P-3 in
Principal Preparation

Leveraging School Leadership
to Improve Early Learning and the Early Grades

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NATIONAL
P 3 C E N T E R

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that 4th grade reading and math differences based on race, socio-economic status, English Learner status, and disability status have improved minimally since the turn of the 21st century. Given that these achievement gaps largely persist throughout high school, addressing the opportunity gaps that exist prior to 4th grade is a core issue of equity to be addressed by the field.

To address these opportunity and subsequent achievement gaps, this paper puts forward a call to action to infuse P-3 (pre-school through 3rd grade) leadership into the nation's school leader preparation programs at scale.

Our vision is that:

All of the nation's elementary schools are led by principals knowledgeable about the science of young children's learning and development, skilled in creating a school climate that nurtures the unique aspects of high-quality teaching and learning across P-3, and dedicated to meaningful engagement with families and community-based early care and education (ECE) programs.

This vision stems from an intersection of two fields of research, policy, and practice – P-3 and school leadership. Evidence from both fields highlights the promise of this work. **Research shows that:**

» **Sustained focus on ensuring children experience high-quality instruction, instructional alignment, and better-quality classrooms year-after-year from pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade leads to increased proficiency on state tests and substantial closing of achievement gaps.**

» **Replacing a below-average elementary school principal with an above-average principal can result in an additional 2.9 months of math learning and 2.7 months of reading learning each year for students in the school. Adding these effects across four years of K-3 means that some children would make up more than a full school year's worth of learning.**

Because elementary principals have proven impact on issues of instructional and classroom quality across early learning and the early grades, we see compelling reason to link P-3 and school leadership. To accomplish our vision at scale requires engaging the systems that prepare, develop, and support principals.

Possibilities and Tensions in Effective P-3 Leadership Development at Scale

Infusing P-3 into principal preparation and development systems can potentially influence the vast majority of the nation's young students. In 2021, about 50% of 4-year-olds attended pre-k, and 86% of 5- to 8-year-olds attended grades K-3 in a public school. Notably, comprehensive P-3 approaches sustain meaningful partnerships among schools and community-based ECE programs that serve children outside of public school in community-based preschool, child care, and the federal Head Start program, thus influencing even more than the 50% of children who attend school-base pre-k.

While exemplars of P-3 approaches can be found, they are not abundant; policy and practice do not currently support strong P-3 efforts at scale in school districts, nor preparation of principals for P-3 leadership at scale. To realize the promise of this work, tensions will need to be addressed, each providing opportunity to improve the alignment of research, policy, and practice to support young learners.

While the full report identifies several such tensions, three illustrations include:

Tensions in P-3 policy and practice: P-3 work often focuses on pre-k, short-changing the need for subsequent, year-after-year quality learning opportunities that align with the science of young children's learning and development. This tension is fueled by the siloed nature of policy, funding, organization, and management for pre-k and K-12 at federal, state, and district levels. Effective P-3 attends equally to each grade level across the P-3 continuum and strives to create continuity, coherence, and quality across pre-k and K-3 , establishing a new first level of school for all children.

Tensions in school leadership: National school leadership standards have gained traction in school districts nationwide, but they lack specificity around early learning and the early grades. Absent meaningful P-3 standards to guide preparation and practice, elementary principals' practices can inadvertently undermine student success.

Tensions in principal preparation: National standards for school leadership and for school leader preparation are widely used in principal preparation programs, but they are virtually silent on leading early learning and the early grades.

Spanning Boundaries

Complex systems require siloes of expertise to focus attention and resources on specialized areas. For example, it is critical to have researchers in early childhood education, in school leadership, in principal preparation, in diverse learners, in literacy, and so on. Siloes become problematic when weak communication and insufficient collaboration exist among them, creating barriers to addressing challenges that do not fall neatly within any one of them. P-3 education is one such example, and a particularly important one because of the significance of the P-3 years in a child's learning and development.

To achieve the vision of effective P-3 leadership at scale will require boundary-spanning work. Boundary-spanning theory appears in the literature for both educational improvement in general and P-3 in particular. We intend this Call to Action to serve as a boundary-spanning document to enable actors on different sides of boundaries to engage each other in dialogue about preparing and developing principals for P-3 leadership.

Figure 1. Drivers of Change in P-3 Leadership
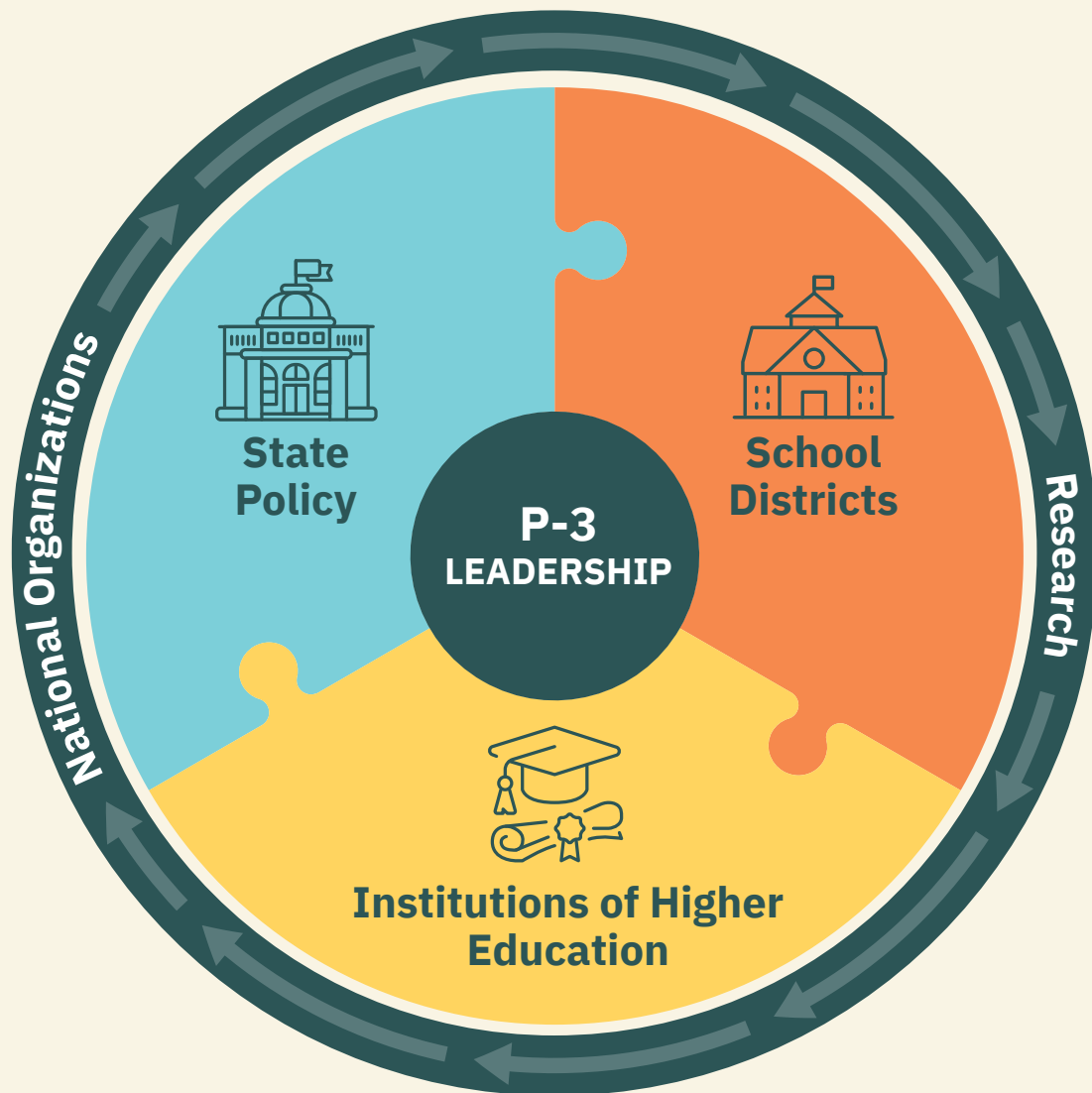
To accomplish the vision of preparing and developing P-3 principals at scale will require specific effort in five domains (see Figure 1). The first three drivers (#1, 2, and 3) represent the most proximal influences on principal preparation and development. The last two drivers (#4 and 5) represent potent influences that can jumpstart, bolster, and sustain focused effort on this work. Together, though, the five drivers represent the ecosystem of changemakers.

1. **State policy** supports research-based practices in developing effective P-3 leaders at scale.

2. **Institutions of higher education** and other approved principal preparation programs integrate P-3 goals and content throughout their policies and practices.

3. **School districts** support the preparation and development of effective P-3 leaders, in both policy and practice.

4. **Research** provides a strong foundation for the continuous improvement of effective P-3 leadership policy and practice at scale.

5. **National organizations** that influence education leaders' development endorse P-3 leadership as essential to equity-focused school improvement.

Each of these drivers require specific strategies (see Figure 2). The organizational capacity to work across institutional boundaries to implement such strategies will be challenging, and strong leadership at all levels will be important. This Call to Action provides a robust overview of the possibilities that exist, and advocates for a systemic approach to change that will alter the very ecosystem of school leadership.

Figure 2. Driver Diagram

AIM

Research, policy and practice are aligned at the state, higher education, and school district levels to develop school leaders who lead effective P-3 learning at scale.

PRIMARY DRIVERS	KEY STRATEGIES
State policy supports research-based practices in developing effective P-3 leaders at scale.	1. Use state authority to include P-3 leadership proficiency in standards for principal licensure and credentialing. 2. Use state authority to change approval standards and processes for principal preparation programs, ensuring orientation to P-3 leadership. 3. Require or support the use of frameworks with P-3 leadership criteria for elementary principal evaluations and formative assessments. 4. Create P-20 collaboration mechanisms where they do not already exist. 5. Foster P-3 leadership approaches within and among school districts and IHEs.
Institutions of higher education and other approved principal preparation programs integrate P-3 goals and content throughout their policies and practices.	1. Create internal partnerships among faculty who specialize in principal preparation, early childhood development, and early grades teaching and pedagogy. 2. Partner with school districts to incorporate P-3 exemplars of practice, curricular modules, and field-based experiences into principal preparation programs. 3. Partner with the state to create and deliver micro-credentials specific to P-3. 4. Collaborate to build or augment existing networks of IHEs engaged in P-3 leadership development.
Policies and practices within **school districts** support the preparation and development of effective P-3 leaders.	1. Build system-wide commitment to P-3 by explicitly integrating it into district strategic plans. 2. Partner with IHEs to develop and maintain a continuum of growth for P-3 leadership development before and after program completion. 3. Engage with other districts to share learning about systemic support of P-3 leaders.
Research provides a strong foundation for the continuous improvement of effective P-3 leadership policy and practice at scale.	1. Track current P-3 leadership preparation and development practices and identify opportunities to expand P-3 principal leadership at scale. 2. Establish research-practice partnerships between IHEs and school districts to conduct continuous improvement research on P-3 leadership development. 3. Expand and deepen research on the impact of P-3 leadership on improved outcomes for P-12 students.
National organizations that influence education leaders' development endorse P-3 leadership as essential to equity-focused school improvement.	1. Engage national education organizations and alliances to formally recognize P-3 in their standards and policy guidance. 2. Engage national organizations that prioritize K-12 leadership to address P-3. 3. Invest in national networks to focus on P-3 leadership policy levers. 4. Activate federal policy levers to explicitly address P-3 leadership.