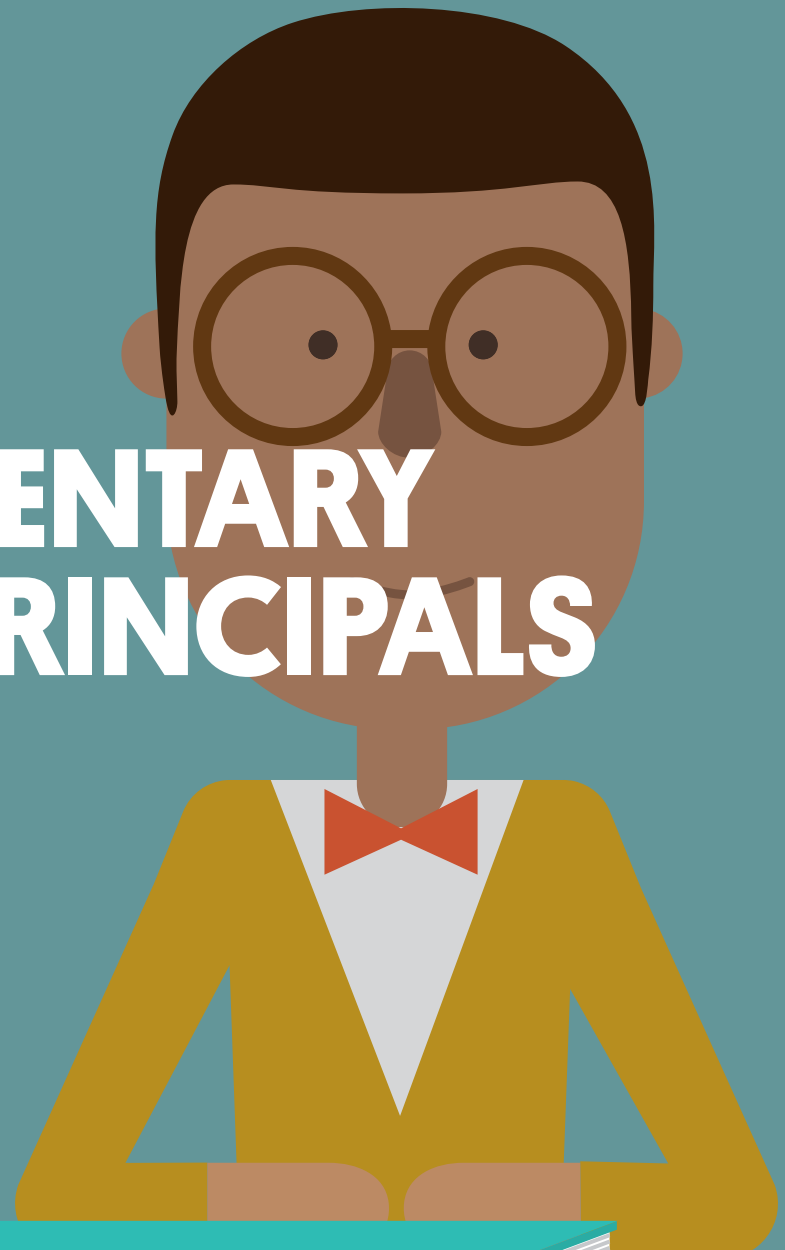


AARON LOEWENBERG

# WHY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS MATTER



Why Principals Matter

MAY 2016

## About the Authors



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## **Contents**

Introduction	2
Elementary School Principals Should Be Early Education Leaders	5
Notes	10

# INTRODUCTION

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A principal walks into a kindergarten classroom as part of her weekly observation. She sees a group of students huddled around a sand table. The five-year-olds are burying and digging up plastic letters of the alphabet with plastic shovels. Other students are lounging in the class library, flipping through books and commenting on their favorite pictures. Another group is taking turns pretending to be firefighters and police officers, dressed in kid-sized costumes. The classroom teacher is engaged with a small group in a math game involving whiteboards and a pair of oversized rubber dice.

What the principal takes away from this informal observation is dependent on her level of comfort with early childhood education and her

interest in the math game? Does she understand why this classroom may look different than what she sees in second grade?

Principals play a central role in supporting teaching quality and student learning, acting both as instructional leaders by conducting teacher evaluations and as operational leaders by working to build a productive school culture that encourages the retention of high-quality staff.<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian McNulty, principals alone can account for 25 percent of a school's impact on student learning and have the second largest in-school impact on student achievement after teachers.<sup>2</sup> Highly effective principals, as measured by academic achievement

**Until recently, principals have been largely overlooked, with most policy attention focused on improving teacher quality.**

understanding of early childhood development and instructional strategies. Does she see pretend play as a learning opportunity or a distraction? Does she know what to look for in children's language and interactions? Is she aware of the subtle techniques that the teacher is employing to keep children

compared to similarly situated schools, can raise student achievement by an additional two to seven months of learning per school year.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, principals have been largely overlooked, with most policy attention focused on improving teacher quality. Today, principals are increasingly

being recognized as “the lynchpin for high-quality implementation of education reforms.”<sup>4</sup>

As more attention turns to rethinking principal roles and improving principal pre-service preparation, licensing, in-service development, and evaluation, it is important for new policies to consider specific aspects of early learning. This is more urgent than ever, as there is increasing momentum across the country to expand pre-K. Many of these new classrooms are located in public elementary schools. Research shows that access to high-quality early education experiences can lead to significant short- and long-term benefits for children, especially those from low-income families and those who are dual language learners.<sup>5</sup> Children who experience high-quality early education are less likely to repeat grades, need special education services, or become incarcerated later in life, and are more likely to graduate from high school, own a home, and have higher lifetime earnings.<sup>6</sup>

With public pre-K programs expanding across the country, there is increased interest in understanding why achievement scores among students who attend pre-K and those who do not often converge by the end of third grade. While students who attend pre-K generally enter kindergarten better prepared than those who do not, the benefits gained in pre-K have been reported to “fade out” as early as the end of kindergarten.<sup>7</sup> High-quality learning experiences, environments, and instruction, beginning at birth and extending up through third grade, build the academic and social-emotional foundation that prepares children for success throughout their schooling and beyond. We, and others, posit that only with a well-built staircase of learning up the early childhood continuum, can children’s gains made at the end of the pre-K years be sustained through early elementary school.<sup>8</sup>

Elementary school principals play a critical role in making this possible, overseeing the

## In Pursuit of a Better Understanding of Principals and Their Roles as Early Education Leaders

New America’s Early and Elementary Education Policy team was interested in understanding principals’ perceptions of what should take place in pre-K and early grade classrooms and if and how they see their role as early education leaders. To that end, New America commissioned the FDR Group, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm, to convene five focus groups around the country with elementary school principals to explore views about and experiences with PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, teachers, and classrooms.

The focus groups took place between February and April 2015, one each in San Francisco, New York, Minneapolis, Austin, and Orlando. The geographically-diverse groups answered questions on the staffing and hiring of teachers, the transition between pre-K and kindergarten, student assessment, professional development, and the role of the principal. The first two focus groups, in

San Francisco and New York, also included directors of early childhood programs in order to dig into the relationships between public school and non-public school programs. Specific examples of questions posed include: “What matters most when it comes to hiring a new PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher or placing a teacher in an early grade classroom? What do you expect a child to know at the end of kindergarten or first grade? When it comes to literacy assessment, what kind of guidance do you give or training do you seek out for your staff? Do you see value in making connections between pre-K and K–3?”

In total, 46 educators participated, including 38 principals and two assistant principals in public elementary schools, plus six directors of pre-K programs (public and private). The FDR Group’s report on our focus groups can be found at:

[www.newamerica.org/education-policy/principals-corner](http://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/principals-corner)

implementation of reforms affecting the early grades that require high-quality instruction and leadership. State-funded pre-K programs located within traditional elementary schools are becoming a reality for a growing number of children around the country, as more governors embrace the funding of early childhood education as a worthwhile investment.<sup>9</sup> An increasing number of states have passed third-grade reading laws that require districts to intervene with struggling readers starting in kindergarten.<sup>10</sup> And a growing number of states are implementing kindergarten

readiness assessments that are designed both to measure children's school readiness and to tailor future instruction.<sup>11</sup> Principals are increasingly expected to provide accurate, frequent evaluation and feedback to all of their teaching staff. More of these professionals are kindergarten teachers, as the percentage of kindergartners enrolled in full-day programs has nearly tripled between 1977 and 2013.<sup>12</sup> The challenge of implementing these various reforms in ways that respect the unique needs and challenges of early learners illustrates the need for principals who have early education expertise.



# ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS SHOULD BE EARLY EDUCATION LEADERS

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In order for elementary school principals to help construct the staircase of learning from early education up through the later grades, they must fulfill several roles simultaneously. Successful school leaders establish a PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> culture and continuum within their schools, build relationships with families and other community early education providers, and ensure effective, developmentally-appropriate teaching and assessment within their schools.

## **Establish a PreK–3rd Culture and Continuum**

Elementary school principals must foster a school culture that values early education. This means viewing pre-K, when it is in place, and kindergarten (see box on valuing kindergarten) as fundamental parts of a school’s mission rather than as separate entities disconnected from the first-through-fifth grade experience.

## **Valuing Kindergarten**

While the popular conception of elementary schools consists of a K–5 continuum, kindergarten in practice stands apart from the other grades in many states when it comes to attendance policies, funding levels, and length of day. As of 2014, only 11 states and the District of Columbia require districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs, and only 15 states and DC require kindergarten attendance at all.<sup>13</sup> Many states only provide funding for a half day of kindergarten, meaning that districts wishing to provide a full day of learning must use local funds

to pay for it or charge a portion to the families of those who attend full-day K. While the number of students attending full-day kindergarten has nearly tripled since the late 1970s, as of 2013, only about 77 percent of kindergartners attend full-day K.<sup>14</sup> This data point says nothing about how long the day is or whether parents are paying to extend that day. Principals need to advocate for kindergarten to be recognized within the district as a grade level that is as important as first, second, or third grade.



## Successful school leaders establish a PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> culture and continuum within their schools, build relationships with families and other community early education providers, and ensure effective, developmentally-appropriate teaching and assessment within their schools.

To send a clear message that pre-K and kindergarten teachers<sup>15</sup> and students are as important as those in other grades, principals should take concrete steps to integrate them into the school community. For example, pre-K and kindergarten educators should participate in all professional development opportunities that are offered to the elementary school staff, and early education students should participate in school-wide events. Pre-K and kindergarten should not be viewed as an “add-on,” but as an integrated part of the elementary school. Principals should also consider the type of specialized professional development that pre-K and early grade teachers might need.

### **Build Relationships with Families and Other Early Education Providers**

Many students come to kindergarten from pre-K programs taking place outside of public school settings. Good principals develop relationships with typical feeder Head Start programs, child care centers, and other relevant entities. Developing these relationships can help smooth the transition for children into kindergarten by leading to opportunities for information sharing; joint professional development; and planning and alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies. Research shows that kindergartners whose teachers and principals engage in these practices have better academic outcomes and higher rates of parent-initiated school involvement.<sup>16</sup>

Principals must also take steps to build trusting relationships with families and think about family

engagement as more than literacy nights and parent newsletters and conferences. Principals have the responsibility to develop a welcoming environment for parents and a sense of shared responsibility. Studies have consistently found a positive relationship between parental involvement in schools and student academic performance.<sup>17</sup> Because of their awareness of the positive effects of parental involvement in school, effective principals reach out to parents for regular communication. Effective principals focus not only on communication with parents inside the school walls, but they also encourage teachers to make meaningful connections with families through the use of home visits. Research suggests a positive correlation between home visits and student academic achievement.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ensure Effective, Developmentally Appropriate Teaching and Assessment**

Since teachers are the most important in-school factor when it comes to student achievement, effective elementary school principals make the promotion of effective, developmentally appropriate teaching a top priority.<sup>19</sup> This means taking the time to visit classrooms, observe teachers, and provide useful feedback in order to improve the level of instruction students receive. Given that early grade teachers may also lack preparation in child development and instructional strategies appropriate for young children,<sup>20</sup> it is important for principals to ensure PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> teachers have access to opportunities to deepen their knowledge about how young children learn best.



Effective school leaders also take steps to ensure that professional development takes place within a collaborative culture that leaves plenty of time for shared planning time and discussions about data, both within and across grade levels. These leaders know that classroom instruction is most effectively improved through a process of collective inquiry and discussion, rather than through the efforts of teachers working in isolation. Unfortunately, in the era of test-based accountability, principals face significant incentives to turn attention away from instructional improvement in the early grades in exchange for a greater emphasis on the later grades that are subject to standardized tests.<sup>22</sup> Some principals are able to resist these immediate test-based incentives because they understand that high-quality instruction in the earliest grades sets the foundation for academic achievement that is manifested in later standardized test scores .

One important role for principals is to help teachers develop an understanding of the proper role of assessment in the early grades.<sup>23</sup> Effective principals know that the ultimate goal of assessment is to improve instruction and student learning. It is important for these leaders to understand that

**Some principals are able to resist these immediate test-based incentives because they understand that high-quality instruction in the earliest grades sets the foundation for academic achievement that is manifested in later standardized test scores .**

assessment for younger children looks very different than assessment in the later grades. Early childhood assessments should cover multiple domains and take place over a period of time and within the context of daily activities.<sup>24</sup> When school principals are aware of the unique characteristics of early childhood assessment, they are better able to support their teachers in assessment and data literacy.

### **More Advanced Preparation Needed for Elementary School Principals**

Many principals have no elementary teaching experience, much less pre-K teaching experience.

## **What is Developmentally Appropriate Teaching?**

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in order to practice developmentally appropriate teaching, early childhood practitioners must consider three areas of knowledge: what is known about child development and learning, what is known about each child as an individual, and what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live. A teacher practicing in a developmentally appropriate manner will think about what children of the age and developmental status in his classroom are typically like, examine each individual child's

unique strengths and weaknesses, and, finally, consider each child within the context of her family, community, and culture. Developmentally appropriate teachers understand that all the domains of development and learning—physical, social and emotional, and cognitive—are important and interrelated. These teachers understand that children develop best when they have secure, positive relationships with the adults in their lives. Developmentally appropriate teaching incorporates play as an important vehicle for promoting self-regulation, cooperation, and social competence.<sup>21</sup>

While some who become elementary school leaders recognize the potential value of pre-K, many principals understand less about how to realize that potential or how to follow it up with a strong, coordinated, and connected K–3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning experience. In fact, a recent survey of new principals found that only one in five felt well-trained in instructional methods for early education. This is despite the fact that a little over half of the principals said their schools house pre-K programs.<sup>25</sup>

In order for principals to serve as effective early education leaders, they need a deep understanding of early childhood development, PreK–3<sup>rd</sup> grade content, and appropriate instructional practices and learning environments. Yet, only one state requires that early childhood education be part of

prospective principals' preparation.<sup>26</sup> As of 2014, Illinois includes early childhood content and field experience in its principal licensing requirements.<sup>27</sup> In order to ensure that principals are knowledgeable about the unique nature of early education more states should make early childhood education part of preparation for prospective principals.

*This is the first of six briefs released in spring 2016. The other five briefs are: A False Dichotomy: Elementary Principals on Academics and Play, Tradeoffs: Hiring and Staffing in the Early Grades, Connecting Pre-K and the Early Grades: Principals on Transitions, Leading for the Early Years: Principals' Reflections on the Need for Better Preparation, and Bringing It All Together: Elementary Principals are Key to Strong PreK-3rd Grade Classrooms.*



## Notes

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<sup>13</sup> Institute of Education Sciences, “Types of State and District Requirements for Kindergarten Entrance and Attendance, by State: 2014,” Table 5.3, State Education Reforms, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5\\_3.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp).

<sup>14</sup> *Full-Day Kindergarten: Indicators on Children and Youth* (Bethesda, MD: ChildTrends, February 2015), <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=full-day-kindergarten>.

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<sup>27</sup> Debra Baron and Alicia Haller, *Redesigning Principal Preparation and Development for the Next Generation: Lessons from Illinois* (Normal, IL: Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University), [http://education.illinoisstate.edu/csep/news/redesigning\\_principal\\_preparation\\_and\\_development\\_for\\_the\\_next\\_generation.pdf](http://education.illinoisstate.edu/csep/news/redesigning_principal_preparation_and_development_for_the_next_generation.pdf).



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