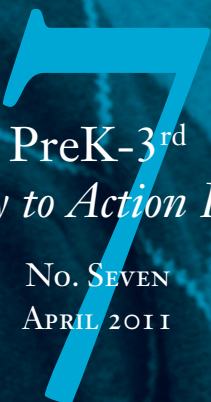


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PreK-3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders

Sara Mead



PreK-3rd

Policy to Action Brief

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PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs

PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs seek to promote the idea of PreK-3rd and to provide guidance for its implementation. The goal of PreK-3rd Grade Education is the creation of a seamless learning continuum from PreK to 3rd Grade.

PreK-3rd is a national movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different efforts use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools to create a well-aligned primary education for all our nation's children.

What is PreK-3rd Education?

- Public responsibility for full-school-day education starting at age three
 - Voluntary, Full-Day PreK for three-year-olds
 - Voluntary, Full-Day PreK for four-year-olds
 - Required, Full-School-Day Kindergarten
- Aligned educational strategies and resources within and across grades
 - Aligned standards, sequenced curriculum, instruction, and assessments
 - Well-rounded and comprehensive curriculum, including arts, physical education, social and emotional learning, science, and history
 - Joint planning and shared professional development among all PreK, Kindergarten, and Grades 1-3 teachers and staff
- Principal leadership to support joint professional development around curriculum and instruction
- Family engagement focused on supporting learning and instruction
- PreK-3rd teachers with the same qualifications and compensation as all teachers
 - Lead teachers qualified to teach any grade from PreK through 3rd Grade
 - Teaching assistants with A.A. degrees.

PreK-3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders

Policymakers and educators recognize the critical importance of elementary school principals in creating effective schools and improving student achievement. Research shows that principals alone account for 25 percent of a school’s total impact on student learning, and teacher and principal quality together account for nearly 60 percent of a school’s impact.¹

Principals are particularly crucial in PreK-3rd settings, where instructional leaders must align standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment both vertically (across grades) and horizontally (between classrooms) and ensure effective instruction across all PreK through 3rd Grade classrooms. Only consistent, high-quality learning experiences will ensure that all children reach grade-level standards by 3rd Grade. Unfortunately, too many schools today lack strong principal instructional leadership.

This Policy to Action Brief looks at what principals can do to build high-quality PreK-3rd experiences for young children and how policymakers can eliminate existing barriers and better support them to do so.



Barriers to Instructional Leadership in PreK-3rd

Research and common sense tell us that the best way to ensure children’s long-term academic success is to build solid foundational skills during the early childhood and early elementary years. Children who reach 3rd Grade below grade-level in reading and math are unlikely ever to catch up.ⁱⁱ Educational improvement strategies that focus on the early years—preventing children from falling behind in the first place—have a much better chance of long-term success than those that emphasize remediation later on.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in an era of test-based accountability, principals face pervasive systemic incentives to direct resources and energy away from the early grades and into later, tested grades. “The mandate that the principal has is for Grades K-5,” says Loretta Burns of the Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness,

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which has been active in supporting Kindergarten readiness and PreK-3rd alignment efforts in Santa Clara County, California. “But if you’re a program improvement school and you don’t fix your 3rd, 4th, 5th Grade reading scores, you’ll be fired. What the principal starts doing and focuses attention on is intervention and remediation work in those grades. Which never digs you out of the hole.”

The existing leadership recruitment and preparation system also creates a number of barriers to effective instructional leadership. Principals are haphazardly selected, with little attention to the characteristics and skills required of effective leaders.^{iv} Many preparation programs do not prepare principals to be effective instructional leaders, especially in PreK-3rd systems.^v

State principal credentialing policies also contribute to poor quality principal preparation, by creating barriers to effective preparation models, and failing to ensure that principal preparation programs equip principals with essential knowledge and skills—particularly in the areas of child development and early education.

The structure of the job itself is another barrier to effective instructional leadership. Principals face numerous operational, paperwork, and other administrative demands that too often crowd out time they should be spending in classrooms, evaluating and supporting quality instructional practice, and working with teachers to align educational strategies and resources within and across the grades from PreK through 3rd Grade.



Improving Principal Quality in Illinois

In 2010, the State of Illinois enacted legislation, PA 96-0903, designed to strengthen the quality of principal preparation by improving quality and selectivity and requiring higher education institutions to work more closely with local school districts. This legislation made Illinois the first state to require principal preparation programs to fully integrate early childhood-related content by 2014. These reforms will help to increase the supply of principals who have the skills to drive improvements in student learning and create aligned early learning experiences for PreK-3rd students.

PA 96-0903 grew out of recommendations of a state task force, which was strongly informed by the work of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Urban Education Leadership program, an intensive cohort program that prepares principals to lead change in urban schools. The program integrates child development and early childhood content throughout principals' preparation, as well as research by Illinois State University documenting the disconnect between public elementary school principals and early childhood programs. Both initiatives received support from the McCormick Foundation, an Illinois-based foundation that has made significant investments in improving early childhood education and leadership.

Sources: Illinois PA 96-0903; Interview with Sara Slaughter, McCormick Foundation

Why PreK-3rd Principals Must Know About Child Development

Principals who have a solid understanding of developmentally appropriate instruction and how children learn along the continuum from PreK through 3rd Grade know that focusing on remediation is the wrong approach. They know that lasting gains in student achievement must be built on a solid foundation of consistent, high-quality instruction in the early childhood and elementary grades.

But too many elementary principals lack the child development knowledge and instructional leadership skills to ensure coherent, seamless instruction in every year from PreK through 3rd Grade. Very few principals have professional backgrounds

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in early childhood, PreK, or Kindergarten, and principal preparation programs rarely close this gap in their knowledge. As a result, some principals may have inappropriate expectations of PreK and Kindergarten students, and may push teachers to teach in ways that do not engage young children or take into account their stage of development. Others may largely ignore PreK and Kindergarten, leaving those teachers isolated from the larger school. Both approaches miss a critical opportunity to use the PreK and Kindergarten years as a starting point for high-quality, aligned, and seamless PreK-3rd early learning experiences that build a solid foundation for later learning.

In “Transforming Early Learning in Grades Pre-K- 3,” the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) states, “What elementary and middle level principals know from decades of experience and from their day to day work with children is that we need to re-think, re-orient, and re-work our approach to early childhood education and now focus on the child’s perspective and address their many developmental needs.”

In 2005, the NAESP publication “Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities,” stated that principals must “see the need to be strongly involved in learning before Kindergarten and First Grade. Principals help create the opportunity for high-quality Full-Day Kindergarten and high-quality early childhood education for all students—within public schools or through other early care and education providers in communities.”^{vi}

PreK-3rd: What Principals Can Do

Successful instructional leaders build strong PreK-3rd learning environments in several ways:

Creating a PreK-3rd Culture: The principal's most important instructional leadership role is in the culture he or she creates within the school.^{vii} Effective instructional leaders in PreK-3rd settings create a strong culture that:

- Views PreK and Kindergarten as fundamental parts of school's mission and PreK-3rd continuum, not add-ons: Principals send a clear message that PreK and Kindergarten students and teachers are crucial and equal, and take steps to integrate them into all aspects of the school community.
- Aligns standards, sequenced curriculum, instruction, and assessments from PreK through 3rd Grade.
- Incorporates a well-rounded and comprehensive curriculum, including arts, physical education, social and emotional learning, science, and history.
- Reframes the role of teaching as collaborative, rather than isolated work: Traditionally, teachers have often worked in an "egg crate" model that isolates them from their peers. In effective schools, teachers work very differently, engaging in regular collaboration around lesson planning, data analysis, and shared problem-solving.^{viii} Principals play a key role in creating and sustaining this culture of collaboration, including creating opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative planning and joint professional development within and across grade levels.^{ix}

Driving Effective Teaching: Effective PreK-3rd principals create a culture that emphasizes and expects quality instruction for every child. They work closely and relentlessly with teachers to ensure high-quality instruction. Principals are in classrooms on a regular basis, observing teachers and giving feedback. Even in the early grades, effective instruction requires teachers regularly to assess children's progress and to adjust instruction in response to assessment results. Successful PreK-3rd principals regularly analyze data with teachers and support them in collecting and using data to monitor student progress and evaluate and improve instructional approaches. Finally, successful principals use a full range of human capital management strategies to ensure effective teaching in all classrooms, including hiring effective teachers, developing teachers' instructional skills, and, when necessary, removing underperforming teachers.

Creating structures and conditions in the school that support quality instruction: Principals ensure their schools have a sequential curriculum that builds children’s knowledge and skills grade-by-grade and skill on skill, leading to grade-level proficiency by the 3rd Grade—and beyond. They put in place curriculum-aligned formative and interim assessments that provide teachers with data to inform instruction. They provide professional development that enables teachers to use curriculum, assessments, and student data to improve student learning. Principals realign resources—time, people, and money—within the school to support PreK-3rd alignment by, for example, scheduling regular common planning time. And they allocate resources for timely interventions that help struggling students before they fall behind.

Building relationships with community partners: Effective PreK-3rd principals recognize that children’s education begins long before they enter school. Principals who do not have PreK students in their own school can create aligned PreK-3rd experiences by partnering with community-based early childhood providers. These relationships can facilitate children’s transitions between PreK and Kindergarten, but need to go much further to support quality in community-based early childhood programs and foster alignment between these programs and local elementary schools. Principals should invite teachers in community-based PreK programs to participate in professional development provided to school-based PreK and Kindergarten teachers. And they should work with community-based PreK programs to adopt common routines and curriculum so that children have common learning experiences no matter what type of early learning setting they are in.

Helping Principals Understand How Children Learn

The CAYL Institute’s Principals Fellowship in Early Care and Education is another effort to build elementary principals’ understanding of early childhood development. “Our purpose is to help principals be better able to understand, implement, and evaluate developmentally appropriate practice to better serve children in their schools,” explains CAYL Executive Director Valora Washington. The fellowship works intensively with locally or regionally based cohorts of principals, creating networks of principals working on similar issues, and includes a summer institute, visits to other schools and early childhood programs throughout the year, and workshop opportunities to learn about early childhood pedagogy and child development. To date, more than 65 principals in Massachusetts and Ohio have participated in CAYL’s intensive one-year cohort program. A larger network of principals receive support through CAYL’s annual conference, which brings together a national network of elementary school principals working to support quality early learning opportunities in their schools and communities.

Sources: CAYL Institute Website <http://www.cayl.org/>; Interview with Valora Washington

Moving Forward: What Policymakers Must Do

Ensuring that all principals have the skills to serve as effective instructional leaders will require changes in the way we recruit, select, prepare, and support principals, as well as how we structure the job of school leadership. Various initiatives are working to transform the role of the principal and the context in which principals operate—and some are producing impressive results.^x (See the sidebars on Illinois, the CAYL Institute, and Rainwater Leadership Alliance.) But ensuring effective school leadership at scale will require broader policy changes. Specifically, policymakers must:

- **Eliminate Barriers to Exercising Instructional Leadership:** Getting serious about PreK-3rd instructional leadership requires improving or closing poor-quality principal preparation programs and actively recruiting and selecting individuals who have the skills necessary to be effective school leaders—leaders that must have knowledge of how children develop and learn from PreK through 3rd Grade. It will also be necessary to restructure the demands of the position to prioritize instructional leadership over building management, and to give

principals freedom to make decisions about curriculum, schedules, personnel, budget, and other factors critical to school performance. This will require changes in policy as well as practice at the district, state, and federal levels.

Principals also need support from district leadership committed to building solid foundations in the early years.^{xi} Districts must ensure that principals have both the time to serve as instructional leaders and the autonomy to reallocate resources (people, time, and funding) within the school to achieve educational

objectives. This will require significant changes in the way many districts operate. District, state, and federal policymakers must also ensure that policies, regulations, and other contextual factors support, rather than serving as barriers or disincentives to, effective instructional leadership in PreK-3rd, for example, by supporting principals in using Title I funds to improve access or quality in school- or community-based PreK settings.

- **Foster Strategies that Develop Effective PreK-3rd Leaders:** Preparation programs must equip principals working in elementary schools with a strong foundation in young children’s development, and should make a concerted effort to recruit more prospective elementary school principals with solid backgrounds in early childhood education. Policymakers should also consider

Districts must ensure that principals have both the time to serve as instructional leaders and the autonomy to reallocate resources (people, time, and funding) within the school to achieve educational objectives.

innovative solutions, such as new early childhood leadership pipelines that recruit individuals from PreK, Kindergarten, and early childhood settings and equip them with the instructional and leadership skills to serve as leaders in PreK-3rd settings.

Equally important, we must not neglect the principals who already work in our nation's schools. Public policies should support an array of in-service professional development options that enable these principals to develop both specific instructional leadership skills they may be lacking and their knowledge of how young children learn.

- **Get the Incentives Right:** Current accountability systems create perverse incentives for principals to focus on remediation and triage in the later elementary grades that are subject to testing, rather than building solid foundations in the early elementary school years. Ultimately, successful PreK-3rd reforms must translate into 3rd Grade test score gains. But accountability policies must provide a safe harbor for schools that are making gains with the youngest students that are not yet reflected in 3rd, 4th, and 5th Grade test scores. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides an opportunity for creating such a safe harbor in federal policy.

Because gains in the early years must ultimately translate into better test scores in Grades 3-8, the number of years schools can take advantage of this safe harbor would need to be capped at three to five years.

Truly transforming the role of the elementary school principal as a PreK-3rd instructional leader will require a substantial change in both the work principals do and the context and constraints under which they operate. It will require new methods of selecting, preparing, evaluating, and supporting principals, as well as strategies to retool or enhance the skills of current principals. But only through these changes can we ensure that all of our students—in the PreK-3rd Grades and throughout our entire educational system—benefit from consistent, high-quality instruction that enables them to master necessary knowledge and skills and prepares them to succeed in school and in life.

Sara Mead is an Associate Partner with Bellwether Education Partners, a national education nonprofit organization dedicated to accelerating the achievement of low-income students. She conducts analyses, writes, and advises clients on issues including early childhood education, public education reform, state and federal education policy, and charter schools.



Preparing Instructional Leaders: The Rainwater Leadership Alliance

The Rainwater Leadership Alliance (RLA) is a network of organizations committed to improving the quality of public school leadership to ensure that all children achieve at high academic levels. Members include school districts, higher education institutions, and nonprofit organizations that lead, manage, and support high-impact principal preparation and development programs. RLA members place principals in a variety of settings, including PreK-3rd, elementary, middle, and high schools. But they ensure that all principals who complete their programs have a solid foundation in core instructional leadership skills—such as adult leadership and human capital management—that are critical to successful instructional leadership in any setting, and particularly in PreK-3rd settings.

Sources: Rainwater Leadership Alliance, *A New Approach to Principal Preparation*.
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- ^{viii} Stephen W. Rahdenbush and J. Douglas Willms, *Schools, Classrooms, and Pupils: International Studies of Schooling from a Multilevel Perspective* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1991).
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Online PreK-3rd Resources

These key resources aim to inform policymakers, educators, researchers, and others about PreK-3rd issues. For more in-depth resources, visit our Resource Library web page (<http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/>) which houses all materials published by FCD and our grantees.

This document provides direct links to the materials by accessing the FCD web site at: http://www.fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PreK-3rd_Resources.pdf.

The Case for PreK-3rd

- Dale Russakoff (2011). [PreK-3rd: Raising the Educational Performance of English Language Learners \(ELLs\)](#)
- Kristie Kauerz (2010). [PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle](#)
- Lisa Guernsey & Sara Mead, New America Foundation (2010). [A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education](#)
- New School Foundation & Foundation for Child Development (2010). [PreKindergarten - 3rd Grade: A New Beginning for American Education](#) (Eight-minute video)
- New America Foundation (2009). [Fighting Fade-Out Through PreK-3rd Reform](#) (Seven-minute video)
- Rima Shore (2009). [The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform](#)
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- Grantmakers for Education (GFE) (2007). [Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start](#)

Financing PreK-3rd

- Rima Shore (2009). [PreK-3rd: What is the Price Tag?](#)
- Lawrence O. Picus, Allan Odden & Michael Goetz (2009). [An Evidence-Based Approach to Estimating the National and State Costs of PreK-3rd](#)

Implementing PreK-3rd

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- Geoff Marietta (2010). [Lessons for PreK-3rd from Montgomery County Public Schools](#)
- Linda Sullivan-Dudzic, Donna K. Gearn, & Kelli Leavell (2010). [Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System](#)
- Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle & David A. Thomas (2009). [Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools](#)

Teacher Preparation/Professional Development

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- Foundation for Child Development (2007). [Teacher Education and PK Outcomes: Are We Asking the Right Questions?](#), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*
- Cynthia Rice & Jill McLaughlin, Association for the Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2007). [Providing Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2006). [Ready to Teach? Providing Children with the Teachers They Deserve](#)

Online PreK-3rd Resources

Leadership by Educators

- Geoff Marietta (2010). [PreK-3rd: How Superintendents Lead Change](#)
- Ruby Takanishi (2010). [PreK-Third Grade: A Paradigm Shift](#). *Children of 2020: Creating a Better Tomorrow*
- Stacie G. Goffin & Valora Washington (2007). [Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education](#)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2006). [Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results](#)

Federal Policy

- New America Foundation (ongoing). [The Early Ed Watch Blog](#)
- New America Foundation (2007). [Ten New Ideas for Early Education in the NCLB Reauthorization](#)
- Danielle Ewen & Hannah Matthews, Center for Law and Social Policy (2007). [Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era](#)

State Policy

- Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010). [Starting Strong in Washington State: Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories](#)
- Sara Mead (2009). [Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3rd Reform](#)
- Linda Jacobsen (2009). [On the Cusp in California: How PreK-3rd Strategies Could Improve Education in the Golden State](#)
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) (2008). [Promoting a Pre-K to Three Vision for Early Learning](#)
- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Seizing the Opportunity: Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts](#)
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295 Madison Avenue, 40th Floor
New York, NY 10017
(212) 867-5777 phone
(212) 867-5844 fax
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