

Preschool Is More Than Fun & Games





Investing time and effort into preschool pays long-term dividends

By Kathryn Raasch

I'd barely parked my car in the school parking lot when I noticed a woman running toward me. As she drew closer, I recognized her as the mother of two of our former students. She greeted me with a huge hug and bright smile, and thanked me for the great start her daughters received at our preschool. Her daughters were thriving in school; her oldest son, a fifth-grader, was not. He hadn't had the opportunity to attend our preschool. If he had, she said, he might be doing better in school.

Creating and supporting a pre-K–3 learning continuum requires a strong commitment by principals and all educators.

The addition of a preschool within an existing elementary school is becoming more common in the United States due to increased funding from both the state and federal governments. But while the community at large is usually excited by the addition of public preschool, elementary principals may be overwhelmed by the prospect of opening and maintaining a preschool within a facility.

The list of hurdles runs long for those seeking to educate our youngest learners. For starters, many principals are ill-equipped to lead an early childhood learning experience. Lack of training and experience in quality early learning is partially to blame. Additional obstacles include areas already needing their attention, such as high-stakes testing, attendance issues, compliance, and state directives.

As one who has been through the process, I encourage you to see the opportunities, rather than the challenges, in the inclusion of a preschool program. A preschool program can strengthen your elementary setting, increase family relationships and connections, align curriculum and assessments, and create a unified professional conversation in your building.

Eight years ago, after 21 years of serving as principal of a small, rural elementary school that housed preschool through third grade, I accepted a position as principal of a startup public school preschool in a large urban district. My preconceived notion that early learning benefited only children with disabilities was shattered and replaced with a clearer vision of how a comprehensive pre-K–3 (preschool through grade 3) program can meet the needs of all learners.

Through the process, I learned that creating and supporting a pre-K–3 learning continuum requires a strong commitment by principals and all educators. It is essential to break down silos and work together to ensure that the children's needs are met.

Given all the demands placed on a school leader, it may be tempting to relegate preschool to the bottom of the list. But it's

important to reframe the conversation regarding early learning and recognize the need for quality early learning programs. Principals play a key role in creating a culture that values early learning. For school leaders, a critical part of their role is setting ambitious goals for schools—including strong strategies for young learners.

6 Steps to Preschool Success

You can use the six competencies outlined in the NAESP publication *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* to help you to integrate a preschool program into your school. Here's how:

1. Embrace the pre-K–3 early learning continuum.

Principals who voice the importance of early learning will lead staff to value its importance. At the beginning of each year, I share my belief statements with my staff. My first statement is always, "Early learning is essential for the success of children, both academically and emotionally."

Skills such as focus and self-control, perspective-taking, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, and taking on challenges are essential to students' success in school and in life. These skills can be developed in preschool and beyond.

It is difficult and costly to correct discrepancies in achievement that result from early setbacks, and much easier and more efficient to invest in early development of skills. According to "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40," a \$20 investment in quality preschool nets a return on investment of \$257.98. Students who participated in the preschool project generally did better in life than students who did not: Preschool participants' lifetime earnings were 14 percent higher, and their rate of homeownership was 32 percent higher than that of nonparticipants. To gain support for a preschool program, principals should share current local data on the return on investment for children who attend quality early childhood programs.

Once the importance of the early learning programming is established, professional conversations should revolve around the horizontal and vertical alignment of curriculum and instruction. The principal sets the stage

for these intentional conversations by dedicating time and making them a priority. I was fortunate to have a curriculum coach in both of my school settings. In my experience, curriculum coaches, grade-level representatives, and district staff development led curriculum alignment efforts and shared the results with the pre-K–3 staff. This process can lead to a seamless transition between grades that ultimately benefits the teachers as well as students.

2. Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching.

The website of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (naeyc.org) is a great place to learn more about developmentally appropriate practices. This information can make the difference in a child's engagement, behavior problems, and risk of failing.

When a principal understands what is developmentally appropriate, he or she can clearly establish classroom expectations. The walk-through document, which is a part of the teacher evaluation process, should be a snapshot of those expectations. I worked with my district leadership to create a document that reflected our classroom settings and aligned expectations with our evaluation rubric.

3. Provide personalized, blended learning environments.

Early learning should be play-based. Principals should understand their state's early learning standards so they can effectively communicate to staff and school community stakeholders the elements of learning that are embedded in classroom play. Our school wrote a book with visuals showing children at play, and then defined the specific standards that were being met through play. We shared this book with our school board and community members so they could better understand our program.

4. Use multiple measures to guide student learning growth.

Early learners don't—and shouldn't—take tests in the same manner as older students. Best practice dictates using observation, anecdotal notes, presentations, story retells, performances, portfolios, and other feedback from the children. As a principal, it's your job to ensure that your learning community is early learning assessment literate. Supporting open and collaborative discussion about assessment

data with stakeholders is helpful. Focus meetings with your school community, including grade-level and cross-grade-level data meetings, can foster a clearer picture of the long-range goals for each group of children.

5. Build professional capacity across the community.

The principal should pay attention to the early learning community. When you include early learning professionals and preschool children in your program, you reshape the culture of your school and emphasize your support for a strong beginning that can lead to long-term academic gains.

Principals who voice the importance of early learning will lead staff to value its importance.

Encourage professionals and teachers to become involved in local or state early childhood organizations. These organizations provide professional development and support, and they strengthen connections with others involved in early learning. Become active in your state's policymaking efforts, and be a voice for your young learners.

6. Make the school the hub of pre-K–3 learning for families and the community.

I always enjoy having families visit our program. We survey parents annually to identify their needs, and provide meals, interactive music instruction, game nights, body safety sessions, and STEM programs during parents' nights. We provide incentives for parent participation, and each child gets a book. We arrange for child care and provide materials to take home for experiments. These evenings help our parents network and connect with other families.

When you make your school a community hub, you become a source of support and resources for your families. The trust you gain and relationships you build will strengthen learning for all students.

Pouring your energy into a preschool program will result in big dividends for a school and community. The value of adding a preschool will be seen today and for years to come. 

Kathryn Raasch is principal of Wayne Township Preschool in Indianapolis.

