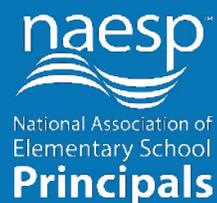
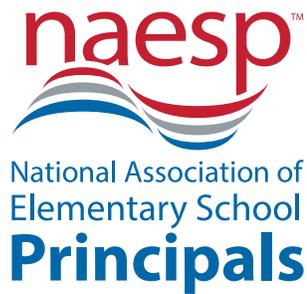


Executive Summary

Leading Learning Communities:
**A Principal's Guide
to Early Learning and
the Early Grades**
(Pre-K–3rd Grade)





National Association of Elementary School Principals

1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3483
Phone: 800-386-2377
Email: naesp@naesp.org
Website: www.naesp.org

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is the strongest unified voice for Pre-K–8 leaders across the U.S. and around the world. NAESP’s mission is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children. NAESP’s vision for Pre-K–8 leadership includes principals having the vision, courage, wisdom, and professional knowledge to lead learning communities that create opportunities for all children to achieve their highest potential. NAESP was founded in 1921 by a visionary group of principals who sought to advance the profession. Today, NAESP provides the professional support system and the critical information that you need 24/7!

National P-3 Center

School of Education and Human Development
University of Colorado Denver
1380 Lawrence Street, #629
Denver, CO 80204
Phone: 720-390-8206
Email: pthru3@ucdenver.edu
Website: www.nationalp-3center.org

The ultimate goal of the National P-3 Center is to improve the education continuum that children experience from birth (Pre-school) through 3rd grade. The mission of the Center is to bridge divides between early care and education (ECE) and PreK-12 organizations and systems. Race, class, culture, and zip code demand explicit strategies to mitigate their effects on children’s learning opportunities. The Center understands and values both the ECE and PreK-12 systems and engages in strategic work with a focus on organization and system change at district, community, and state levels.

Authorship of this publication was supported by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. In addition, grants to the National P-3 Center from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation generously supported this work.

Suggested Citation: Kauerz, K., Ballard, R., Soli, M., & Hagerman, S. (2021). *Leading learning communities: A principal’s guide to early learning and the early grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Table of Contents

Foreword	4
The Importance of Leading Pre-K–3rd Grade	6
A Primer on Child Development and Early Learning	9
Competency 1: Understand Child Development and Its Implications for High-Quality Instruction and Interactions, Pre-K–3rd Grade	11
Competency 2: Develop and Foster Partnerships with Families and Communities	12
Competency 3: Embrace and Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision	13
Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities	14
Competency 5: Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity	15
Competency 6: Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement	16
About the Guide	17
Review Panel Members	18
NAESP Board of Directors.....	19
Methodology	20
References	22

Foreword

Great schools are places where communities of learners grow and flourish at every level. They are places where all children and adults feel included and valued. They are places where the organizational culture is defined by care, trust, and high expectations of everyone. Great schools are places where there is an investment in early learning and principals think “Pre-K through 3rd grade.”

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) continues to uphold its important work in Pre-K–3rd grade education with its revised publication, *A Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades*. NAESP, in partnership with the National P-3 Center at the University of Colorado at Denver, brought together education leaders and experts in the field of early childhood education to develop a comprehensive guide emphasizing an aligned, cohesive, and robust Pre-K–3rd grade system. The primary focus of the guide is to support all children and their learning needs.

Principals working in the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum span two entirely separate ecosystems – birth to age five, and K-12 – each of which has its own history, infrastructure, and preparation systems. To successfully navigate these two systems, we must recognize that each school and each community is different, and that success requires a differentiated approach.

The goal of this publication is to provide a structure and a set of competencies that can guide principals in creating and supporting connections between birth to age five and K-12 systems in order to build successful Pre-K–3rd grade continuums in their schools.

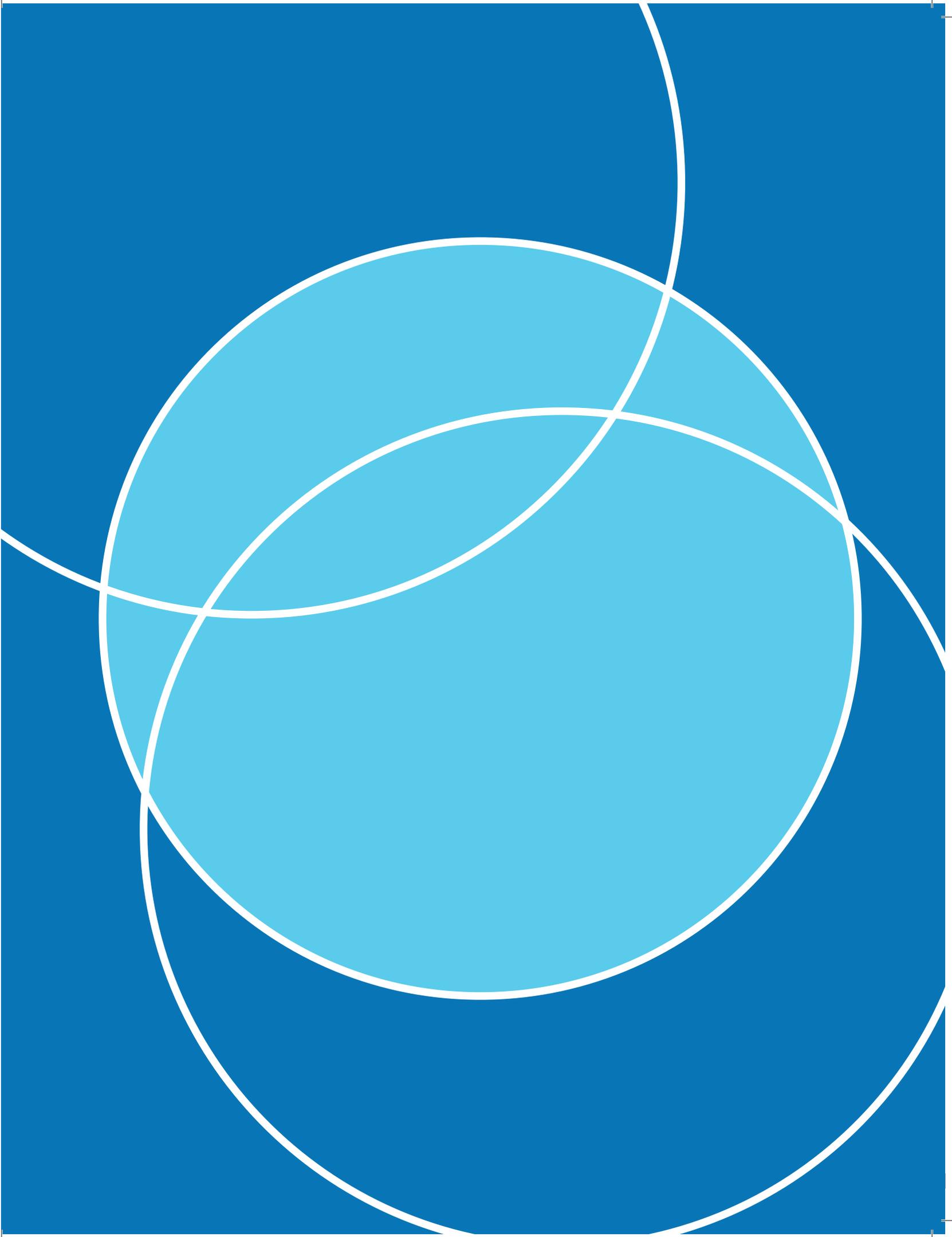
This body of work provides a tool for principals to not only keep pace with their ever-shifting roles, but to help them support children to reach their greatest potential. This guide will also help school leaders identify important areas of focus, fine-tune developmentally appropriate leadership practices, and align Pre-K experiences with early elementary grades, thereby providing a coherent, related set of learning experiences for children during the first critical years of schooling.

It is also important to note that during the time that this revised guide was being written, major events impacted schools and communities across the country – both the COVID-19 pandemic and waves of protests related to systemic racism. Both of these challenges demand nimble, equity-focused leadership from elementary principals, and that school communities work together to understand and support the diverse needs of young children and their families. Even though the six competencies herein did not change as a result of these events, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the tidal waves of uncertainty that are occurring as we near completion of the guide, and to applaud principals’ steady-handed leadership.

Principals—who research says are among the most trusted professionals—are tasked with advancing culturally responsive teaching and learning, which includes not only welcoming diversity in the classroom but also teaching students how to navigate an increasingly racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse society. NAESP is excited to be a part of this work, which identifies quality indicators of effective Pre-K–3rd grade systems in addition to highlighting the vital role that principals play in this learning continuum. We hope that the recommendations, taken together and advanced by educators in the field, will ensure that our youngest learners continue to grow and thrive.



L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE
Executive Director, NAESP



The Importance of Leading Pre-K–3rd Grade

The Importance of Leading Pre-K–3rd Grade

Intended to encourage elementary principals to deepen their own knowledge related to Pre-K–3rd grade, then to reflect that knowledge through strong school leadership, *A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades* provides specific suggestions for principals to become more effective and visible leaders on behalf of young children. Meaningful leadership for Pre-K–3rd grade requires substantive expertise about child development and instructional practices that support young learners. It also requires explicit dedication to *being* a strong leader of the school's vision, systems, and people.¹ Principals are indeed important, but they cannot do this work alone. Throughout the competencies and strategies in the guide, we acknowledge the essential collaboration that must occur among principals, teachers, staff, early care and education professionals, as well as parents, families, and community partners. The guide highlights explicit ways in which being an effective Pre-K–3rd grade principal goes beyond traditional roles for elementary principals.

What Does Pre-K–3rd Grade Mean?

Pre-K–3rd grade represents both an age range and a frame for thinking about school improvement that recognizes the importance of the early years and embeds knowledge of developmental science across the early grades. Within the guide, the term “Pre-K” is used to describe the variety of pre-kindergarten settings that children experience—school-based classrooms, Head Start, center-based child care, or family child care homes—before they transition to kindergarten. Although 3rd grade serves as the latter portion of the age range when discussing a Pre-K–3rd grade approach, it is considered a marker for progress

rather than the final endpoint. Third grade serves as a respective time for children when they begin to make the transition to “middle childhood” and is often a time when student growth and achievement are monitored using full-scale, standardized accountability assessments. Using the term “Pre-K–3rd grade” does not put firm guardrails on either end of the continuum.

What Does Research Say About the Importance of Pre-K–3rd Grade?

Science provides persuasive rationales for focusing on Pre-K–3rd grade. Several fields of study (e.g., developmental science, neuroscience, molecular biology, and genomics) point to the fact that children develop at a young age the skills, behaviors, and dispositions that are foundational as they transition to later learning.² Studies show the promising impacts of early learning programs on children's outcomes in Pre-K and full-day kindergarten. This research serves, in part, as the underlying basis for the continued expansion of early learning opportunities over the past 40 years. Many states and localities across the country have dedicated funding toward Pre-K and full-day kindergarten as much-needed interventions for children, especially those who have been historically marginalized. Despite the heightened focus on early interventions, prominent and persistent achievement gaps continue to exist for students throughout the elementary years and beyond. Therefore, an intentional focus on increased access to high-quality early learning opportunities and reforming the experiences children have in elementary school is paramount to ensuring equitable learning for all students.

¹ Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006.

² Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015.



Why is a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision Essential?

Pre-K–3rd Grade is not a stand-alone initiative, but a way to make sense of and make more effective the range of demands placed on elementary school principals. Intended to equip principals with knowledge of both child development and effective school leadership strategies, the guide provides an overarching frame for the complex work and priorities in elementary schools. Elementary school principals face a multitude of responsibilities and demands, including meeting standards and performance expectations. They manage multiple, immense, and evolving pressures as leaders of their schools that could benefit from being addressed through a Pre-K–3rd grade lens.

Why Does Leadership for Pre-K–3rd Grade Matter?

A Pre-K–3rd grade vision makes sense of a principal's pressures and priorities together rather than as disparate or competing responsibilities. The guide provides explicit recommendations about the key dimensions of a Pre-K–3rd grade vision that an elementary school leader can expect to see in their school. The guide is intended to provide in-depth information for principals to put the systems in place to develop the people necessary to achieve a strong Pre-K–3rd grade vision. While the competencies each stand alone as important areas for principals to examine and improve their knowledge, understanding, and actions, the competencies will be most impactful when considered together.



A Primer on Child Development and Early Learning

abridged from Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8³

Children are already learning at birth, and they develop and learn at a rapid pace in their early years. This provides a critical foundation for lifelong progress, and the adults who provide for the care and education of children from birth through age 8 bear a great responsibility for their health, development, and learning.

Nature and nurture interact as children develop.

- During a child's early years, the brain develops in rapid and fundamental ways, and connections among neurons are reinforced.
- While a child's genes influence how strongly he or she is affected by environmental factors or experiences, research also shows that influences in the environment can shape whether genes are turned off or on.
- Psychological and social adversities early in life can have important short- and long-term effects on the brain's development and the way the brain and body handle stress.
- There are substantial individual differences in how susceptible children are to influences in their environment.

Many aspects of child development and learning are complex and interrelated.

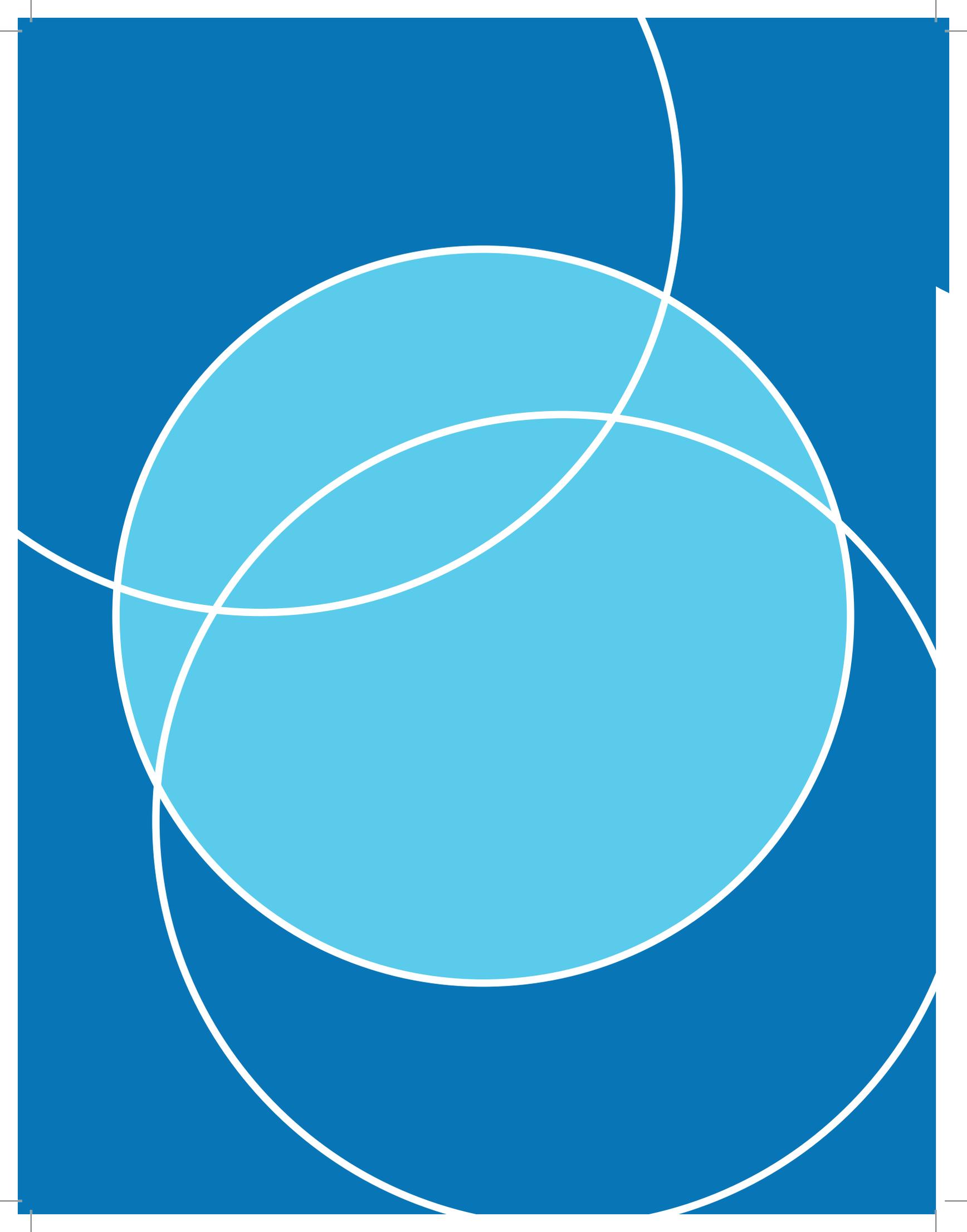
- A child relies on developing an ability to regulate emotions and attention in order to concentrate and stay engaged long enough to learn new ideas and skills.
- While certain skills and concepts are distinct to particular subject areas, learning in these subject areas relates to general cognitive skills such as reasoning, attention, and memory.
- Learning is influenced by a child's relationships with adults and peers. A child's security both physically and in relationships creates the context in which learning is achievable.
- Physical health matters. Studies link food insecurity among children and their families to poor academic outcomes, for example, while increased physical activity has been linked to improved academic performance.

Learning and development for young children is both rapid and cumulative, continuously laying a foundation for later learning. Preschool and early elementary students...

- Are becoming more competent in deliberate approaches to learning, such as trial and error or informal experimentation.
- Are experiential learners — they learn by doing rather than figuring things out only by thinking about them. This makes shared, physical, play-based activities with educators and peers especially effective opportunities for learning.
- Learn in a developmental sequence as they progress through increasingly sophisticated levels of thinking and understanding of concepts as well as mastering skills.
- Benefit from extensive opportunities to listen to and use complex spoken language.
- Are increasingly able to understand and manage emotions and behavior, to make decisions and achieve goals, and to establish and maintain positive relationships, including feeling and showing empathy for others.

To read more, please visit: <https://www.nap.edu/resource/19401/ProfKnowCompFINAL.pdf>

³ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015.



Competency 1 : Understand Child Development and Its Implications for High-Quality Instruction and Interactions, Pre-K–3rd Grade



Principals who have a clear and current understanding of child development recognize that long-term achievement is built on a solid foundation of high-quality experiences in early learning and the early grades. All young children learn best when they are actively engaged, domains of learning are integrated, and curiosity and play are prioritized. Without this knowledge, many principals may hold inappropriate expectations of Pre-K–3rd grade students and, in turn, push teachers to teach in ways that do not effectively support children’s learning and development. In order to provide effective instructional and organizational leadership both within the school and among community partners, elementary principals benefit from a strong understanding of typical developmental milestones that children gain across Pre-K–3rd grade.

Strategies

- Deepen knowledge of and stay current with research on child development (including social-emotional development, executive function, and effects of toxic stress).
- Emphasize and prioritize relationships among students, teachers, staff, and families.
- Establish learning environments and instructional practices that promote student engagement and voice.
- Understand the implications of child development for students’ social and emotional experiences along the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.

SPOTLIGHT

Gardner Pilot Academy in Allston, MA

More than a decade ago, Boston made a daring bet – that it could build and sustain a high-quality, whole-child focused, intellectually engaging early education program that would significantly lower the city’s persistent achievement gaps by locating that program within its public school system. Boston Public Schools (BPS) worked with and against many conventional dichotomies to form their early education program, such as play versus academic rigor, teacher-led instruction versus learner-driven exploration, inferential learning versus direct instruction, breadth versus depth, and a focus on head (intellectual concepts and skills) versus heart (social-emotional development and engagement of passion).

Principal Erica Herman ensures her school, Gardner Pilot Academy, embodies BPS’s core principles. Gardner Pilot Academy is a full-service community school that serves over 400 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 8. The mission of the school is “to provide quality learning and social opportunities for our diverse student body, engage families, and offer health and community services through innovative programs and partnerships.” For the last five years, they have implemented the district’s project-based learning curriculum in PreK through 2nd grade. At Gardner Pilot Academy, their instructional approach supports child development and enhances teacher-child interactions and instructional practices. Their curriculum integrates learning experiences from all content areas while connecting with students’ everyday lives. Each theme builds upon the last, providing countless opportunities for students to create, collaborate, communicate, reflect, and think critically.

Competency 2: Develop and Foster Partnerships with Families and Communities



A child's education does not begin and end at the school door. Children's families and the communities in which they live are essential partners in their learning and development. Elementary principals recognize that the basis of these connections is mutual respect and a desire to be partners in the most important task of all—promoting the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional health and growth of children. To accomplish this, school leaders can prioritize meaningful engagement with families, and build collaborative relationships with a broad set of early care and education (ECE) programs and other community-based supports. To this end, principals are central to creating a shared sense of purpose among school staff, families, and allied professionals in the community.

Strategies

- Engage intentionally with families, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized.
- Establish relationships and support collaboration with early care and education (ECE) programs in the community.
- Ensure smooth transitions for students and families not only between the variety of ECE programs and kindergarten, but also across the full Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.
- Facilitate linkages with community supports and services to meet the needs of Pre-K–3rd grade families.

SPOTLIGHT

Charles R. Drew School Elementary Academy in Atlanta, GA

Charles R. Drew Charter School was established more than two decades ago by a pioneering partnership of community members, parents, philanthropists and civic leaders who believed that Atlanta's East Lake neighborhood should be a place where all residents thrive and all students excel. In response to a neighborhood revitalization effort that aims to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, two high-quality, neighborhood-based early learning sites—the YMCA East Lake Early Learning Academy and Sheltering Arms East Lake—combined with the on-site Cox Pre-K Program at the Drew Charter School to provide early learning opportunities for approximately 320 children.

To support meaningful engagement with families, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized, and to synergize family outreach efforts, Drew's Cox Pre-K Program and East Lake's two neighborhood early learning centers launched the Partnership for Reaching and Empowering Parents (PREP) program. Together, the three partners host quarterly parent engagement nights designed to provide parents with tools and information to create nurturing learning environments for their children. Each PREP event highlights early language and literacy through a different lens and features expert presenters, child care, and incentives for attendance to eliminate barriers for participation.

In addition to parent outreach, East Lake's education partners convene a monthly Early Learning Advisory Council to provide an opportunity for leaders at the various sites to discuss matters such as enrollment, academic alignment, and transitions. All partners share a long history of productive collaboration, and together, have made significant contributions to the revitalization of the East Lake community.

Competency 3: Embrace and Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision



Building from a current knowledge of child development and unwavering dedication to collaborating with families and ECE programs, a principal's most important leadership responsibility is building and supporting a shared vision and school culture for Pre-K–3rd grade. Such a vision requires commitment from principals to embrace the essential importance of Pre-K and other ECE experiences; to ensure Pre-K and kindergarten are instructionally strong and reflect developmental science; and to commit to reforming instruction across the full Pre-K–3rd grade continuum to effectively support the learning and development of young learners. This perspective brings together a school reform lens with scientific understandings from child development—namely, that learning is cumulative, builds on previous learning, and the early years are the basis for lifelong learning.⁴ Recent research demonstrates that children who experience high-quality instruction across multiple years of elementary school, not just a single year, have better language and literacy skills in 3rd grade.⁵ Embracing and enacting a Pre-K–3rd grade vision calls principals to re-imagine both their organizational and instructional leadership roles. This includes organizing the school's systems and processes to ensure coherent, effective instruction occurs consistently from grade-to-grade and classroom-to-classroom.⁶

Strategies

- Establish a schoolwide culture that Pre-K, inclusive of the different learning opportunities children have prior to kindergarten, is a fundamental anchor to the school's mission and student success.
- Align curriculum and instructional practices across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum to ensure that they are comprehensive and differentiated for students along the developmental continuum.
- Ensure that instruction, interactions, and learning environments in the primary grades (K–3rd grade) reflect child development and are designed to build on the gains made in Pre-K.
- Align schoolwide policies, programs, and initiatives to ensure coherent support for Pre-K–3rd grade.

SPOTLIGHT

Gomez Heritage Elementary in Omaha, NE

Gomez Heritage Elementary, led by Principal John Campin, is committed to developing a school that recognizes the importance of the time from birth through 3rd grade in every child's life. Together, along with other schools across the state of Nebraska, Gomez Heritage partners with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI) to create an aligned and comprehensive Pre-K–3rd grade approach centered on key ideas from current child development research.

“School as hub” is the goal, providing comprehensive support to children and families with early childhood education and services. This strategy begins early, as staff from Gomez Heritage conduct regular in-home visits with families from before their child is born through the age of three. These home visits provide school staff with opportunities to develop relationships with families, offer tools or community resources, and engage families in understanding how they can support their child's development and well-being.

As children move into preschool, Gomez Heritage continues to build strong partnerships with families through family facilitators to support transitions into preschool and kindergarten. In addition, to the focus on supporting students with transitions, Gomez Heritage is committed to alignment of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment from Pre-K–3rd grade. This alignment reflects the importance of child development and builds on the preschool experiences a child has to continue building their academic, social-emotional, and cognitive skills through 3rd grade. Mr. Campin and the teachers at Gomez Heritage value the roles that purposeful play, experiential learning, and language goals support high-quality learning experiences for all students.

4 Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015.

5 Cash, Ansari, Grimm, & Pianta, 2019; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2019.

6 Hassrick, Raudenbush, & Rosen, 2017; Takahashi, 2016.

Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities



Over decades, study after study provides evidence of disparities in opportunities and outcomes that correlate with race, family socio-economic status, disability, immigration status, and home language.⁷ The systemic barriers and disparities have been documented not just in K–12 education, but also in Pre-K, child care, and other early learning settings.⁸ Despite decades of reform efforts, disadvantage and disparities persist, providing gnawing evidence that different approaches are needed. In early learning and the early grades, it is important to keep in mind that what a child currently knows and is able to do is largely reflective of the opportunities that child has been provided, not an indicator of what the child is capable of learning.⁹ As young children enter ECE programs and schools, the teachers and leaders they engage with profoundly influence the quality of learning opportunities they experience. To meaningfully address opportunity and achievement gaps, educators need to shift to believing all children *can* learn and excel, then reform their policies and practices in accordance.

Strategies

- Develop critical self-awareness and knowledge of oppression, privilege, and cultural competence.
- Establish a school climate that is open, inclusive, and affirming of differences (for staff, students, and their families).
- Examine school data sources and stakeholder feedback to identify disproportionalities and disparities.
- Differentiate resources and strategies to ensure students, teachers, staff, and families have equitable opportunity to succeed.

7 Mulligan, McCarroll, Flanagan, & Potter, 2018; Reardon & Portilla, 2016; Shores, Kim, & Still, 2020.

8 Children's Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020; Henry, Betancur Cortés, & Votruba-Drzal, 2020; Johnson-Staub, 2017; Robinson, 2010; Wright, 2011.

9 Friedman & Mwenelupembe, 2020.

SPOTLIGHT

Marguerite Montgomery Elementary in Davis, CA

Marguerite Montgomery Elementary (MME) is a dual immersion school in Davis, California with 38% of students classified as English Learners/ Dual Language Learners (ELs/DLLs) and 56% low-income. MME has struggled with disproportionate outcomes, disorganized instructional practices, poor alignment, and a chaotic, symptomatic solution mindset. The experiences and achievement of ELs/ DLLs at MME have varied greatly.

To create a thriving learning environment for MME students, Principal Jen McNeil and the school community joined together to reframe the problem of low, disproportionate student outcomes as a problem of the system. By maintaining a focus on system actions, structures and policies rather than placing blame on children and their families, MME defined priorities and made bold program changes to create a schoolwide transformation. At the same time, the school began a rigorous course of professional development with the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) organization, aimed at transforming Tier 1 “first instruction” practices specifically shown by research to improve learning for students classified as ELs/DLLs. All early learning and lower elementary teachers at MME engaged in this professional development in order to effectively help students increase oral language skills, make significant gains in reading comprehension, and become persuasive writers. The teachers and staff at MME committed to creating an inclusive environment that viewed language, culture, and families as assets. To support this goal, they focused on two key areas: examining school data for school-driven sources of inequity and creating a highly engaging, culturally responsive program that met the needs of ELs/DLLs in the classroom.

Competency 5: Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity

Creating the infrastructure and conditions for equitable, effective Pre-K–3rd grade instruction is not a principal’s responsibility alone. One of the most essential functions of principals is to empower teachers to improve their practice while creating a shared responsibility for student experiences and outcomes. Inherent to this is reframing the role of teaching as collaborative, rather than isolated, work. Effective principals are willing to cultivate leadership and seek input and expertise when creating and sustaining a high-quality continuum of learning from Pre-K–3rd grade. Importantly, they include Pre-K and kindergarten teachers alongside other teachers in the school. Without meaningful engagement from teachers in the early grades, collaborative teams of teachers and, therefore, instructional alignment within and across grades will be imbalanced.¹⁰

Strategies

- Share leadership for Pre-K–3rd grade with individual teachers and teacher teams based on their expertise.
- Provide supportive, rigorous, aligned, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that reflect current knowledge of child development and of effective, high-quality instructional practices.
- Use knowledge of the developmental continuum to make informed decisions about hiring and placement of teachers.
- Foster the health and well-being of teachers and staff (and oneself) to be able to support students and families in times of stress.

¹⁰ Stipek et al., 2017.

SPOTLIGHT

Loma Verde Elementary in Novato, CA

Teacher professional learning is at the heart of their efforts at Loma Verde Elementary in the Novato Unified School District. Just as Principal Tehniat Cheema wants students to be engaged and enthusiastic learners, she also wants teachers to feel a similar sense of investment and excitement about their own learning and growth. To accomplish this, the school focuses on a parallel process that is committed to improving the day-to-day learning experiences provided to students and teachers alike.

This work began in 2009 as a 10-year effort funded by the Marin Community Foundation to provide long term support to focus on the specific needs of PreK–3rd grade children, their families, and their teachers. FirstSchool, a PreK–3rd grade approach launched by University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, joined this effort in 2015 and brought along a set of principles centered around alignment across grade levels, collaborative inquiry, continuous improvement, and openly addressing issues of equity to provide children and families with a quality schooling experience. Over the past six years, Loma Verde Elementary continues to work with veteran coaches from FirstSchool while simultaneously adopting and adapting the work that best suits their school’s context.

Competency 6: Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement



A culture of continuous improvement is the glue that holds the other competencies together, ensuring they are enacted not as one-time efforts, but as usual and expected practice. Within a culture of continuous improvement, effective Pre-K–3rd grade leaders build trust, a shared vision, and collaborative commitment to explore and improve the learning opportunities provided to young students. Continuous improvement relies on commitment from district central office leaders and school principals both to recognize that students are not the sole learners in schools and to use data to inform decision-making and change. Discussion of these factors—leadership, adult learning, and data use—are pulled together to emphasize the importance of using evidence to systematically envision, enact, and improve a Pre-K–3rd grade vision. Continuous improvement for Pre-K–3rd grade focuses on developing and supporting systems and processes to provide ambitious whole child-focused instruction, authentic relationships with families and communities, and internal accountability for progress.¹¹

Strategies

- Develop an understanding of appropriate uses of student assessments in Pre-K–3rd grade.
- Rely on multiple sources of data to inform improvement efforts.
- Build and support collaborative inquiry among teachers and others in the school community.
- Engage families and community members in reviewing data and planning continuous improvement.

SPOTLIGHT

N. W. Harlee Early Childhood Center in Dallas, TX

Dallas Independent School District is engaged in an effort to rewrite the district’s early literacy story by sustained investment in early learning. Principal Amber Shields leads the school’s continuous improvement efforts at N.W. Harlee Early Childhood Center, a Pre-K–2nd grade school serving 265 students, 95 percent of whom are African-American, 5 percent Hispanic, and 92 percent living in economically disadvantaged homes. The school’s work is driven by data about how both students and teachers are doing. Using a combination of the district’s teacher evaluation rubric and a “look-for” provided by the district, Ms. Shields and her assistant principal walk through classrooms each week, together, ensuring they are calibrated in their observations and reflections.

Along with teacher evaluations, student growth data and classroom observations are utilized to monitor the school’s continuous improvement efforts. The teachers at N. W. Harlee Early Childhood Center engage in weekly grade-level professional learning communities (PLCs) during which they use data to identify trends and areas for improvement themselves. With real-time data about both their own classroom interactions and student progress in mind, teachers focus on developing action steps and improvement priorities.

¹¹ Bardige et al., 2018; Childress et al., 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014; Takanishi, 2016.

About the Guide

A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades primarily focuses on school-based leadership and the roles of elementary school principals. However, leadership, of course, can emanate from state, school district, and community levels. Other practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and advocates are encouraged to use the guide to identify ways to support and collaborate with principals. The guide can also support the design of leadership and professional learning opportunities for principals and shape the activities of principal supervisors. In general, the guide will be useful to any stakeholder interested in improving teaching and learning to ensure every child receives a strong continuum of high-quality education across early learning and the early grades.

Backed by relevant and recent research findings, the guide defines six competencies to help elementary school principals navigate aligning Pre-K–3rd grade—for children, families, and the adults who serve them within a school—and practical strategies that will support these competencies. The competencies are intentionally related and interdependent. Depending on the school context and current efforts, it may make sense for a principal to begin by focusing on one or two competencies. However, all of the competencies are equally important and necessary to create a unified, coherent leadership approach that supports *all* young learners.

The guide is a tool in and of itself, but also connects principals to additional resources and references that can be used to go deeper into a topic area. The guide deliberately provides examples of the concepts in practice and includes elements to intentionally support principals' knowledge, skills, planning, and leadership. This includes:

- **Spotlights on Effective Practice:** Stories of effective practice are presented for each competency to provide a variety of strategies for readers, regardless of the context in which they work. These spotlights are intended to demonstrate effective practices happening in elementary schools across the country that are making a difference in Pre-K–3rd grade learning.
- **Reflective Assessments:** To encourage principals to engage and reflect on their own practices, a series of self-assessment items are outlined for each competency, providing guidance for principals to reflect on their own efforts and to encourage discussion and inquiry with others in their school or community. There is also space provided to cite the evidence principals use to track progress on each item and to determine action items.
- **Additional Resources:** Each competency contains links, resources, and references, so principals and others who are interested can go deeper to learn more about key issues.



Review Panel Members

ZONE 1

Jennifer Daigneault
Principal
North Smithfield Elementary
North Smithfield, RI

ZONE 2

Annie Corley-Hand
Principal
Mark Kay McMillin Early
Childhood Center
Berkeley Heights, NJ

ZONE 3

Ann Gwynn
Principal
Cougar Elementary
Manassas Park, VA

ZONE 4

Adam Dasinger
Principal
Pleasant Grove Elementary
Heflin, AL

Kimberle Barbosa Lewis

Principal
Cordova Elementary
Cordova, TN

ZONE 5

Brian Bond
Principal
Hunter Hills Elementary
Corbin, KY

ZONE 7

Josie Floyd
Principal
Sutherland Elementary
Sutherland, NE

ZONE 7

Jenn Miller-Yancey
Principal/Teacher
Evergreen Elementary
Wrangell, AK

ZONE 8

Julie Bloss
Principal
Grove Early Childhood Center
Grove, OK

ZONE 9

Rachael George
Principal
Sandy Grade School
Sandy, OR

Paul Kepka

Principal
Kamaile Academy PCS
Waianae, HI

ADDITIONAL MEMBERS

Jeannie Allen

Director of Innovative
Projects & Assessment
Alabama Dept. of Early Childhood
Education
Montgomery, AL

Kristine Luebbe

Director of Programs & Partnerships
Nebraska Dept. of Education
Lincoln, NE

Jon Millerhagen

Executive Director
Minnesota Elementary School
Principals' Association
Roseville, MN

NAESP Board of Directors

<p>President David N. Wick Columbia Falls Junior High School Columbia Falls, MT</p>	<p>2019-2020</p>	<p>Director, Zone 6 James Edmond Jr., Ph.D. Woodside Elementary School Sussex, WI</p>	<p>2019-2022</p>
<p>President-elect Kimbrelle Barbosa Lewis Cordova Elementary School Cordova, TN</p>	<p>2019-2020</p>	<p>Director, Zone 7 Timothy Kosters Lead-Deadwood Elementary School Deadwood, SD</p>	<p>2018-2021</p>
<p>Vice President Paul Wenger Jordan Creek Elementary School West Des Moines, IA</p>	<p>2019-2020</p>	<p>Director, Zone 8 Kasandra Nelson Vici Elementary School Vici, OK</p>	<p>2017-2020</p>
<p>Director, Zone 1 Victoria A. Reed Highland Elementary School Wallingford, CT</p>	<p>2017-2020</p>	<p>Director, Zone 9 Keith Conley Geneva Elementary School Orem, UT</p>	<p>2018-2021</p>
<p>Director, Zone 2 Arlene Rogo, Ed.D. Neptune Middle School Neptune, NJ</p>	<p>2018-2020</p>	<p>Director At Large, Middle Kevin Armstrong, Ed.D. DuPont Hadley Middle School Old Hickory, TN</p>	<p>2019-2022</p>
<p>Director, Zone 3 April D. Knight Avondale Elementary School Columbus, OH</p>	<p>2019-2022</p>	<p>Director At Large, Minority Level Liza Caraballo-Suarez, Ed.D. Magnet School of Architecture, Engineering & Design - P.S. 120 Brooklyn, NY</p>	<p>2018-2021</p>
<p>Director, Zone 4 Ann-Marie Gleason, Ed.D. Harpeth Valley Elementary Nashville, TN</p>	<p>2019-2022</p>	<p>Ex-Officio Board Member Executive Director L. Earl Franks, Ed.D.</p>	
<p>Director, Zone 5 David A. Naylor Jr., M.Ed. Model Laboratory School Richmond, KY</p>	<p>2019-2021</p>	<p>Director, Governance Services Jennifer Shannon</p>	

III. Methodology

NAESP first published *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities* in 2005, followed by *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities* in 2014. This updated guide was written in 2020 by the National P-3 Center. The methodology used to update the guide included:

Literature review. A review of recent and relevant research was conducted to provide the basis for the updated competencies and strategies outlined in this guide. The research included studies and reports on the fundamental rationale for a Pre-K–3rd grade vision, aspects of Pre-K–3rd grade learning environments, child development and early learning, continuous improvement strategies, equity, and partnerships with families. A full reference list of the literature reviewed is provided.

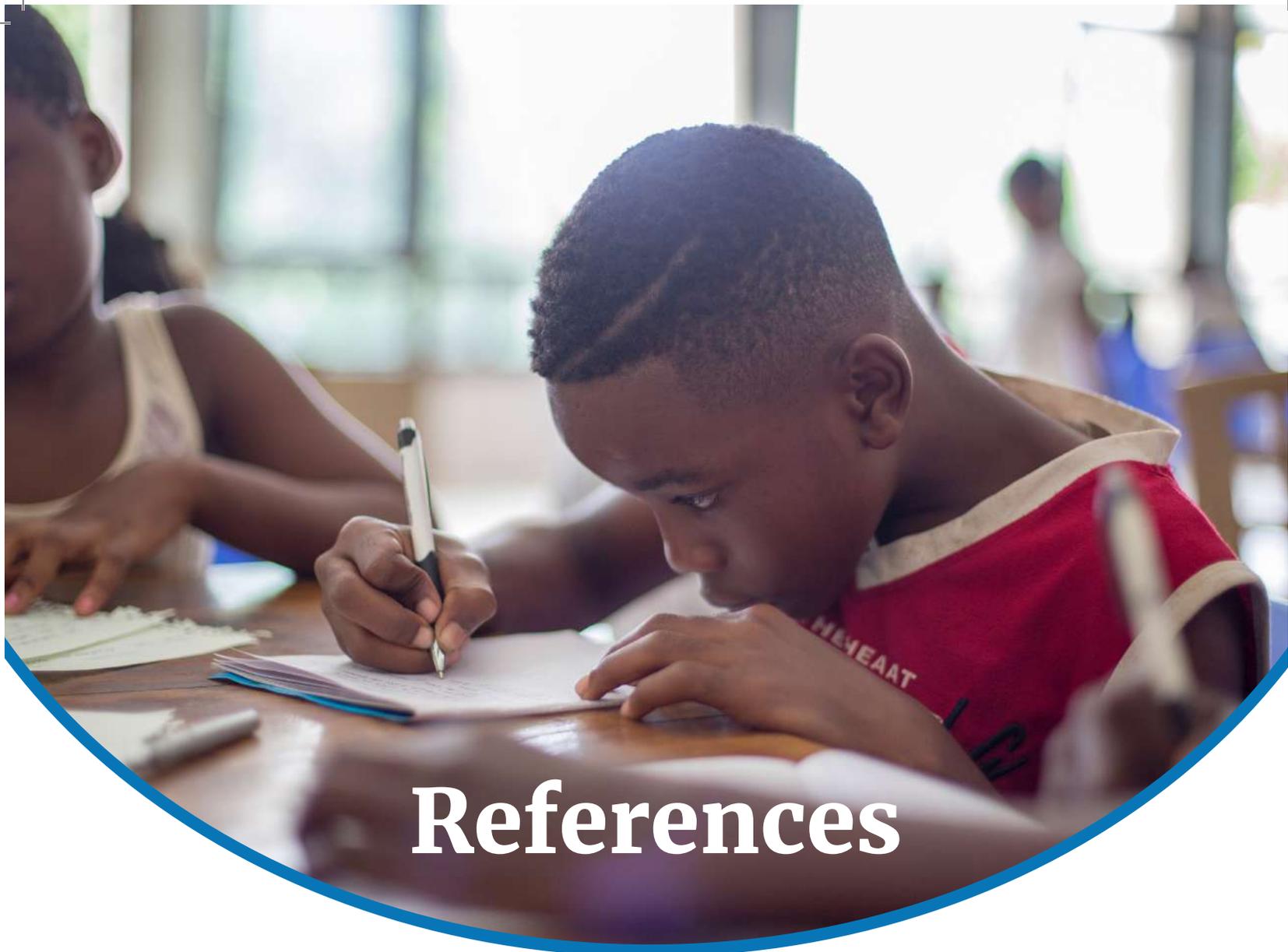
Discovery Interviews. Discovery interviews were conducted with thought leaders in the field of research, policy, and practice who study, support, or lead Pre-K–3rd grade efforts across the nation. Nine interviews were completed.

Review Panel. Principals were nominated to the Review Panel from individual geographic zones within the NAESP governance structure, for their experience and leadership in early learning, Pre-K–3rd grade. The Review Panel met virtually three times throughout the process of developing this guide. They provided feedback on the competencies, strategies, spotlights, and resources presented throughout the guide. Fourteen individuals served on the review panel.

Outreach with Principals and School teams. Each of the spotlights that appear in this guide were written in collaboration with the school’s principal and/or other key stakeholders. The spotlights were gathered through a nomination process using an online survey that was distributed nationally by NAESP and the National P-3 Center.

Reviews of Drafts. NAESP leadership and staff, members of the Review Panel, and two external experts in the field of P-3 (Sharon Ritchie, Ed.D. and Steve Tozer, Ph.D.) provided extensive, candid, and detailed feedback on drafts of this document.





References

- Bardige, B., Baker, M., & Mardell, B. (2018). *Children at the center: Transforming early childhood education in the Boston Public Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Cash, A. H., Ansari, A., Grimm, K. J., & Pianta, R. C. (2019). Power of two: The impact of 2 years of high quality teacher child interactions. *Early Education and Development, 30*(1), 60-81.
- Children's Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center. (2020). *Start with equity: From the early years to the early grades*. Retrieved from: <https://childandfamilysuccess.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-07/CEP-report-071520-FINAL.pdf>
- Childress, S. M., Doyle, D. P., & Thomas, D. A. (2009). *Leading for equity: The pursuit of excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Friedman, S., & Mwenelupembe, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Each & every child: Teaching preschool with an equity lens*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

- Hassrick, E. M., Raudenbush, S. W., & Rosen, L. (2017). *The ambitious elementary school: Its conception, design, and implications for educational equity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Henry, D. A., Betancur Cortés, L., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2020). Black–White achievement gaps differ by family socioeconomic status from early childhood through early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. doi:10.1037/edu0000439
- Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Johnson-Staub, C. (2017). *Equity starts early: Addressing racial inequities in child care and early education policy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/equity-starts-early-addressing-racial-inequities-child-care-and-early>
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006). Transformational school leadership for large-scale reform: Effects on students, teachers, and their classroom practices. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(2), 201-227. doi:10.1080/0924345060056582
- Mulligan, G. M., McCarroll, J. C., Flanagan, K. D., & Potter, D. (2018). *Findings from the fourth-grade round of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-22 (ECLS-K:2011)*. (NCES 2018-094). U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Sciences.
- Reardon, S. F., & Portilla, X. A. (2016). Recent trends in income, racial, and ethnic school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry. *AERA Open*, 2(3), 1-18. doi:10.1177/2332858416657343
- Ritchie, S., & Gutmann, L. (Eds.). (2014). *FirstSchool: Transforming preK-3rd grade for African-American, Latino, and low-income children*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Robinson, K. (2010). Black-White inequality in reading and math across K-12 schooling: A synthetic cohort perspective. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 37(3-4), 253-273.
- Shores, K., Kim, H. E., & Still, M. (2020). Categorical inequality in black and white: Linking disproportionality across multiple educational outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(5), 2089-2131. doi:10.3102/0002831219900128
- Stipek, D., Clements, D., Coburn, C., Franke, M., & Farran, D. (2017). PK-3: What does it mean for instruction? *Social Policy Report*, 30(2), 1-22.
- Takanishi, R. (2016). *First things first! Creating the new American primary school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Vernon-Feagans, L., Mokrova, I. L., Carr, R. C., Garrett-Peters, P. T., Burchinal, M. R., & Family Life Project Key Investigators. (2019). Cumulative years of classroom quality from kindergarten to third grade: Prediction to children's third grade literacy skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 47, 531-540. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.06.005
- Wright, T. S. (2011). Countering the politics of class, race, gender, and geography in early childhood education. *Educational Policy*, 25(1), 240-261. doi:10.1177/0895904810387414

Six Competencies That Characterize Leadership of Pre-K–3rd Grade Learning Communities

Effective leaders of Pre-K–3rd Grade learning communities:

1. Understand Child Development and Early Learning
2. Develop and Foster Partnerships with Families and Communities
3. Embrace and Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision
4. Ensure Equitable Opportunities
5. Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity
6. Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement

National Association of Elementary School Principals

1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3483
Phone: 800-386-2377
Email: naesp@naesp.org
Website: www.naesp.org



National Association of
Elementary School
Principals

NATIONAL



School of Education
& Human Development

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **DENVER**