



Leadership training helps principals address any gaps in their knowledge about early childhood education to help kids transition to the primary grades

BY TANYA GUIN



THE FOR EARLY ED

Many administrators who supervise early childhood education programs don't, unfortunately, have credentials or a lot of knowledge in the area. Therefore, they might lack an understanding of a number of critical areas, including early childhood development; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and brain development and developmentally appropriate practices.

Principals are a fulcrum of early learning—they have the ability to build up a program or tear it down. Principals are also integral to student success—a key component in establishing a culture that values student learning and builds relationships with all stakeholders. As such, they need to pursue advanced training in early childhood development to help ensure that every student has the foundation they need to excel in the elementary grades.

SUPPLEMENTING STUDY

For me as an educator/administrator with multiple degrees, early childhood education and development was an area of limited knowledge even when I became a supervisor and pre-K director for my district. I realized that I didn't understand some of the most vital components in ensuring that the individual needs of our youngest learners were met.

Seeking to supplement my knowledge, I participated in NAESP's Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy. After completing it, I had a new appreciation and understanding of early childhood development. The leadership academy is a yearlong commitment that focuses on six competencies

ALABAMA'S INITIATIVES

The Walker County School District's journey began when it was awarded a grant for its kindergarten classrooms to participate in the state's pre-K-3 program. The grant focuses on high-quality learning opportunities designed to improve outcomes and close achievement gaps. The initiative also seeks to ensure that students can make seamless transitions from pre-K into kindergarten and through the third grade.

The state also offers the First Class pre-K program, which is ranked No. 1 in the nation. It is designed to strengthen the early childhood education continuum and embrace whole-child learning, providing students with quality learning experiences and improving cognitive and language skills to impact achievement gaps directly.

In the initial stages of our involvement, teachers, administrators, and I visited a school in another district that had implemented the program successfully. Because instruction and assessment differed so greatly from the approaches to learning we had seen previously, it represented a paradigm shift for us all.

TEACHER TRAINING

We piloted the program at a single pre-K-8 school, Lupton Junior High, in 2020. Lupton principal Corey Shubert participated in NAESP's Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy to deepen his knowledge of best practices as part of his professional development, and we supplied new materials to classrooms to support student learning through language development, intentional play, active learning, and social-emotional development.

Teachers attended Teaching Strategies® GOLD training over the summer to prepare them to successfully assess whole-child student learning. Using GOLD, teachers provide intentional learning opportunities starting in kindergarten and collect authentic data from their observations. Formative assessments are embedded in the classroom every day, and the data is used to tailor student learning, drive teacher instruction, and improve student performance.

Three times a year, GOLD generates a checkpoint report showing what the child is able to do and understand—where they are on the learning continuum and how to move them to the next level. After the first year of implementation, data revealed that all students had shown growth. What's more, student attendance had increased and behavior issues had decreased. Better still, teachers had made deeper connections with students and their families.

"Developmentally appropriate practices were engaging students and enriching their educational experience," Shubert says. "The children could articulate the expectation of the learning activity. Collaboration between the teachers and students clarified the next steps for learning. This was unlike anything I had experienced before."

Our goal is to provide a seamless continuum in pre-K-3 learning. If we can build deep learning constructs that provide a foundation for later learning and teach the whole child, we won't have to worry about achieving excellent test scores—they will be a byproduct of high-quality student learning and instructional practices that align with the research on early childhood development.

All kindergarten classrooms in our district now participate in the Pre-K-3 initiative, along with the first and second grades at Lupton. My goal is to have all of our elementary schools' K-3 classes involved. It is a huge project, but we're up for the challenge. My motto is, "When we know better, we must do better." And we now know better. —*Tanya Guin*

of early childhood development and learning that leaders need to embrace and practice:

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

Competency 2: Develop and Foster Partnerships With Families and Communities

Competency 3: Embrace and Enact a Pre-K-3 Vision

Competency 4: Ensure Equitable Opportunities

Competency 5: Share Leadership and Build Professional Capacity

Competency 6: Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement

In equipping administrators with a better understanding of pre-K-3 education, the Leadership Academy gives principals the confidence they need to provide meaningful feedback to students, teachers, and families; plan professional learning to support early childhood practices; and serve as advocates for pre-K-3 policies and procedures at the district level.

AREAS RIPE FOR "AHA" MOMENTS

In facilitating Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy activities for Alabama educators and mentoring participants, I found that many other educators had missed out on fundamental concepts of early childhood behavior, intentional play, and assessment in spite of their having advanced degrees.

Participants often say they have "aha" moments when we discuss strategies for regulating behavior. A lot of kids—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—haven't had the opportunity to be exposed to appropriate behaviors or a literacy-rich environment, and educators learn that redirecting and shaping more positive behaviors typically take more than a timeout.



Core Concepts: Early Childhood Training

Kids aren't born with the skills to problem-solve, make good decisions, or self-regulate, and educators often assume that the children in their classrooms have the same ability to exercise the "executive" functions that they or their own children have.

Many kids have never seen executive function and self-regulation modeled, however, and as a result, they might not know how to express anger or behave appropriately in a classroom. They can develop these skills through a positive relationship with an adult, such as a teacher who regulates their own behavior appropriately.

PLAY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

One of the most misunderstood areas among educational leaders is the importance of learning through play in the early years. Young children are not going to sit at their desks and listen—or at least not for long. They need to construct their own knowledge through intentional learning opportunities. It takes more planning than what you might consider a traditional curriculum, but the outcomes are far better.

We often attempt to draw a divide between play and traditional academics, when they should go hand-in-hand. For example, one of our second-grade classrooms built a make-believe bakery where one student would create a menu, another would take an order, and another would measure out ingredients to bake a mock cake. It was a hands-on learning opportunity that imparted a variety of problem-solving skills effectively in a familiar and engaging setting.

Intentional play allows students to learn new concepts. Make-believe play helps students acquire all-important self-regulation skills. Dramatic play builds students' language skills, social skills, and capacity for empathy. Principals who familiarize themselves with learning through play can champion developmentally appropriate practices, and that knowledge will help them support early childhood programs effectively.

EARLY ASSESSMENT

Assessment is another area in which Leadership Academy participants needed supplemental knowledge. When educators discuss formative assessments, it's often a question of having students do something on a piece of paper. That doesn't provide authentic documentation in an early childhood classroom, however. Instead, try using a hands-on manipulative while you watch and guide the conversation—that's what an authentic assessment looks like.

So many times, we just supply children with a set of facts and don't give them an opportunity to construct

the conceptual knowledge they can use in different situations. You can get only so far with procedural knowledge, and gaps like these can last throughout life.

Schools tend to teach to the masses, and that's not good practice; each child has to be taught to mastery. The big thing for leaders is knowing where each of your children is and helping them move forward. They need to know that every kid doesn't learn the same, and every kid doesn't need to be doing the same thing. ●

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- Elementary administrators don't often have backgrounds in early childhood education and therefore lack an understanding of brain development, mitigating their ability to lead and support early childhood programs.
- Participants often say they experience "aha" moments when learning about early childhood behavior, the importance of intentional play in learning, and assessment in Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy training.
- Leadership and teacher training can assist in strengthening the early childhood education continuum, providing students with quality learning experiences that improve cognitive and language skills.
- Initial results of the district's participation in Alabama's Pre-K-3 program showed that attendance was up, behavioral issues were down, and that all students had shown growth.