

A Renewed Focus on Alignment

Principals must cope with the pandemic's disruption of the early learning continuum

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It is well-established that students should reach critical learning milestones by third grade. It is an important transitional year in which students shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” But with three school years now having been affected by COVID-19’s disruptions, the impact on our youngest learners has been significant. Low enrollments and slowdowns in academic and social-emotional growth have hit this student population especially hard.

An article appearing in *Education Week*, “Starting School After the Pandemic: Youngest Students Will Need Foundational Skills,” notes that school enrollment rates dropped about 3 percent nationwide in the 2020–2021 school year, but this number was as high as 14 percent for preschool enrollment. In addition to this staggering statistic, the youngest learners also experienced disproportionately slower academic growth, with students of color facing the most setbacks.

What worked in pre-pandemic early learning doesn’t translate to children’s needs today. Students need additional support; early childhood educators must renew their focus on reigniting academic and social-emotional growth. To do this, aligning pre-K through grade 3 becomes even more crucial. Meaningful early learning leadership requires expertise in child development and instructional practices that support young learners.

Aligned early learning has long been a priority at NAESP. The NAESP Pre-K–3 Leadership Academy®, a cohort-based, job-embedded professional learning opportunity for states and districts, continues to grow to support principals in leading early learning communities—adapting, along with

the principal profession, through a future-focused lens.

NAESP also collaborated with the National P-3 Center to develop *Leading Learning Communities: A Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)*. The guide aims to help school leaders better understand child development, embrace a pre-K through third-grade vision, and ensure equitable outcomes for early learners.

At the core of successful early learning leadership are three factors—vision, systems, and people. Our focus is clear: Equip principals with the training and tools they need to put the systems in place to develop the people necessary to achieve a strong pre-K–third grade-vision.

As third graders head into the home stretch of another school year disrupted by the pandemic, we must acknowledge that the pandemic has forced them to miss out on many benefits of early childhood education experiences. Now more than ever, educators must understand the need to support a seamless continuum of learning for every child across pre-K through grade 3. NAESP will be there every step of the way, providing specific guidance for principals to become more effective leaders on behalf of young children. ●

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NAESP BELIEVES THAT:

- Early childhood programs and experiences should be available for all children and that there should be a continuum of learning from early childhood through third grade;
- Early childhood curricula should include ambitious standards and instruction, purposeful play, and age-appropriate assessment;
- Principals must be provided with individualized professional learning to strengthen their knowledge of early childhood education; and
- Federal and state funding for school-connected early childhood programs must be a legislative priority.