Embrace the Pre-K-3 Early Learning Continuum

Leaders of effective Pre-K-3 communities know that a strong foundation in early learning sets the stage for future academic and personal achievement. Operating within a patchwork of early learning programs, funding streams, goals, standards and levels of quality, effective principals help their learning communities define a Pre-K-3 continuum that transcends the boundaries of preschool and elementary school to create a seamless learning experience for children from age three to grade three. This learning continuum includes prekindergarten, kindergarten and the primary grades—regardless of whether each of those grades exists within a school’s specific physical structure.

Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice

- Engage your learning community in understanding the importance of the early learning continuum and the transitions along it.
- Set expectations that the continuum of learning from age three to grade three is fundamental to your school’s mission.
- Expand the concept of "learning community" to include collaboration among external, as well as internal stakeholders.
- Articulate the long-term value of early learning and the benefit of inclusive early learning to parents and all learning community stakeholders.
- Align funding, resources and governance to support the Pre-K-3 framework.

Spotlight on Effective Practice

Nathan Hale Elementary School, Enfield, CT

Although Nathan Hale is a K-2 elementary school, Principal LeAnn Beaulieu works within her community to align curriculum, standards and assessments across Pre-K through grade three classrooms in Enfield, Connecticut.

To support these efforts, Principal Beaulieu and her staff have made it their mission to develop strong relationships with local Pre-K programs and receiving grade three through six elementary schools, often meeting throughout the year to examine best practices and areas for improvement. In particular, they aim to ensure that students are properly supported in their transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten and from grade three to grade three.

Each year, Principal Beaulieu meets with community Pre-K program directors to discuss the students who will be entering Nathan Hale's kindergarten class and to develop strategies around their individual education plans. These plans are based on the district-required school readiness checklists completed by all Pre-K teachers.

While the physical Pre-K and grade three classrooms are not housed under the same roof, Principal Beaulieu and the Nathan Hale staff recognize the importance of viewing education through the Pre-K-3 lens and supporting community and statewide efforts to align early education.

Connecticut has also taken a state approach to aligning the Birth to Five Early Learning and Developmental Domains with K-3 Standards, providing professional development opportunities for principals and public school leaders around the continuum.
Ensure Developmentally-Appropriate Teaching

Quality instruction has particular significance during the Pre-K-3 years, when children master foundational skills and concepts, develop attitudes toward school and form ideas about themselves as learners. Learning gaps emerge early, particularly among disadvantaged students. If not addressed early, these gaps can widen over the elementary grades.

Researchers argue that nothing is more important than ensuring that every child experiences quality teaching—grade by grade, year after year—over the entire Pre-K-3 continuum. Ensuring effective instruction for every student often means that effective leaders must help to create and implement inclusive practices—those that serve the needs of all students, with and without disabilities—such as flexible curricula, adaptive technologies, early childhood interventions and prevention strategies.

Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice

- Align ambitious standards, curriculum, instruction and age-appropriate assessments so they create a consistent framework for learning from age three to grade three.
- Provide a comprehensive curriculum inclusive of, but not limited to, language arts and math.
- Work with teachers and teacher leaders to develop an interactive, relevant and engaging early learning curriculum.
- Create professional communities of practice to empower teachers to learn from each other and to improve instruction.

Spotlight on Effective Practice

Wayne Township Preschool, Indianapolis, IN

Ensuring developmentally-appropriate teaching practices is important in the early grades, and even more so when working with students with special needs. Wayne Township Preschool in Indianapolis, Indiana, is home to a diverse student body where 62 percent of students receive special education services. Principal Kathryn Raasch and her staff strive to provide a quality early education to all of the school's students.

Wayne Township Preschool serves children ages three to five and offers both childcare classrooms as well as a comprehensive Pre-K program. Students are placed in one of two types of Pre-K classroom settings dependent upon the level of support needed to be successful learners. Students needing a higher level of support participate in development classes while students able to learn more independently participate in community classes. Following the concept of least restrictive environments, the learning environment changes along with a child's learning needs.

In the development classes, the abilities of the students range. Some require limited special education services while others require significant supports. Higher functioning special education students are directed to the community classes, as they may just need speech and language supports or the assistance of an aide.

Principal Raasch sees her role at the school as an “advocate for high-quality early education” and a “champion for children three to five.” She feels that remediation is not always the answer but that early intervention services and parental engagement programs can best help to identify the ways that a child needs to be supported.
Provide Personalized Learning Environments

The most supportive and effective learning environments create a welcoming physical and emotional climate that is safe, nurturing and developmentally-appropriate. Children in such environments are regarded as learners with individual needs, each with different skills and interests, working at their own pace, practicing and refining as much as they like, and moving to mastery of different competencies at different rates. This individualized learning is also known as personalized learning. Active learning in personalized environments requires effective utilization of a variety of learning tools, including the effective application of technology to the curriculum, in ways that add relevance and sense-making to children’s learning. Research indicates that technology can enhance student engagement, persistence and the development of a variety of emergent literacy skills.

Spotlight on Effective Practice

Cumberland Trace Elementary School, Bowling Green, KY

Principal Mary Evans and the Pre-K-6 Cumberland Trace Elementary School work hard to improve supportive and creative learning opportunities for all students through the use of technology and digital learning opportunities. Principal Evans and her staff see blended learning as a way to help empower students to become responsible for their own academic and personal learning.

At Cumberland Trace, blended learning is a combination of teacher instruction and supplemental technology that is meant to “reach and teach all students effectively.” Digital opportunities allow students to be their own “leader of lessons” and provide differentiated and adaptive learning structures to meet individual needs.

Younger students utilize technology in the development of their basic skills, while the older grades focus on creating, researching and developing projects. Students also use classroom iPads and laptops to share assignments via Google Drive and receive instant feedback from their teachers and colleagues.

Principal Evans sees blended learning as a necessity for Cumberland Trace, as it “is the way children learn today,” and she works to model the use of technology in the school by setting expectations and celebrating the successes of the students.

Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice

- Promote environments that blend face-to-face and technology enhanced learning and that are rigorous, developmentally-appropriate and support individual learning.
- Facilitate the use of technology tools for learning and provide instructional leadership in schools on how to use technology effectively.
- Support instructional use of appropriate technology and interactive media to support learning and development—through work and play—in school, at home and in community settings.
- Integrate technology directly into curriculum, student learning and outcomes.
- Help teachers develop their understanding and ability to use technology effectively to individualize and differentiate instruction for each student.
Use Multiple Measures of Assessment To Guide Student Learning Growth

Effective principals know that the goal of assessment must be to improve teaching and learning.

Research shows that teachers spend one-quarter to one-third of their professional time on assessment-related activities. Still, most do so without the know-how and understanding of how to assess students effectively. Thus, the assessment literacy of educators, defined as understanding the purposes and use of various kinds of assessments for learning and growth, is an area of interest and a professional development need for educators and all members of a Pre-K-3 learning community.

Perhaps most illusive in Pre-K-3 learning communities is assessment literacy, an understanding of how to use assessment effectively for our earliest learners.

**Spotlight on Effective Practice**

Henry L. Cottrell Elementary School, Monmouth, ME

A proficiency-based approach to demonstrating learning is at the center of the learning environment here. Teachers and students work collaboratively to learn concepts and processes laid out in a continuum of learning targets across subject areas and grades. Students let teachers know when they are ready to demonstrate proficiency in a learning target. This collaborative approach to learning “takes the secrecy out of student grades and progress” and celebrates everyday learning, according to third grade teacher Jana Armstrong.

Assessment is an ongoing process at Henry L. Cottrell. Teachers introduce a new learning target through direct instruction. Students work in small groups, individually, with technology or with the teacher to build understanding and proficiency in a particular learning target. Regular formative assessments indicate the student’s level of proficiency—the goal being to demonstrating complex understanding of targeted ideas and concepts. When a student has demonstrated this level of proficiency he takes a summative assessment.

Through the process, students have voice and choice in how they learn a target, and how the target is assessed. Teacher and student share ownership in the strategies they adopt to learn and assess each learning target. Teachers note that they feel differently about student success, or lack of success, in their classrooms. “We became so responsible for their learning,” said one teacher.

**Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice**

- Build understanding throughout the learning community of the various purposes and appropriate uses of different student assessments to improve teaching and learning.
- Support teachers in using multiple forms of assessments, along with observation, portfolios and anecdotal records, to guide student learning and growth all along the Pre-K-3 continuum.
- Support open and collaborative discussions about assessment data with parents and community.
- Share information about program effectiveness among schools and other providers.
Build Professional Capacity Across the Learning Community

Effective principals build collaborative working environments that support the professional growth of all who work in them. They know that in order to improve the learning of children, every member of the learning community must be continually learning, including all teachers—and principals themselves.

In order to ensure that every child receives a high-quality Pre-K-3 education, principals and the entire learning community must have the will and capability to implement it. While many principals across the country want to add and align Pre-K 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 Pre-K-3 work.

Most principal knowledge of child development and the Pre-K-3 learning continuum remains largely self-taught.

**Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice**

- Build principal professional knowledge about what is age- and developmentally-appropriate across the continuum.
- Support ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers all along the continuum.
- Support professional learning communities that focus on authentic work.

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**Spotlight on Effective Practice**

**Build Professional Capacity Across the Learning Community**

Hawaii P-3 Initiative, Honolulu, HI

The state-wide Hawaii P-3 Initiative is dedicated to establishing and supporting local partnerships that promote a cohesive and aligned continuum of services for children birth through age eight. The Initiative is a specific program of the Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education, which is led by the Executive Office of Early Learning, the Hawaii State Department of Education and the University of Hawaii System.

Through funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation, the Samuel N. and Mary Castle Foundation and the Kamehameha Schools, the Hawaii P-3 Initiative supports five demonstration sites across the islands. These sites develop a “spider web” of early childhood and elementary school partnerships focused on the goal of improving access to quality educational experiences and supporting students to read on grade level by third grade.

All demonstration sites focus on seven areas of improvement: leadership in literacy; standards, curriculum and assessment; instruction; teacher professional development; comprehensive early learning services; family and school partnerships; and data.

The Hawaii P-3 Initiative also supports a PK-3 Post-Graduate Certificate Program that was developed in collaboration with the University of Hawaii Manoa College of Education’s Department of Curriculum in response to the ongoing professional development needs of educators. To receive the certificate, participating educators must complete 15 credits of early childhood coursework and a professional portfolio.
Make Schools a Hub of Pre-K-3 Learning for Families and Communities

Effective principals work with families, prekindergarten programs and community organizations to build strong Pre-K-3 linkages. Linking early learning and elementary learning can help children and families experience smooth transitions and continuity of practice across early care and elementary schools settings so that children thrive all through the early elementary years. To achieve this goal, effective principals engage a number of partners in meeting the social, emotional, academic and physical needs of their students and their families. Such connections are not all that common, but effective principals see them as a natural extension of a school’s work.

By recognizing the important role of these multiple players, effective principals redefine a child’s readiness for kindergarten as an issue of child, family and school readiness. This requires that principals help their learning communities shift their thinking, dialogue and practice to support all three components. Foremost, principals must create a school culture in which parents and community members feel a sense of belonging and know that they help to form a child’s learning network.

**Spotlight on Effective Practice**

Make Your School a Hub of Pre-K-3 Learning for Families and Communities

Ericka Guynes, Earl Boyles Elementary School, Portland, OR

As principal of the Pre-K-5 Earl Boyles Elementary School, Ericka Guynes has continued to build relevancy around the importance of integrating early learning into K-12 education and developing meaningful opportunities of collaboration for both families and the broader community. In partnership with the Children’s Institute and the Early Works Initiative, Principal Guynes and her staff have created a clear vision for what they call a “seamless system” between the early learning program and the K-5 classrooms.

In the early stages of planning, Principal Guynes conducted a community needs assessment with Portland State University to determine gaps in services, identify parental priority areas and develop short- and long-term strategies for implementation. The assessment helped the Earl Boyles staff to establish a common vision around what early learning looks like in a K-12 system and to engage early childhood experts throughout the process.

With the help of a parents group, Earl Boyles is now in the process of creating an Early Learning Wing/Neighborhood Center at the school, which will serve as a community-centered hub of supports, resources and information focused on helping children to arrive better prepared for kindergarten.

**Strategies/indicators of the competency in practice**

- Develop a welcoming environment and sense of belonging and cultivate a shared responsibility for children’s learning from age three to grade three.
- Provide meaningful transitions between preschool and elementary school.
- Develop out-of-school and summer learning opportunities for children from age three to grade three.
- Blend and braid funding to maximize resource opportunities.