school year the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy was piloted with a cohort of 29 school leaders in the state of Alabama, 21 of whom completed the program. The participants were diverse. They came from urban, suburban and rural schools from throughout the state. They had a background of previous experience in education, ranging from being familiar with both Pre-K and with K-3 settings, to having experiences limited to only one of those age groups, to having no background at all in early childhood or early elementary. The participants also held a number of roles, from principals and assistant principals, to district leaders.

The Academy curriculum is firmly based on six leadership competencies the NAESP identified in its 2014 white paper on the topic, *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (NAESP 2014):

> Competency 1: Embrace the Pre-K-3 early learning continuum
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> Competency 2: Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching
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> Competency 3: Provide personalized learning environments
>
> Competency 4: Use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning growth
>
> Competency 5: Build professional capacity across the learning community
>
> Competency 6: Make schools a hub of Pre-K-3 learning for families and communities

The Academy was designed to use a hybrid delivery model combining the benefits of face-to-face training and networking as well as the convenience and cost savings of online learning. The participants, who came from schools and districts spread across the state, attended three face-to-face training sessions in Montgomery. They also completed two online courses. Course 101 provided a general overview of all six competencies. Course 201 allowed the participants to select one of the competencies for a deeper dive.

Course 201 was also designed to lead into participants completing a capstone project. The capstone projects were all presented in Montgomery on June 19, 2018. The projects were video-recorded to be shown on public broadcasting. Secretary Jeana Ross of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education stayed throughout the day to see all of the capstone presentations, underlining the value of the program and indicating cabinet-level state support for this initiative.

Two final components rounded out the Academy design: the intentional creation of communities of practice, and the use of virtual advisors. The cohort model was deliberately adopted to encourage the participants to network, share and collaborate with each other. The capstone presentations provided evidence of the success of the development of a community of practice in the number of participants who specifically referenced visiting other districts and schools to see what was happening in other parts of the state, share best practices, and bring back to their own schools and districts lessons learned.

A majority of the virtual advisors attended the capstone presentations, and many of the participants spoke to the value of their guidance, and their willingness to share of their experience and wisdom.

Overview of Results

Participants reported statistically significant growth on each of the six Pre-K-3 leadership competencies. Ninety percent of respondents (19 of 21) reported that the NAESP PreK 3 Leadership Academy has helped them to "better meet the needs of vulnerable children." Seven respondents reported an increase in the percentage of teachers using effective teaching practices, and none reported a decrease. Participants also reported an increase in the amount of professional learning that included teachers from both Pre-K and early childhood, and from K-3.

Characteristics of Participants and Their Schools

Because school leaders have an indirect influence on student learning (Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson, 2010; Branch, Hanushek and Rivkin, 2012), the full impacts of the Academy go beyond the 21 participants who completed the Academy. The 20 schools led by graduates of the Academy served a total of 11,841 students, and employed 997 teachers. Their schools averaged 50 teachers and 592 students. In addition, the district leader from St. Clair County who was in the cohort indicated serving 9,000 students in her district. Even without including her 9,000 students in the total, it is clear that a leadership program such as the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy has the ability to touch the lives of many students.

The 21 Academy completers included 12 principals, five assistant principals, two other school leaders, and two district leaders. In terms of their previous experience, six

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of them were primarily experienced in K-3 and elementary, while four were primarily experienced in Pre-K and early childhood. Nine participants had previous experience with both K-3 and elementary, and with Pre-K and early childhood. Two participants had little previous experience with either; both of these were principals of K-12 schools in rural communities, whose earlier careers had primarily been focused on working with secondary students.

Academy participants were fairly evenly distributed between leading schools with very high students' readiness and performance, moderate readiness and performance, and low readiness and performance, as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2. When asked what percent of students were ready for school, based on Ages and Stages Questionnaire, the most common answer, selected by five participants, was between 60 percent and 80 percent (Table 1). Three respondents reported more than 80 percent of their students were ready, and two each reported between 40 and 60, between 20 and 40, and below 20 percent were ready. Seven respondents reported that they did not know or did not answer.

Table 1: Percent of children ready for school according to Ages and Stages Questionnaire

Percent of Students Ready	Number of respondents
≥ 80%	3
≥ 60% but < 80%	5
≥ 40% but < 60%	2
≥ 20% but < 40%	2
< 20%	2
Don't know	5
Did not answer	2

Participant Mastery of Leadership Competencies

Participants reported gains in their self-assessed level of mastery for each of the six core leadership competencies the Academy was designed to develop. Gains for all six competencies were statistically significant at a level of $p ≤ 0.05$ (se Table 2). At the beginning of the program, participants identified Competency 6, "Make schools a hub for Pre-K-3 learning for families and communities," as the competency on which they were weakest, giving an average rating of 3.76 on a six-point Likert scale; they had increased this to 5.19 at the end of the Academy. Participants showed the greatest gains, and also the highest ending mastery, on Competency 2, "Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching." This rose from a 3.90 to 5.50. The weakest competency at the conclusion of the Academy was Competency 3, "Provide personalized learning

environments." While self-reported gains in mastery of this competency were significant, increasing from 3.81 to 5.05, this is an area this cohort perceives as relatively more difficult.

Overall, the participants rated themselves fairly low on their mastery of these competencies at the beginning of the program, with a range from 3.76 for Competency 6, to 4.10 for Competency 4. At the end of the program they rated themselves much higher, with a range from 5.05 for Competency 3, the 5.50 for Competency 2.

Table 2: Participant Self-Reported Mastery of Pre-K-3 Leadership Competencies (reported on a 6-point Likert scale)

	Before	After	P(T<=t) two-tail
Competency 1: Embrace the Pre-K-3 early learning continuum	3.95	5.38	5.34E-05*
Competency 2: Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching	3.90	5.50	3.47E-06*
Competency 3: Provide personalized learning environments	3.81	5.05	6.25E-05*
Competency 4: Use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning growth	4.10	5.10	0.007856*
Competency 5: Build professional capacity across the learning community	3.90	5.19	4.42E-05*
Competency 6: Make schools a hub of Pre-K-3 learning for families and communities	3.76	5.19	3.21E-05*

*Result is statistically significant at a level of $p \leq 0.05$.

These self-assessments are corroborated in the view of their advisors (see Table 3). Again, the advisors found that Competency 3, personalizing learning environments, was the most challenging of the competencies for this cohort. While the small sample size (only six advisors) does not allow for significance testing, the advisors believed the Pre-K-3 continuum leadership competencies of their advisees did increase over the course of their participation in the Academy.

Table 3: Advisor Perceptions of Participants' Mastery of Leadership Competencies (reported on a 6-point Likert scale; six advisors reporting)

	Before	After
Competency 1: Embrace the Pre-K-3 early learning continuum	3.00	5.17
Competency 2: Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching	3.00	5.00

	Before	After
Competency 3: Provide personalized learning environments	2.67	4.33
Competency 4: Use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning growth	3.33	5.17
Competency 5: Build professional capacity across the learning community	3.00	5.17
Competency 6: Make schools a hub of Pre-K-3 learning for families and communities	2.67	4.80

<u>Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Students</u>

Ninety percent of the Academy completers (19 of 21) reported that the Academy had prepared them to "better meet the needs of vulnerable children." Specific examples they provided include the following:

> *My participation in the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy has made great improvements in the lives of vulnerable children. As stated previously, my school is 76 percent free and reduced lunch. Each child in my school has been greatly impacted by the professional development of their teachers. Teachers have begun to consistently implement developmentally appropriate practices, which has led to greater learning opportunities. Teachers are also able to better assess student needs, not only academically, but socially and emotionally, as well.*

> *I used the additional reading resources to help with some of the learning deficiencies of my students.*

> *Through participation in the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy, I have grown tremendously as an educator and administrator concerning the importance and impact of the PK-3 Early Learning Continuum, especially on children who are at-risk of not achieving grade level proficiency. I plan to implement several new ideas that will impact all WVES students, many of which are vulnerable as identified by the high number of students living at or below the poverty level (68%), and the percentage of children who are EL learners (40%).*

In answer to how the Academy helped them to meet the needs of vulnerable students, Academy completers said that it made them more aware of the needs of students; more aware of research and literature that could help their teachers; it gave them more instructional strategies to share with their teachers. The most common word used in these comments was "aware" or "awareness."

Effective Teaching Practices

Overall, participants reported that they believed that more of their teachers were using effective teaching practices "most of the time" during the 2017-18 school year (concurrent with their participation in the Academy) than had been during the previous school year, 2016-17 (see Table 4). Seven respondents reported an increase; none reported a decrease.

Table 4: Effective teaching practices most of the time:

Percent of teachers using effective teaching practices "most of the time"	2017-18	2016-17
80-100 percent	10	8
60-79.9 percent	10	7
40-59.9 percent	1	5
20-39.9 percent		1

Professional Development, Training, Credentialing, and Degrees

There was a 42 percent increase in joint professional development including both ages 0-4 and grades K-3 practitioners: across all participants, there were 92 joint PD events in 2017-18, up from 65 in 2016-17. Fourteen of 21 participants (67 percent) reported an increase. For example, Coffee County went from three joint PD events in 2016-17 to eight in 2017-18, and New Brockton Elementary went from zero joint PD events in 2016-17 to four joint trainings in 2017-18.

Respondents reported that a total of 24 ages 0-4 educators at their schools are currently working towards CDA, AA, BA or advanced degrees. Respondents also reported that 139 of the K-3 teachers at their schools are currently receiving early childhood training, credentials, accreditation or experience.

The joint professional development and the increases in teachers pursuing advanced credentials and degrees points to a more professional and integrated teaching workforces serving young children in the future, and greater collaboration and vertical integration and teaming between the age levels.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Ninety percent of the respondents (19 of 21) "strongly agreed" with the statement, "A developmentally appropriate practices approach aligns with the way I believe Pre—K-3 children learn best." The other two respondents "agreed," and no respondents disagreed. Participants were asked if they believe that developmentally appropriate practices approaches are superior to traditional approaches in a variety of areas of student learning, and the results are shown in Table 5. Almost all participants agreed that developmentally appropriate practices were best for all areas except self-care skills

such as managing clothes and jackets, zipping and buttoning, and hanging up backpacks. Therefore, while a majority still did see developmentally appropriate practices as preferred (16 of 21, 76 percent), there was a larger group of leaders preferring to see teachers take a more direct instructional approach to managing these parts of the day.

Table 5: Participants Agreeing Developmentally Appropriate Practices are Superior in Each Area

Science and Technology Skills	21/21	100%
Motivation to learn, receptiveness to learning, engagement in the learning process	21/21	100%
Problem-solving, making decisions	21/21	100%
Interacting with other children	21/21	100%
Language/Communication: understanding and speaking	20/21	95%
Positive ways of dealing with conflict; controlling emotions and behaviors	20/21	95%
Fine Motor Skills: using small muscles of the hand; drawing, writing, cutting	20/21	95%
Literacy/Pre-Literacy and Reading Skills: letters, sounds, words, vocabulary, spelling	19/21	90%
Math/Pre-Math Skills: shapes, numbers, counting, arithmetic	19/21	90%
Wanting to come to school	19/21	90%
Interacting with adults	19/21	90%
Gross Motor Skills: moving large muscles; walking, pedaling, climbing, running, jumping, using stairs	19/21	90%
Self-Care Skill Management: managing clothes and jacket, buttoning and zipping, eating/feeding self, hanging up backpack	**16/21**	**76%**

Participants shared a number of challenges they face in moving their teachers to adopt more developmentally appropriate practices. Several mentioned the challenge of getting teacher buy-in. One spoke about the challenge of asking "seasoned" teachers to change practices they had been using for years, and another asked "Is it happening when I am not watching?" One Academy participant cited a challenge in getting buy-in from the central office.

A couple of the Academy participants cited need for more training and teaching materials to help with implementing developmentally appropriate practices. Several expressed concerns that developmentally appropriate practices would be seen as going against needs to prepare students for state assessments. For example: "Teachers are afraid to let go because of the pressure of the grade above"; and, "Teachers want to teach developmentally appropriately but must be concerned about the testing instrument that will be used to judge them and their students."

One extended answer expands on what many of the participants felt as they worked to move their schools towards more developmentally appropriate classroom practices:

> *Change is very hard, especially for professionals who are good at their craft. Not all faculty members had a growth mindset and saw the need for professional development in developmentally appropriate practices. This was a major challenge in implementing the project. I provided as much evidence as I could through the data collected in the surveys, but not everyone was fully onboard. I had to keep moving with those faculty members who were committed to improving instruction for our young learners and hope that the others would join in as they observed the success and improvement in others' classrooms. As the book study came to a close, I still had some skeptics. Even though the project has come to a close, the learning has continued. Those without the yearning to improve are really struggling to keep up in grade level meetings where collaboration is truly blooming and data meetings where their students are not making great strides. I am confident through their own time, they will join the movement towards improvement for our students or they will choose something else that will be purposeful for their life.*

Despite the challenges, almost all of the participants had success stories to relate about moving toward developmentally appropriate practices. A common theme in both capstone presentations and in survey responses was that the move back to developmentally appropriate practices was restoring a love of learning to the classroom and a sense of joy to classrooms and teaching. One principal was the leader of a school her grandchild attended, and she attributed her grandchild's liking school more this year than last to the initiative to use more developmentally appropriate practices. Other participants shared stories about specific teachers, some veteran, some novice, who cited greater energy and commitment to teaching as a result of changes.

Specific comments made about successes in adopting developmentally appropriate practices include:

> *I have seen my building transform into a community of learners. The teachers are supportive of each other rather than competitive with one*

another which greatly benefits children. Children have a genuine JOY and LOVE for learning that was missing with the constant direct instruction model.

My teachers love it and it improves student motivation and school culture.

Our kids love learning and love being at school and are successful leaders in their KG and above classrooms.

Students are more successful and love learning.

A true paradigm shift in the way teachers are understanding child development.

I believe our school's overall success story this year has been that we approached discipline issues with children by taking into account their developmental levels.

The pre-k classrooms in our school are very aware of developmentally appropriate practice due to continuous professional development provided by the Alabama Office of School Readiness. We do have one teacher who embraces the "whole child" approach more than the others. At the end of the school year, the assessment data for her students was the highest of all classrooms.

One of our Pre-K teachers from last year looped with her students to kindergarten. The growth we saw in these students was astounding. All students tested ready for 1st grade in reading and math.

Our kindergarten really focused on developmentally appropriate skills this year. We saw an increase in DIBELS data from 32% CORE in 16-17 to 66% CORE in 17-18.

As the last three comments make clear, participants attribute academic learning gains to the shifts in developmentally appropriate practices, as well as an increased love for school.

Again, an extended comment of a participant sheds light on the challenges and successes attributed to the Academy:

When I began working at [school name], the schools had just merged to create our new primary school. Together the faculty and staff created a vision and mission statement, but I was naive to the fact that most of the faculty could not firmly stand behind our goals because they did not have

a deep understanding of the children that we served. My experience in the leadership academy made me aware that I also did not have a deep understanding of early childhood development. Through the rigorous studies of the leadership program I realized that our school was not in fact a true primary school. As mentioned before, teachers were so focused on meeting the state standards through curriculum adopted by the school system, they were not dedicated to meeting the social and developmental needs of our early childhood population. My participation in the NAESP Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy was very successful because I was able to grow as a leader and guide my faculty and staff to transform our school into what it truly should have been all along. We are not yet a model primary school, but we are headed in the right direction and will continue to learn and implement best developmentally appropriate practices for the children we continue to serve.

Academy participants were asked what could be done to better support developmentally appropriate practices in the Pre-K-3 learning continuum, and the most common request was for more professional development and training for both administrators and teachers. One participant suggested that podcasts might be a popular and convenient way to support learning, as they can be listened to in the car and can fit into the busy lives of today's educators.

Feedback on Academy Components

Academy completers were asked to provide feedback on the components of the Academy (see Table 6). The in-person training sessions held in Montgomery were the highest rated component of the Academy (average rating of 5.00 on a six-point scale), while Online Course 201 was the lowest rated component (average rating of 4.19). However, Course 201 was differentiated so that the different participants focused on completely different content, based on which Competency the participant chose to focus on. With a cohort of only 21 members, split across six different competencies, these sections became very small. One of the challenges of asynchronous online learning is the difficulty in interacting with classmates on the discussion boards. The first person to post something has nothing to respond to, and unless that first person is very (unusually) diligent, people who post later might not get meaningful feedback. Having more participants helps, but with only three or four members in a section, as some of the competencies had in 201, it's hard to generate and sustain meaningful feedback and interaction.

After the in-person training sessions (5.00), the next highest rated component was the communities of practice (4.43). The other, non-in-person components were all tightly clustered. Support and feedback from advisors was rated 4.38, but the high standard deviation of 1.50 reflects widely different advising experiences. Some of the

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participants had outstanding advising experiences, while others expressed disappointment. The capstone rating for the capstone project was on the low end, at 4.29, but the survey was conducted before the participants actually met in Montgomery to present their capstone projects. The rating may reflect anxiety over completing that project and having to make a high profile presentation (being filmed for television, and with the Secretary of the Department of Early Childhood present). Judging by the positive energy in the room on the day of the actual capstone presentations, it is possible the participants would rate that experience higher now that they have completed it.

Table 6: How would you rate each of the following aspects of the NAESP Leadership Academy? (Rated 1-6 on a 6 point Likert scale, with 6 being high)

	Average	Standard Deviation
In-person training sessions	5.00	0.76
Communities of Practice: learning from other cohort members	4.43	1.09
Online Coursework: Course 101	4.38	0.95
Online Coursework: Course 201	4.19	1.01
Support and feedback from my advisor	4.38	1.50
The Capstone Project	4.29	1.20

Participants were asked to report on what activities and content were most helpful, and to offer recommendations for improving the program. Three themes stood out in their responses: 1) the participants especially valued the face-to-face time, and wished there was more of it; 2) the participants valued the research literature and content they were exposed to; and, 3) several participants expressed concerns about the workload.

The most important theme related to the value the participants placed on their face-to-face interactions. They valued their discussion, partnerships, visits to each others' schools, and face-to-face dialogue. There were exceptions, and one person identified the online discussions as the most valuable part of the Academy. The more common response was that of a participant who recommended that in the future, don't "require as many online assignments, and add face-to-face time. Being in the group and learning from others was more beneficial to me." Another participant simply said "I think we need more interaction." And a third participant, after complimenting the relevance and quality of all of the Academy content, recommended "more onsite visits for future cohorts" — presumably meaning making it possible for the virtual advisors to

meet on site with their advisees at least once or twice during the Academy. A participant also expressed that thought during the capstone presentation day.

A second theme is that the participants really appreciated the content of the Academy, especially the introductions to research and journal articles. Several representative comments capture the feelings of the cohort.

> *The publication, Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities by NAESP has been a great source of information.*
>
> *I must admit that opening the LMS for each unit filled me with dread at reading all the research, I actually gained quite a bit as I completed the activities. I am not a fast reader so it takes me a great deal of time to complete many readings, but it was beneficial.*
>
> *I feel that I grew the most from the readings that were required for each assignment.*
>
> *The research materials provided as well as articles and videos from other areas with successful early childhood programs was very helpful.*

While this theme was not universal, several participants raised concerns about the amount of work required by the Academy. One responded said that "As active principals and administrators, finding time for the amount of work (especially in 101) was challenging." Another asked for "More feedback, and deadlines spread out. The course deadlines started right at the beginning of school starting which is hard for administrators." Of the eight participants who began the program but did not complete it, five specifically gave work and home responsibilities as their reason for not completing the Academy.

In terms of the amount of time participants spent on the online portions of the Academy, 11 Academy completers estimated that they spent 10-20 hours, and the rest estimated spending more than 20 hours.

Participant feedback and recommendations not falling under any of the three themes identified above included:

- One participant noted that she had found Competency 6 to be the most interesting and valuable to her, although when she had to make a decision about what route to take she chose Competency 2 to focus on. She wished that she had had more time to learn about all of the competencies before she was asked to make a decision.
- One participant suggested splitting the Academy into a section for those who are implementing Pre-Kindergarten, and those who are not. (This

recommendation may be contrary to the goal of promoting continuity across age levels).

- A participant asked that advisers provide more coaching, feedback and support.
- There was a comment about confusion around assignments at the beginning of the Academy, but the commenter understood that it was the type of confusion that could occur in a pilot.
- One participant was concerned that assignments seemed ask her to make changes that would have to come from the state level.

Overall Recommendations

The Academy was a success in improving completers' mastery of the six Pre-K-3 leadership competencies that served as the basis of the curriculum. Participants were appreciative of the opportunity to become part of an active community of practice, and they appreciated the research and literature that they were exposed to through the Academy. They felt like the Academy experience helped them and their teachers to better meet the needs of their students, especially vulnerable students.

One recommendation would be to add at least one on-site coaching visit as a part of the Academy curriculum. Some of the participants greatly valued their advisors, but did not have a chance to meet them before the capstone presentations.

A second recommendation is to look again at Course 201. It can be difficult to establish engagement with an asynchronous online class. Smaller enrollments make that engagement even more difficult, as interaction will decrease as the number of participants decreases. If the current configuration is kept for Course 201 — and it does have the advantage of permitting participants to concentrate — it may be advisable to make the course more synchronous and interactive by incorporating scheduled webinars.

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