One of the most important roles of a principal is that of early childhood advocate. It is a role supported by an abundance of research showing that students who enter school having experienced high-quality preschool are better equipped and adjusted to meet today’s kindergarten programs. But where does a busy principal—pushed to the maximum with increasing responsibilities—begin in trying to create an effective preschool program?

Based on my own experience, here are 10 steps that can help:

1. **Analyze Your Environment**
   Ask yourself these questions:
   - Does your community offer an existing preschool program that meets your needs?
   - How many of your incoming kindergarten students are actually ready?
   - What type of infrastructure do you have to support a preschool facility, including equipment and staffing?

   As an active principal who also is the district coordinator for early childhood education, I had firsthand knowledge about existing programs in our community before the district implemented a five-year early learning support plan that called for the creation of a preschool program. We felt that by reaching out early to young children, we could better prepare them and their families for kindergarten.

2. **Research Your Plan**
   Contact the local or state agency that certifies preschools and find out what the financial implications will be. Conduct a cost analysis of what it would take to run a self-funded program and compare prices for existing programs. The program we eventually implemented had already proved effective in a neighboring school district, and we were able to design a tuition scale that fell well within the average range for preschools in our county. We also adopted the Reggio Emilia philosophy as a curriculum model, which encourages children to be autonomous and independent learners.

3. **Gather Support**
   Communication is the key. You must convince your superintendent and school board that preschool is an absolute necessity. Recruit “stars” from your early childhood staff to champion your ideas and assist you in surveying families who could take advantage of a preschool program. Allow community members an opportunity to offer input and invite school board members to attend meetings. It is important to share information about budget projections, staffing, and infrastructure with the superintendent or central office administrators who will be responsible for the ultimate decision.

4. **Hire the Staff**
   The people you hire must meet your state’s criteria for teaching and licensing. When hiring my staff, I followed the accreditation guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Only 7 percent of preschool programs nationwide are accredited through this voluntary and strict process, and gaining this accreditation would set your program apart from most others.
5. Develop the Program

Remember to start with the end in mind. What do you want the students who exit the program to know? As our district went through the Early Learning Success training facilitated by Robert Sornson, our early childhood staff developed and reviewed a list of more than 150 essential skills that all learners should be able to know and do with effectiveness and automaticity. With the assistance of the preschool staff, we pared down the list to about 50 measurable essentials that met the NAEYC’s Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines and offered a scaffold for the curriculum. After going through a period of refinement, we have developed a matrix that allows program coordinators to check on students’ achievement at a glance.

6. Share Your Vision

There must be a vision for the preschool program. Whether it is to gain NAEYC accreditation or to simply have a safe place for 3-year-olds to learn, this vision must be clearly shared with your staff, families, and the community. Meet with legislators to articulate your vision and express the importance of supporting funding for preschool and early childhood programming in an educational setting.

7. Cultivate and Refine Your Program

Now that you’ve got the program started, take the time to listen to your staff and learn what is needed. How has the assessment plan worked? What areas could be improved? When is the right time to offer further professional development?

At our school, we include professional development days in our monthly calendars, enough so that the staff can earn continuing education units and assist us in meeting state licensing guidelines. During the school year, we’ve also surveyed all of our families (and prospective families), allowing them an opportunity to provide constructive feedback about the current program and future expansions within the program. As with any great idea, modifications may be necessary along the way to improve what you’ve started.

8. Share Your Program

Share your preschool philosophy, ideals, and curriculum with other professionals. Invite local day care providers and preschool administrators to visit and see what you are doing. This opens up communication that often can lead to new ideas, networking, and improvements. We have tried hard to make our preschool approachable and highly visible by contacting local media, being present at our Kindergarten Fair and other community events, and embracing specific NAEYC programs, such as Month of the Young Child and Kite Day. All of these efforts help make the program more attractive to impressionable young families.

9. Track Data and Analyze Results

This is a critical element in sustaining your program. Analyzing your results also will help define decision-making and planning for the future. Showing the positive gains in academic, behavioral, and motor skills by your preschool students versus those of nonpreschool students is essential when showcasing results to the public. But keep it simple. Making your marking cards match matrix checklists is a great first step and eases the teacher’s ability to maintain accurate records. We use a trimester approach in assessing our children’s performance, sharing the results with their families.

10. Be Prepared for Anything

Surprise licensing visits. Carpet installation delays. Sudden staff changes. All of these have happened to me and could happen to you. That is why it is important to have a working relationship with people you will need during times of crisis. For example, we currently are leasing space from a school in our intermediate school district, and my positive relationship with the principal often makes it easier to get things accomplished when they need to be done at that site.

The most profound advice I received when I began this journey to start a preschool for our school district was, “This will be the most exciting project you will ever do.” Now, after having done it, I believe this wholeheartedly. We currently offer a self-funded, tuition-based preschool program with separate classes for 3- and 4-year-olds, representing approximately 15 percent of our incoming kindergarten population. I would like to see this number rise during the next few years, and with support from my superintendent, school board, staff, and a committed public I am confident that it will increase.

The ultimate vision for our preschool program is to have it fully accredited by the NAEYC, which is considered to be the gold standard of the early childhood education field. Our district continues to make great strides toward meeting the needs of all our students through our comprehensive approach to preventing early learning failure. Helping preschool students develop the skills needed for the early elementary years gives them experience that prepares them for a lifetime of successful learning.

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