

PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3:
Early Investment
Strong Alignment
Better Results

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

We've heard it over and over: Children need more and better support early on to be able to come to school ready to learn and succeed in the elementary grades. Educators, researchers and policymakers acknowledge the importance of early childhood education for all children. The first five years of life are critical to the development of emotional competence, as well as linguistic, cognitive, social and motor skills. Without adequate early education, statistics show a dramatic decline in later academic performance.

“Children who do not recognize the letters of the alphabet when they enter kindergarten demonstrate significantly lower reading skills at the end of first grade, and statistically, by then, the damage is done. Eighty-eight percent of children who are poor readers in first grade will still be poor readers in fourth grade. Seventy-four percent of children who are poor readers in third grade will still be poor readers when they start high school. High-quality PK programs give children the tools they need to keep pace in school and become able readers.” – Pre-K Now

Research indicates that PK programs reduce the likelihood of teen crime, delinquency and pregnancy. Strong PK programs are also linked to greater employment rates and higher adult wages.

But early learning success should not stop at the kindergarten door. To build a strong platform for children's academic and social success, learning each year from PK through third grade must build in deliberate ways on the previous year's experience. Only then will children be adequately prepared for fourth grade, when academic standards and expectations become considerably tougher, and children's educational skills must be applied to a wide range of subject areas. Without consistent support in the primary years, many children do not master basic reading skills in third grade. Poor readers often fall behind and are more likely to drop out of school.

In order to ensure that every child receives a high-quality PK-3 education, there must be the will and capability to implement it. While many principals across the country want to add and align PK programs, their districts or schools often don't have the resources or capacity. Many communities are faced with budget cuts, disjointed early education systems and lack of knowledge about how to make PK-3 work.

Understanding lessons learned from principals who are leading efforts to align PK-3 and improve results for children across the country can help more principals build similar systems in their schools. Close analysis of successful PK-3 programs reveals that school reform is not accomplished by a one-size-fits-all approach. Because communities, schools and students have varied strengths, challenges and resources, successful PK-3

reform occurs when core principles are adapted to meet the unique needs of the school, community and students.

Through interviews with principals who are leading efforts to build strong PK-3 programs across the country, we found the following core elements among successful programs:

- Strong PK-3 alignment
- Strong principal leadership
- High-quality, ongoing professional development
- Strong focus on student achievement and results

Our research and that of others show that successful principals who ensure these elements work together create an environment of continuous improvement that helps young children come to school ready to learn and achieve in later grades.

“The more time and energy you put into early childhood education, the less time you will spend on the other end with remediation.”

*Bernadette Nevarez, principal,
Mary Ann Binford Elementary School,
Albuquerque, NM*

PK-3 ALIGNMENT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

PK-3 alignment involves much more than housing a PK program within a school. In fact, alignment can occur when the PK program and elementary grades are located in different buildings and even in different systems.

The key to successful alignment is streamlining the core elements of teaching and learning, and focusing on grade-level transitions to ensure that children get what they need to succeed at every step. This means dovetailing standards and curricula, so that what is taught in one year leads seamlessly to the next. Teachers must understand and articulate what children should know and be able to do at each stage of development—and assure that they master each step. Teachers and parents must share the same vision for learning and provide continuous support for children.

“By bringing PK expectations in line with those in kindergarten and the early school years, principals provide a coherent, related set of experiences for children in the first critical years of schooling.” – National Association of Elementary School Principals

E X A M P L E

In San Antonio, TX, Patricia Blattman Elementary School’s staff aligns PK-3 by translating grade-level standards into specific content that should be covered in classrooms. Professional development helps teachers see connections between skills students should learn from grade to grade in language arts, math, science and social studies. Planning time is structured to encourage teachers in different grades to work together on issues such as assessments, student progress or teaching techniques. Benchmarked unit tests are being developed for students across the district. District staff, who understand the importance of horizontal and vertical alignment, are starting an information system that will allow principals to quickly see, track and analyze students’ performance on the unit exams at their own schools and others across the district.

STRONG PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP GUIDES THE TRANSITION AND ENSURES SUCCESS

Principal leadership is another critical element in a successful PK-3 program. In addition to supporting a strong PK-3 vision, principals must apply all their skills and knowledge to create a community and school focused on educating young children. Managing resources, energizing teachers, building community support and leading reform all play a part in retooling PK-3.

Implementing a PK-3 program can be challenging. To become effective PK-3 leaders, principals who may not be familiar with exemplary PK teaching and classroom management practices should seek opportunities for professional development and classroom observation. A critical role for principals in PK-3 systems is understanding the practices and challenges of PK classrooms and helping to build a bridge from those classrooms to kindergarten and elementary grades.

The entire community benefits from a unified, coherent approach to helping families with young children. A wide range of providers offers PK programs in many communities. Some districts may have the resources to build new PK classrooms in existing elementary schools, others may not. Creating strongly aligned PK-3 systems when the PK program is located outside the school requires that principals build trust and alignment among fragmented systems. Principals are in a unique position to take the lead in creating connections among families, educators and PK providers.

EXAMPLE

Jill Flanders, principal of Plains Elementary School in South Hadley, MA, serves on the executive board of a local coalition working to create a cohesive system of educational and developmental supports for all children in the community. She works with other members of the coalition to connect the community's private PK programs and child care services with the academic learning standards and developmental supports at Plains Elementary. Flanders has also worked with others at the state level to develop proposed legislation that lays out the essential elements of universally accessible, high-quality early education programs in Massachusetts.

“Building my own knowledge of appropriate practice in the PK-3 classrooms was very valuable in knowing what needed to take place, so I could facilitate the right discussions and provide leadership for my faculty.”

Steve Wilson, principal, Centura Elementary School, Cairo, NE

HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRENGTHENS ALIGNMENT AND CLASSROOM LEARNING

The day-to-day responsibility for continuity of standards and curricula lies with classroom teachers. However, principals need to support teachers and help them understand the vision and philosophies of a continuum of learning that starts in PK and ends at the start of fourth grade.

“In schools that cultivate this continuum of learning, the early childhood educators are respected for what they can offer their peers in later grades, and teachers in later elementary grades work with PK teachers on connecting learning goals and expectations across all levels.”

– National Association of Elementary School Principals

Principals should ensure necessary tools and systems are in place to support the PK-3 continuum through ongoing professional development. Teachers must be knowledgeable about child development and developmentally appropriate teaching practices and assessments. They also must have the opportunity to meet regularly within and across grade levels in order to develop and maintain a continuum of learning. Ongoing professional development can take many forms, including classroom observations, across-grade planning, child development training and reading instruction techniques. No matter what form professional development takes, to be successful it must be ongoing and focused on the goal of providing a seamless continuum of PK-3 learning to students.

E X A M P L E

Principal Beth Carlson created and implemented a professional development system for teachers at Morris Early Childhood Center in Lincoln, DE. Teachers participated in training sessions on reading comprehension and inquiry-based teaching strategies that could be used in all of the school's PK-1 classrooms. Teachers also videotaped lessons in their classrooms, and were required to view and comment on their colleagues' videotaped work.

AGE-APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY CONTINUOUSLY INFORM TEACHING AND LEARNING

Principals are responsible for creating a climate throughout the school that balances developmentally appropriate teaching and learning with specific academic expectations. The bar for principals and schools continues to rise. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has increased principals' accountability for student learning. Principals face a major challenge in balancing the needs of young children with the need to ensure that all children perform well on third-grade tests in state-wide accountability systems.

As principals implement the PK-3 continuum, age-appropriate assessments and accountability should be embraced and used to continuously inform teaching. Strong alignment, strong professional development and ongoing assessment of students' achievement will ensure better results for children.

“This alignment necessitates a master plan that intentionally lays out clear expectations for children at each grade level, aligns these expectations with classroom experiences that facilitate reaching the expectations and multiple forms of assessment that provide information on whether or not children are progressing toward the expectations set out for them throughout the years from PK through third grade.” – Society for Research in Child Development

Teachers at Rolling Hills Elementary School in Orlando, FL, appreciate principal Patrick Galatowitsch's inclusive, supportive leadership role. “Patrick sees teachers as classroom experts,” says a first-grade teacher. “He trusts us, knows our strengths and weaknesses, and makes sure we have the supports we need to be effective.”

E X A M P L E

The Mayo Demonstration School of Science and Technology in Tulsa, OK, implements a variety of assessment tools to measure student progress. Teachers use an early childhood screening instrument in PK and kindergarten that provides feedback on students' early literacy development and basic numeric skills. A computer-based, beginning reading assessment for K-3 students is also used in the second week of school to provide teachers with a snapshot of students' vocabulary, comprehension and reading fluency. Principal Andrew McKenzie credits the school's multi-age grouping approach for the strong language development of PK-3 students. The school is meeting adequate yearly progress as measured by NCLB.

COMMON CHALLENGES AND UNCOMMON SOLUTIONS IN CREATING ALIGNED PK-3 PROGRAMS

As we talked with principals who are leading efforts to create strongly aligned PK-3 schools across the country, we discovered common challenges in implementing core elements of PK-3 reform. Although they share similar challenges, principals have found different ways to best meet the needs of their communities, staff and students. Some of the challenges faced by principals implementing PK-3 programs are described below, along with brief descriptions of their individual approaches to addressing them.

The path to building bridges between community-based PK providers and schools often is littered with obstacles.

Community-wide coalition creates partnerships in La Crosse, WI.

Along with a cadre of other elementary school principals in La Crosse, North Woods principal Jane Morken began advocating for stronger PK-3 connections in the district during the late 1990s. While the city had offered a hodgepodge of community-based, early childhood programs that targeted low-income children since 1965, principals believed the district needed to deepen connections with these programs and offer high-quality PK classes in its 10 elementary schools.

The school board directed the principals and community-based early childhood providers to study possibilities and report back with ideas. As a result, principals and community leaders established the Community Collaboration of Four-Year-Olds. Its goal was to begin making connections between school and community-based providers of early childhood services. Members included Jane Morken, other district principals and staff, community child care directors, private preschool providers, and representatives from family resource centers and public health facilities. In 1999, the district adopted that working group's recommendations to begin incorporating PK into both community centers and elementary schools. Under this more cohesive and collaborative model, the divide between community- and school-based early childhood education is being bridged. Today, eight community-based sites and eight PK-5 schools in La Crosse offer coordinated early learning experiences for 4-year-olds.

Parents and teachers bridge the gap in Laguna, NM.

Laguna Elementary is a K-5 school located on an Indian reservation operated by the Laguna Tribe. The Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education has administered the education system since it gained sovereignty from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1992. Laguna tribal leaders have focused on building a coordinated system of early childhood education that includes a Head Start PK program, an early Head Start program for infants- to 3-year-olds, a special services program for children with developmental

disabilities, and a child care center that provides wrap-around services to children 6 weeks to 12 years old. The early childhood division established the Laguna Interagency Coordinating Council for Young Children to help ensure effective coordination between the different programs.

Laguna Elementary reflects the school system's emphasis on creating seamless learning connections for young children. Principal Brenda Kofahl brings experience as the education coordinator for a Head Start program in Laguna, and also served as the system's director of early education overseeing Head Start through third grade. Under Kofahl's leadership, the elementary school is working closely with a Head Start program to align expectations for early learning and school readiness. Teachers meet with Head Start staff to improve alignment and build a shared understanding of key learning principles. Family advocates help parents navigate a web of social service agencies. These strategies have all helped the school reach a student population that is largely low-income and speaks English as a second language.

Many principals have the will to create PK-3 programs but lack the funding.

Principal taps current funds in Cairo, NE.

When Steve Wilson became principal of the Centura Elementary School in 1988, parents drove 20 miles outside this farming and ranching community to find a school-based PK program. The only options at that time were child care centers that varied in quality and often failed to address principles of early learning. "We had a lot of students who had never seen a book, had poor language skills, or had never been to a doctor," Wilson says. "We had all of these inequalities facing us from day one in kindergarten."

Wilson believed that establishing a PK program in his school and taking a more rigorous approach to identifying best practices in PK through third grade was imperative. He began working closely with a state Department of Education official exploring innovative funding strategies to help schools start PK programs. A plan to allow school leaders to comingle funds from Title I, Head Start and federal special education sources was approved by the Nebraska Board of Education in 1991. A year later, Centura Public Schools became the first district in Nebraska to tap the new funding stream to start a PK program at Centura Elementary.

Today, the school's program for 3- and 4-year-olds is recognized across the state for providing a broad array of early learning and social supports for children and families.

Private and public funds build a cohesive system in Omaha, NE.

"One of the biggest obstacles to expanding quality in early childhood is getting people to realize that if we keep building our own silos, none of us will have enough money to build the quality programs that are going to make a difference," says Gladys Haynes, program director of Educare, a model early childhood program developed through a public-private partnership. Educare has become a vehicle to combine philanthropic support, school district resources, financial support from local businesses, and resources from community agencies to build what leaders hope will be a topnotch program. Private funds were used to build the center; district funds pay operating costs.

Principals must balance a focus on standards and accountability with developmentally appropriate learning.

University-school partnership develops standards and assessments for young learners in Chicago, IL.

At the Henry Lloyd Elementary School, educators work with the University of Illinois-Chicago program to synthesize standards into “I Can” statements that help teachers, children and parents understand and accomplish the step-by-step curriculum. In PK, that means readiness standards are translated into statements, such as “I can listen to a story read aloud to me,” or “I can express or retell a story in my own words.” As students fulfill one step, they move to the next. Principal Assaf-Keller says the school’s curriculum, instruction and assessment now operate on the principle that the school is one big progression of skills and student performance.

The principal considers PK an essential part of that process. “They cannot be disconnected, because PK is not just play,” says Assaf-Keller. “I believe children need time for activities built around play, because that is developmentally appropriate. But we set up an environment where children are playing as a way to interact and develop skills in learning centers. They talk and share a book with someone else, which reinforces a reading initiative component. It’s crucial to begin at that very early age. We can’t send them to kindergarten not knowing what it means to retell a story.”

Focus on the full spectrum of reading skills creates balance in Baltimore, MD.

Deep Creek Elementary became a pilot school in its district for implementing Open Court Reading, a research-based curriculum grounded in explicit instruction of phonemic awareness and comprehension skills. PK uses the same Open Court series as K-3 students. The reading curriculum for PK emphasizes rich language experiences through rhymes, songs and poems. Each month the school’s literacy team—a reading coach, reading specialist, teacher mentor, speech pathologist, and the principal—meet to discuss students’ progress. Prekindergarten students are also using the same mathematics series published by McGraw-Hill as students in first-through-fifth grades.

The Maryland curriculum goals, indicators and objectives are aligned in PK-3 for all content areas. Beginning in PK, students are held accountable for learning specific objectives in reading, writing and math.

States that have not focused on aligning PK to elementary grades are not able to offer guidance to schools on early education standards and curricula.

Locally-designed PK standards fill the gap in Lincoln, DE.

Because the state doesn’t provide PK standards, teacher teams have extrapolated Delaware’s Kindergarten Grade Level Expectations backwards to create developmentally appropriate standards for the PK and early development programs. Teachers have also worked with school administrators to create PK-1 skills checklists linked directly to the state’s third-grade reading tests. Those skills are assessed through daily observation of students’ work and computerized diagnostic tests. Teachers continue to work together to build a strong, consistent literacy focus throughout the school.

Teachers ensure PK is not left out of the equation in San Antonio, TX.

Curriculum alignment in the Patricia Blattman Elementary School is spelled out in the state's academic goals, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. The state translated these standards into content to be covered in every grade. The district offers a curriculum guide for teachers and provides booklets explaining academic standards to parents in each grade. Principal Cindy Luna says that aligning the PK program to kindergarten expectations is assured by joint PK-K district supervision. "The beauty of that position is the district has been able to write standards for PK and K understanding both levels," Luna says.

Professional development in the school helps teachers see connections between the skills students should learn from grade to grade in language arts, math, science and social studies. Luna adds that planning time is also structured to encourage teachers at different grade levels to work together on issues like assessment, student progress or teaching techniques. That kind of teamwork led the faculty to start curriculum compacting, which allows students who score 85 percent or higher on unit pre-tests to opt out of regular classroom teaching and work on more advanced material during the two weeks their classmates learn the unit. Luna says the program is a way to individualize instruction to keep all students moving at a challenging pace. "We've made a start," she says of the new effort. "It's a big job to take each unit and get extra materials ready."

PRINCIPALS LEAD PK-3 REFORM

Each principal brings a unique set of skills and personal strengths to the task of creating PK-3 programs. Leading by doing, principals are spurring PK-3 reform in communities across the country.

By interviewing these principals and sharing case studies about their experiences creating aligned PK-3 systems in their schools, we hope that more principals with the will to implement PK-3 will have the tools to make it happen.

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