

A Leadership Shift

The “what” and “how” of thinking pre-K–3

By L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE



Research has proven what educators have long known: Quality early childhood learning experiences set students up for a lifetime of academic success, and without a smooth transition in the early grades, achievement gaps only widen over the years. While investment in aligned systems that provide a

continuum of learning for children from birth through grade 3 has gained momentum, a critical component remains an area for growth: professional learning opportunities to understand the “what” and the “how” of pre-K–3 principal leadership.

Principals must rethink their connection to early childhood education, especially as it relates to leadership competencies such as:

- Embracing the pre-K–3 early learning continuum;
- Ensuring developmentally appropriate teaching;
- Providing personalized learning environments;
- Using multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning; and
- Making school a hub for families and communities.

And finally, the concept of “building professional capacity across the learning community” is woven throughout these competencies, which are outlined in *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (NAESP, 2014).

Learning Continuum, Learning Community

Embracing the early learning continuum includes, among other strategies, expanding the concept of the “learning community” to include community-based preschool programs such as social service agencies, parents, and churches.

For example, across the country, more than 400,000 children enter kindergarten from Head Start programs each year. NAESP recently urged education leaders to use

October—National Principals Month and National Head Start Awareness Month—to visit their local Head Start program office to discuss school readiness goals and strategize new ways to collaborate with directors.

Help keep this momentum going by making a leadership shift in the way you think about pre-K learning communities. The students entering pre-kindergarten will thank you for the smooth transition. 

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PRE-K–3 LEADERSHIP

- Following the publication of *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities*, NAESP developed the first national, blended-delivery professional learning program to provide principals and other leaders with an ongoing, job-embedded professional learning experience focused on mastering effective instructional leadership practices that are developmentally appropriate. NAESP launched its Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy in 2017 with a state cohort in Alabama, and a second cohort was introduced in 2018 in Michigan. Academy participants experienced significant growth in each of the six Pre-K–3 leadership competencies, and 90 percent reported that the academy helped them to “better meet the needs of vulnerable children.”
- NAESP is proud to have received an ASAE Power of A Silver Award for the Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy. The award recognizes associations that distinguish themselves with innovative programs and activities that positively impact America and the world. Learn more about the Academy at www.naesp.org/prek3-leadership.
- NAESP supports the Power to the Profession initiative as a national task force organization. The national collaboration is defining the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation. Learn more about the initiative at www.naeyc.org/our-work/initiatives/profession.