



Leading Learning Communities

A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)

2ND EDITION

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Elementary School
Principals

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Authorship of this publication was supported by generous grants to the National P-3 Center from the Gates Foundation and the Heising-Simons Foundation.

Suggested Citation: Kauerz, K., Branch, G., Morrison, L., & Samuel, A. (2026). *Leading learning communities: A principal's guide to early learning and the early grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)*. (2nd ed.) National Association of Elementary School Principals and National P-3 Center.

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ISBN 978-0-939327-07-2



Dr. Ruby Takanishi



Dr. L. Earl Franks

Dedication

This work stands on the shoulders of giants.

This guide is dedicated to the lasting memory of **Dr. Ruby Takanishi** whose vision, passion, and tenacity sparked a national movement for Pre-K–3rd grade education. Her legacy serves as the foundation for the work contained in these pages.

We also dedicate this work to **Dr. L. Earl Franks**. Throughout his leadership of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2017–2026), he championed the belief that school leaders hold the power to create truly transformational learning experiences for every child.

Both Dr. Takanishi and Dr. Franks lived their convictions—investing, acting, mentoring, and leading with unwavering purpose.

This book is committed to carrying that mission forward.

The Six Competencies



Competency 1

Enact a Pre-K-3rd Grade Vision

Competency 2

Understand Brain Development and Child Development

Competency 3

Foster Partnerships with Families

Competency 4

Build Professional Capacity

Competency 5

Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments

Competency 6

Promote Continuous Improvement

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Overview of the Six Competencies	9
Competency 1: Enact a Pre-K-3rd Grade Vision	11
Spotlight: Hawthorne Elementary (Everett, WA)	19
Competency 2: Understand Brain Development and Child Development	20
Spotlight: Sayre Language Academy (Chicago, IL)	28
Competency 3: Foster Partnerships with Families	29
Spotlight: Lanakila Elementary (Honolulu, HI)	37
Competency 4: Build Professional Capacity	38
Spotlight: Dr. Catherine Ellison-Rosa Parks Early Education School (Mattapan, MA)	47
Competency 5: Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments.....	48
Spotlight: Payne Elementary (Washington, DC)	57
Competency 6: Promote Continuous Improvement.....	58
Spotlight: Shoshoni Elementary (Shoshoni, WY)	66
Glossary of Key Terms.....	67
Methodology	68
Principals' Advisory Panel.....	69
Thought Leaders.....	69
NAESP Board of Directors	70
References.....	71
Endnotes	76

Introduction

Every child deserves the chance to thrive in school. Yet decades of data, now sharpened by pandemic-era evidence, show widening gaps in literacy, math, attendance, and well-being of young children. The patterns correlate with family income, race, home language, disability status, immigration history, and geography; and they persist from Pre-K through the early grades. This guide is anchored in describing a Pre-K–3rd grade vision where every child is provided opportunities to succeed. It outlines the competencies maintained by school leaders (and others) who embrace such a vision and do the work to make it a reality.

Three things are now well established in the research. First, what a child currently knows and can do reflects the opportunities that child has received; it is not a ceiling on what the child can learn. Second, in addition to their families, the adults that young children encounter in Pre-K through 3rd grade — their teachers, principals, and support staff — play a critical role in shaping children's sense of belonging, their identity as learners, and their long-term academic path. Third, the traditional design of elementary schools — the curriculum, pacing, assessment protocols, and classroom environments that most schools still deliver — is often poorly matched to the science of learning and development for young children.

Most scholars agree that the quality of instruction and support children receive in the years prior to 4th grade is fundamentally important, and young children learn best when schools organize around strong relationships, language-rich interactions, high-quality curriculum, and playful learning.¹ When schools are built that way, more children thrive.

When they are not, children do not thrive and the costs fall unevenly.² What makes the reality of this vision across both Pre-K and K–3rd grade uniquely challenging is that the divides between Pre-K and K–3 are both literal and conceptual.³ Even if an elementary campus has Pre-K classrooms, they may be physically separate from the other grade levels due to licensing requirements. Principals may not supervise the Pre-K teachers, and the teachers themselves may be certified and compensated differently from their K–3 counterparts. Pre-K and K–3 may be accountable to different sets of learning standards, sit in different departments within the school district's organizational chart, and receive funding from entirely different government agencies. Pre-K and K–3 educators are often members of different professional organizations and attend different conferences, resulting in few, if any, opportunities to learn together.

As instructional leaders, elementary principals sit at the center of Pre-K–3rd grade work. They have the authority to examine how their school is currently organized, who it benefits, and who it does not. They also have the authority to change practices, programs, and policies so that every child has a real opportunity to succeed, regardless of zip code, home language, or learning profile. This is not a matter of adding intervention programs at the edges. A Pre-K–3rd grade vision requires rethinking the coherence of the system itself: how resources are allocated to support which children, how families are involved, and how the adults in the building are engaged and supported to build every child's capacity. Leading Pre-K–3rd grade well, therefore, means two things: removing the barriers that stand between children and full participation in high-quality learning year after year, and redesigning the system so it aligns with how young children develop.

The National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) first published *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities* in 2005. Since then, subsequent editions have broadened the focus to explicitly include the full Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. The authors have clarified that Pre-K–3rd grade is neither a distinct initiative nor a separate learning community, but a mindset and approach that inform all aspects of elementary education. This guide is intended to provide standards, research-validated evidence, and practical strategies that can be used by elementary principals, principal supervisors in school districts, and other central office leaders and staff who care about and support the teaching and learning of young children.

How this Guide Supports All Young Students

Since this guide was last updated in 2021, the country has faced the enduring impacts of a global pandemic, along with significant political divisions that have shifted priorities for public services and investments. Through it all, elementary principals continue to show up every day with the goal of supporting the teaching and learning of *all* young children, including those who come from a broad array of family backgrounds, those with disabilities, and those who speak languages other than English. To this end, this guide is rooted in three central priorities:

1. Recognizing and supporting the variety of strengths and needs of each and every young student.
2. Believing that all children hold great potential for success and can be held to high standards of achievement.
3. Acting upon the research-validated knowledge that academic achievement happens when students develop not only foundational knowledge in reading, math, and science, but also social skills, self-regulation, and habits for learning.

What Does “Pre-K–3rd Grade” Mean?

Pre-K–3rd grade represents both a series of grade levels and a frame for thinking about school improvement that embeds knowledge of the science of learning and development *specific to young children* across early learning and the early grades. Schools that meaningfully embrace Pre-K–3rd grade reflect specialized knowledge of *what* young children should learn and *how* they should experience instruction. Pre-K–3rd grade schools recognize that investing in high-quality teaching and learning during these early years builds essential foundational skills that students rely on as they progress through middle and high school, and into college, careers, and life. By building skills during the formative early childhood years, schools and districts can focus on closing achievement



gaps *before* 3rd grade. Doing so pushes better-prepared students into the upper grades, decreasing the amount of remediation needed and forcing middle and high schools to increase their own rigor to meet students' needs and capabilities.⁴ In short, Pre-K–3rd grade is a *prevention-oriented* strategy in education, preventing achievement gaps early before they solidify into a culture of low expectations for some populations of children.

In public education, “Pre-K” is often understood to define the school-based classrooms that serve children in the year prior to kindergarten. These Pre-K classrooms may be funded directly by the district, the county, or the state, or funded through special education. **This guide uses a more expansive definition of Pre-K to also include the wide variety of pre-kindergarten settings that may or may not be co-located within an elementary school — including Head Start, center-based child care, faith-based preschools, family child care homes, and other early learning opportunities.**

Third grade is used as the end of the range because, from a developmental perspective, it is the approximate grade in which children move from “early childhood” into “middle childhood.” From a policy perspective, 3rd grade is when the first full-scale, standardized accountability assessments of student achievement occur. As such, **3rd grade is a marker for examining progress, not an endpoint.**

Using the term “Pre-K–3rd grade” does not put firm guardrails on either end of the continuum nor limit who can learn from this guide. For example, schools serving students K–6th grade will benefit from creating a school culture that embraces the tenets of early learning because the upper grades will gain from receiving better-prepared students, providing opportunity to spend more time on advanced content and less time on remediation of basic skills. All principals may also find strategies herein that help them build and expand their own Pre-K programming and strengthen collaborative relationships with community-based Pre-K programs, tactics that may help to stabilize K–12 enrollment over time.⁵ In addition, schools that intentionally reach out to families with children younger than age 4 and who support early intervention services in their communities will

also find this guide relevant. As principals use this guide, it is important that they make sense of the information based on their school's unique context.

Why Focus on Pre-K–3rd Grade?

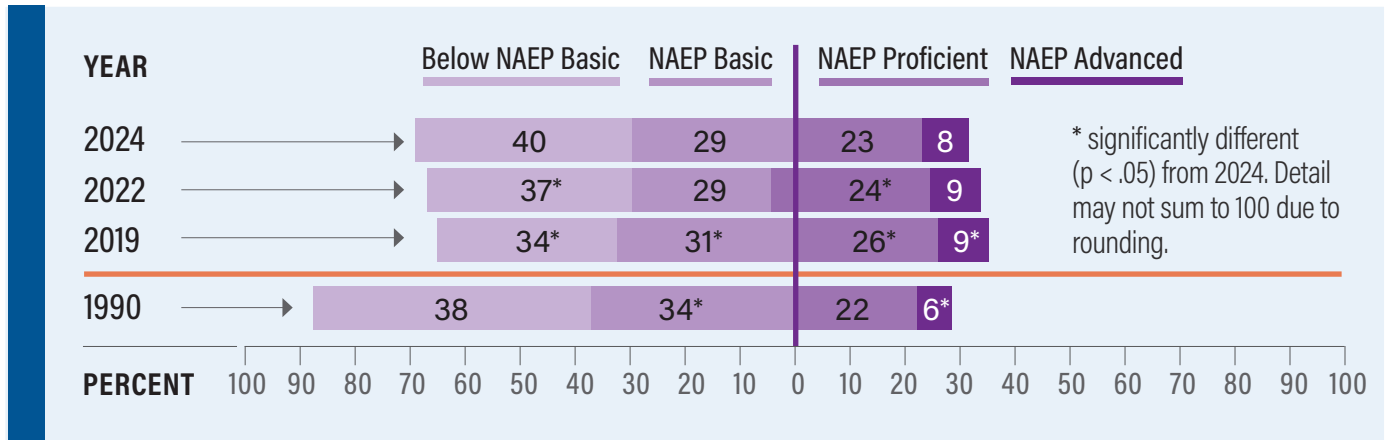
Pre-K–3rd grade is not a one-time or short-term initiative. It is a paradigm shift that calls for school leaders to reconsider their mindsets, practices, and policies in ways that emphasize the immense potential of laying foundations for lifelong learning when children are young. Data and research provide compelling evidence to support this shift. This work recognizes both the urgency of addressing current and growing gaps in what elementary students know and can do, and the enormous possibilities that emerge when public schools recognize and invest in early learning and the early grades.

The Urgency: Student Achievement in 4th Grade

Throughout the elementary school years, achievement in core subject areas has not improved substantially in recent years, and the impact of the pandemic fell hardest on the students who were already falling behind. Students performing at or above the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Proficient* level demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter. Based on 2024 NAEP reading assessment data in public schools, there has been no significant increase in the percentage of 4th graders who perform at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level since 1992, and 69% of 4th graders performed at or below the *NAEP Basic* level (see Figure 1). In math, although achievement has increased since 1992, gaps between high and low achievers have not improved since the pandemic (see Figure 2). In 2024, 40% of 4th graders performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient*, while 60% performed at or below the *NAEP Basic* level.

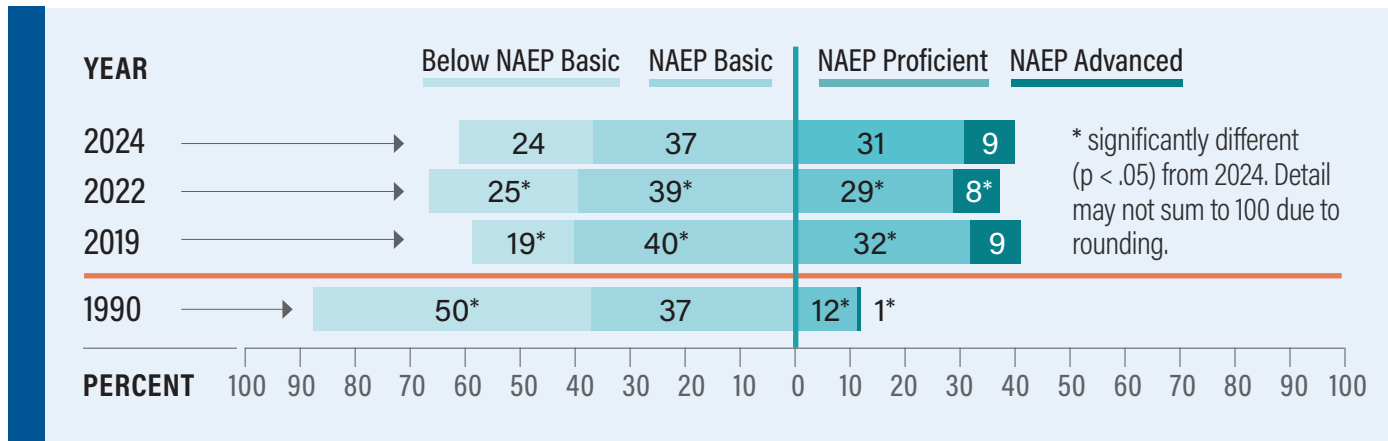
Notable about these charts is the proportion of students to the left of the vertical line — these are the students who are furthest behind when considering their ability to meet set standards. The percentages of children performing below

Figure 1. Trends in 4th Grade NAEP Reading Achievement Levels, Percent of Students



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 1992-2024 Reading Assessments.

Figure 2. Trends in 4th Grade NAEP Mathematics Achievement Levels, Percent of Students



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 1992-2024 Math Assessments.

NAEP Basic have seen the greatest increases since the pandemic, demonstrating the disproportional impact of the pandemic on students who were already falling behind.

While many children continue to do well, educational improvement needs to focus on ensuring that *every* student, regardless of their background or zip code, has access to high-quality educational opportunities that build foundational skills and knowledge for lifelong success. Another way to consider student achievement is to consider how sub-groups of students compare to the overall population of students. Figure 3 provides a comparison of how the performance of sub-groups of students, as measured by NAEP scores,

has changed over the past 15 years (since 2011). The chart is organized to show both reading and math scores for different sub-groups of 4th graders, comparing changes in the percentage of children who were low performers (at the 25th percentile), average performers, and high performers (at the 75th percentile). If the cell is colored red and has a down arrow, it means that the sub-group is doing worse than they were 15 years ago. If the cell is yellow and has a diamond, it means the sub-group continues to perform at about the same level. If the cell is green and has an up arrow, it signifies the sub-group has improved over the past 15 years. The numbers in each cell signify the change in percentile score between 2011 and 2024.

Figure 3. Changes in 4th Grade NAEP Average and Percentile Scores between 2011 and 2024, by Selected Student Groups

	Reading			Math		
	25th percentile	Average score	75th percentile	25th percentile	Average score	75th percentile
Economically disadvantaged	↓ 11	↓ 5	◆	↓ 8	↓ 3	↑ 1
Not economically disadvantaged	↓ 9	↓ 5	◆	↓ 3	◆	↑ 3
American Indian/Alaska Native	↓ 9	↓ 6	◆	↓ 12	↓ 8	◆
Asian	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	↑ 5
Asian/Pacific Islander	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆
Black	↓ 12	↓ 6	◆	↓ 9	↓ 4	◆
Hispanic	↓ 9	↓ 3	◆	↓ 7	↓ 2	↑ 3
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders	◆	↓ 9	◆	↓ 18	↓ 15	↓ 13
White	↓ 10	↓ 6	◆	↓ 7	↓ 4	◆
Two or More Races	↓ 12	↓ 7	◆	↓ 5	↓ 2	◆
Male	↓ 12	↓ 7	↓ 2	↓ 5	↓ 1	↑ 3
Female	↓ 9	↓ 5	◆	↓ 9	↓ 5	◆
Identified with disabilities	↓ 6	↓ 5	5	↓ 11	↓ 7	↓ 4
Not identified with disabilities	↓ 7	↓ 4	◆	↓ 4	↓ 1	↑ 2
Identified as English Learner	↓ 9	↓ 4	◆	↓ 8	↓ 3	◆
Not identified as English Learner	↓ 9	↓ 5	◆	↓ 6	↓ 3	↑ 2

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 2011-2024 Reading and Mathematics Assessments.

Two trends are worth pointing out:

- With only two exceptions (Native Hawaiians and students identified with disabilities), sub-groups that were high achievers in reading and math (at the 75th percentile) in 2011 continued to be high achievers in 2024.
- In contrast, for nearly all sub-groups that were average or low achievers in 2011, their performance has declined since then. There are only two exceptions to this: Asian and Asian/Pacific Islander 4th graders.

Fourth grade NAEP scores largely reflect what children learned in the years *prior to* 4th grade. The NAEP data presented here highlight that, as a country, there are serious and consequential gaps in basic skills that exist in Pre-K–3rd grade. Gaps in basic skills make it more difficult for students to keep up with grade-level content. These gaps also make it harder for upper-grade teachers to remediate those skills since they may not have their own knowledge or strategies to teach basic skills.

There is no single factor that creates these gaps. Different bodies of research point to chronic, inadequate access to high-quality Pre-K and other early learning opportunities; the quality of instruction and support in the primary grades (K–3rd grade); the increasing use of digital devices both at home and in schools; limited availability of out-of-school-time programs and resources in communities; and more. While this guide cannot address all of the probable contributions to suppressed student achievement, it does focus on those that can be tackled by investing in Pre-K–3rd grade in public school systems.

The Possibilities: The Potency of Pre-K–3rd Grade

Research shows that an intentional focus on early learning and the early grades can improve student outcomes by 3rd grade⁶ which are an important predictor of 8th grade achievement, high school graduation, college and career success, and adult health and well-being.⁷ Evidence from brain and developmental sciences, the learning sciences, molecular biology, and economics provide evidence that the first eight years of life are the most

opportune time to build the skills, behaviors, and dispositions that influence a lifetime of learning and success.⁸ Reflecting this vast research base, there has been rapid expansion of pre-school opportunities including state- or locally-funded Pre-K, Head Start, and high-quality child care. In 2025, 44 states and the District of Columbia provided state-funded Pre-K, serving 37% of the country's 4-year-olds, though the program quality varied widely from state to state.⁹ Another 11% of 4-year-olds were served by preschool special education, Head Start, or other publicly funded programs. The proportion of these children that are served in public schools varies from state to state, but Pre-K increasingly is seen as an essential part of public education.¹⁰

Across the U.S., there has also been rapid expansion of the number of states and school districts prioritizing full-day kindergarten, as well as the science of reading and early math in K–3rd grade. Each of these efforts is based on compelling research that demonstrates benefits to student outcomes and non-test outcomes such as student attendance and disciplinary incidents. Why, then, do stagnant achievement gaps, like those just presented, persist?

The potential answer to this is both obvious and complex. Children's learning and development cannot be compartmentalized into single-year interventions (like Pre-K or full-day kindergarten) or domain-restricted instruction (like reading alone or math alone). There should not be dramatic differences between teaching/learning in Pre-K and kindergarten and teaching/learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. Unfortunately, the academic performance pressures that elementary principals face often lead them to segment and separate these grade levels and their teachers, the curricular materials and instructional methods used, and the strategies implemented to engage families. However, the research is unequivocal. Children learn best, and their outcomes improve the most, when they receive year-after-year coherent, high-quality instruction *throughout early learning and the early grades*. This instruction should be delivered in ways that reflect the science of learning and development, integrating content areas and engaging children in active, socially engaged, and iterative ways.¹¹

Accomplishing this requires a systemic approach to considering the entire organization and leadership of elementary schools. The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and teacher knowledge across Pre-K–3rd grade is essential. Children who experience content and instruction across multiple years that build upon their prior learning have greater gains in achievement compared to children who experience only one year of high-quality education.¹² Pre-K–3rd grade approaches center this work.

How Principals Can Lead Pre-K–3rd Grade

The importance of principals has been long-recognized as the second-most influential school-related factor in student learning, behind classroom instruction.¹³ School leaders play vital roles in supporting teachers to strengthen their own competencies, in welcoming families as essential partners in their child’s teaching and learning, and in building trustworthy and sustainable school practices and policies that attend to the success of every young student. The impact of replacing a below-average elementary 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 that school.¹⁴ Adding those gains across the five years of Pre-K–3rd grade, effective elementary principals can have a cumulative effect of nearly two full grade levels’ worth of learning in those subjects.

However, many principals report limited knowledge of how young children develop and learn, a lack of skills to provide instructional leadership across early learning and the early grades, and uncertainty about how to leverage Pre-K–3rd grade to positively influence everything they do in schools.¹⁵ This guide is designed to fill these gaps. The competencies herein are not add-ons or extras to what a principal already does; they are intended to provide an overarching frame for the complex work and priorities in elementary schools. This guide provides a constructive, proactive, integrated, and systemic lens to ensure that every child is seen and supported, and that elementary schools become places where achievement soars, not where gaps increase.

Backed by relevant and recent research findings, **this guide defines six competencies to help elementary principals intentionally build a Pre-K–3rd grade approach — for children, families, and the adults who serve them within a school — and practical strategies that will support these competencies.** Since the late 1990s, research has framed strong school leadership as a combination of three broad categories of leadership practices: setting direction/vision, developing people, and redesigning the organization.¹⁶ Competencies 1 and 2 help to establish the foundational **vision** for Pre-K–3rd Grade. Competencies 3 and 4 guide principals to consider the partnerships with **people** necessary to enact a Pre-K–3rd grade vision. Finally, Competencies 5 and 6 address the instructional and improvement **systems** elementary principals can put into place. While each competency represents a vital area for principals to refine their knowledge, understanding, and actions, they also intersect. The competencies are most impactful when considered collectively; the Spotlight stories in this guide provide real-world examples of this.

Depending on the school context and current efforts, it may make sense for a principal to begin by focusing on one or two competencies. However, the competencies are equally important and necessary to create a unified, coherent leadership approach that supports *all* young learners.

The guide encourages principals to deepen their own knowledge related to Pre-K–3rd grade, then to enact that knowledge through their school leadership. Meaningful leadership for Pre-K–3rd grade requires substantive understanding of the science of learning and development, including the instructional practices and teacher-student interactions that build strong foundations in academic, social, and physical development. Principals are important, but they cannot do this work alone. Throughout the competencies and strategies herein, there is acknowledgment of the essential collaboration that must occur among principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, instructional coaches, staff, and early care and education professionals, as well as parents, families, and community partners.

The Six Competencies



Competency 1

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Competency 2

Understand Brain Development and Child Development

Competency 3

Foster Partnerships with Families

Competency 4

Build Professional Capacity

Competency 5

Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments

Competency 6

Promote Continuous Improvement

Beyond its use for active practitioners, this guide can also support the design of leadership and professional learning opportunities for principals and shape the activities of principal supervisors. This resource will be useful to any person interested in improving teaching and learning across early learning and the early grades.

The guide provides examples of the concepts in practice and includes elements to intentionally support principals' knowledge, skills, planning, and leadership. These include:

Spotlights: Real-world stories of effective practice are presented to demonstrate the promise and possibility of what elementary schools and their leaders can do to enact a Pre-K-3rd grade vision.

Ensuring All Students Benefit: Given the differences in achievement for sub-groups of students, these statements suggest ways that

school leaders can focus their efforts to ensure that the students who are falling furthest behind are provided with the most effective supports and interventions.

Leadership Moves and Self-Assessments: To encourage principals to engage and reflect on their own practices, the guide offers both questions and self-assessment items to encourage discussion and inquiry with others in their school or community.

Implications for Grades 4-6: Many elementary principals also hold responsibility for upper elementary grades. These statements identify ways that principals can lead on behalf of their entire student population, while embracing a Pre-K-3rd grade vision.

Resources: For those who may want to dig deeper into a specific competency or its strategies, additional reading materials are suggested.

Overview of the Six Competencies



Competency 1

Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision

- ✓ Establish a schoolwide vision that recognizes prioritizing early learning and the early grades (Pre-K–3rd grade) as a prevention-oriented approach that can have long-term influence on students' success in school and in life.
- ✓ Understand the demographics of young children and families in your community, including their strengths and needs.
- ✓ Build collaborations with Pre-K programs and educators, including those that share a campus with the elementary school and those that are community-based, in recognition and support of the importance of what happens prior to kindergarten.
- ✓ Ensure the K–3 grades provide strong academic foundations and joyful learning opportunities that build on the growth experienced in Pre-K.
- ✓ Promote seamless grade-to-grade transitions to maintain instructional alignment and continuity, with an emphasis on the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten.



Competency 2

Understand Brain Development and Child Development

- ✓ Understand the fundamental influence of brain architecture and development and how nature and nurture interact.
- ✓ Understand the complexity and interrelatedness of the domains of child development in young children.
- ✓ Prioritize a deep understanding of young students' social and emotional development, recognizing it as foundational to self-regulation, behavior, learning, and the ability to engage with academic content.
- ✓ Acknowledge and respond to the lasting impacts of toxic stress and early adversity on young students' development and learning.



Competency 3

Foster Partnerships with Families

- ✓ Recognize and engage families as their child's first and most important teachers and as essential partners in fostering learning, attendance, belonging, and joy.
- ✓ Cultivate a welcoming school culture for families that prioritizes strong, trusting relationships in order to enhance authentic partnerships between home and school.
- ✓ Engage families intentionally by diversifying communication and partnership strategies to meet the strengths and needs of students across grade levels.
- ✓ Facilitate and broker connections to community supports and services that help meet the diverse needs of families.
- ✓ Invite stakeholders, including families and community partners, to understand data trends and provide input on program recommendations.

**Competency 4****Build Professional Capacity**

- ✓ Structure a routine for the leadership team that models joint work and shared responsibility for the Pre-K–3rd grade vision and ensures there is strategic representation from each grade level and specialty roles.
- ✓ Design aligned, rigorous, and relevant professional learning experiences that enhance collaboration and strengthen teacher practice.
- ✓ Foster a healthy, resilient culture that nurtures the well-being of self and staff, intentionally modeling self-care in a way that enables the school community to effectively support and serve students and families.
- ✓ Use knowledge of educators' strengths to determine optimal hiring decisions and teaching assignments, with the long-term goal of recruiting and retaining effective teachers.

**Competency 5****Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments**

- ✓ Establish and clearly communicate the importance of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), including curricula that address goals in all developmental and content domains and provide strong guidance for teaching effectively.
- ✓ Foster strong teacher–student and student–student interactions through purposeful, playful, project-based, and exploratory learning experiences.
- ✓ Design warm, organized, and child-centered environments that reinforce learning that is culturally responsive and intentionally supportive of different learners and learning styles.
- ✓ Identify and implement high-quality, aligned assessments that measure academic (especially reading and math) and social-emotional milestones.
- ✓ Promote the intentional use of technology to support and amplify, rather than replace, effective teaching and learning.

**Competency 6****Promote Continuous Improvement**

- ✓ Create routines for teachers and teams to frequently calibrate around high-quality Pre-K–3rd grade assessments that are appropriate, cohesive, and comprehensive and that provide information on both growth and proficiency.
- ✓ Implement data analysis systems that rely on multiple data points for the leadership team to effectively monitor strategy implementation and its impact on student learning.
- ✓ Integrate Pre-K–3rd grade priorities into annual improvement efforts and plans that are already established and expected, in order to align schoolwide policies, programs, and to drive resource allocation and decision-making.
- ✓ Ensure that the parts of a student's educational experience fit together within the Pre-K–3rd grade vision, including both instructional coherence and systemic coherence.



Competency 1

Enact a Pre-K–3rd Grade Vision

More than a sequence of grade levels or a standalone initiative, Pre-K–3rd grade is a paradigm shift and a proactive way to re-imagine and reform the first level of education that happens in the years prior to 4th grade. Intended to bring together principals' knowledge of the science of learning and development with effective school leadership strategies, **a Pre-K–3rd grade vision clearly conveys that a principal values the foundational years of development as essential to long-term educational and lifelong success.**

More specifically, such a vision requires commitment from principals to embrace the essential importance of Pre-K and other pre-school experiences; to ensure Pre-K and kindergarten are instructionally strong and reflect developmental science; and to commit to reforming instruction in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades to be academically rigorous *and* grounded in developmentally-informed and joyful pedagogical practices. Across the full continuum of years, children are given ample opportunities to build their social knowledge, confidence, and self-regulation. Research demonstrates that children who experience high-quality instruction across multiple years of elementary school, not just in a single year, have better language, literacy, and math skills in 3rd grade.¹⁷ This perspective recognizes that learning is cumulative and that the early years are the basis for lifelong success across multiple dimensions.

The rapid expansion of early learning opportunities for children before formal entry into school has been largely driven by well-publicized, longitudinal, experimental evidence from small, model programs. More and more studies of larger scale state-funded Pre-K,

Competency 1

Strategies

- 1.1** Establish a schoolwide vision that recognizes prioritizing early learning and the early grades (Pre-K–3rd grade) is a prevention-oriented approach that can have long-term influence on students' success in school and in life.
- 1.2** Understand the demographics of young children and families in your community, including their strengths and needs.
- 1.3** Build collaborations with Pre-K programs and educators, including those that share a campus with the elementary school and those that are community-based, in recognition and support of the importance of what happens prior to kindergarten.
- 1.4** Ensure the K–3 grades provide strong academic foundations and joyful learning opportunities that build on the growth experienced in Pre-K.
- 1.5** Promote seamless grade-to-grade transitions to maintain instructional alignment and continuity, with an emphasis on the transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten.



Head Start, and other high-quality early learning programs also show promising impacts on children's skills and knowledge at the end of the Pre-K year.¹⁸ These impacts include longer-term outcomes into adulthood, such as increased rates of employment and earnings and lower rates of adult poverty and arrest.¹⁹ Improvements in academic areas such as literacy and numeracy are most common, with modest improvements in social-emotional and self-regulatory development.

One prevalent misconception about Pre-K–3rd grade efforts is that embracing Pre-K alone is what matters most. While necessary, this is not sufficient. Research shows that how principals think about Pre-K can have a “push-up” effect on how they view the entire continuum of learning throughout the early childhood developmental period (Pre-K–3rd grade).²⁰ **Principals who prioritize high-quality Pre-K also recognize that early elementary instruction — across kindergarten through 3rd grade (K–3) — often falls short of what young learners truly need.**

A central priority for elementary principals is ensuring that the teaching provided to students

across the early grades (K–3) is designed and delivered in ways that build upon the learning trajectories established in Pre-K²¹ and that reflect the science of learning and development.²² Children in K–3 are gaining essential foundational skills in reading and math, but also in understanding how to constructively contribute in group learning settings and how to manage their own feelings, behaviors, and tasks. Focusing on how young children learn best helps to mitigate the problem of “push down” of a narrow set of academic expectations onto Pre-K and kindergarten.²³

The real “magic sauce” of the Pre-K–3rd grade vision is creating coherence across grade levels, ensuring that schools are designed to think about year-after-year experiences for young children and their families. While a school's systems of coherence (see Competencies 5 and 6) can seem abstract and disconnected from the real lives of children and families, one practical aspect includes the transitions between grade levels. The transition from Pre-K to kindergarten has captured the most attention, but grade-to-grade transitions in the following years are also important.

Strategy 1.1

Establish a schoolwide vision that recognizes prioritizing early learning and the early grades (Pre-K–3rd grade) as a prevention-oriented approach that can have long-term influence on students' success in school and in life.

Setting a clear, compelling vision for the school community is one of the most critical responsibilities of any principal. Creating a vision involves clarifying one's own values and aligning actions with those values. One of the most important things about a vision is to articulate and share it in a way that speaks clearly to others and inspires them to be engaged in making the vision a reality. The ultimate goal for a Pre-K–3rd grade vision is to ensure that every young student experiences joyful and rigorous learning year after year, providing them the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to become lifelong learners.

Establishing a Pre-K–3rd grade vision first requires principals to increase their own knowledge and understanding of what is important; this guide is intended to be a resource for doing so. Principals who hold a Pre-K–3rd grade

vision recognize and act upon the long-term value of investing in early learning and the early grades for a student's future success. Specifically, principals take their understanding of child development, discussed in Competency 2, and their recognition of the importance of meaningful partnerships with families, discussed in Competency 3, and put that knowledge into visible action inside their school and in the community. **Effective leaders bridge the gap between vision and practice by documenting and communicating their goals until it becomes an integral part of how the school operates.**

Providing a clear vision and leadership for the school's instructional priorities demonstrates to both internal and external stakeholders what is valued and where resources are invested. This could take the form of emphasizing Pre-K–3rd grade in mission statements and strategic plans (e.g., school improvement plans). It could also include providing regular updates on Pre-K–3rd grade priorities and progress on school websites, in community or family newsletters, during educators' professional learning, or in staff meetings. These approaches signal that a Pre-K–3rd grade vision is integrated with, rather than stacked on top of, other key drivers for improvement.

In addition to elevating such a vision within the elementary school, principals can serve as advocates in district- and state-level circles to promote the importance of policies and initiatives such as high-quality instructional materials across early learning and the early grades, playful learning, recess, out-of-school-time programs, and supports for children who are chronically absent. Through this advocacy role, principals publicly and visibly advance the need for funding and policy that supports Pre-K–3rd grade teaching and learning.

Strategy 1.2

Understand the demographics of young children and families in your community, including their strengths and needs.

Young children learn best in places where they feel safe, known, and valued. Building a school climate that produces that feeling — for every child, every family — is one of the most consequential

A Pre-K–3rd grade vision clearly conveys that a principal values the foundational years of development as essential to long-term educational and lifelong success.

jobs of a Pre-K–3rd grade principal. Schools work better for every child when the adults who lead them are curious about the lived experience, strengths, and needs of each child and his or her family. Regardless of an elementary school's size, demographics, or location, it serves a unique population of children and families. Research shows that early childhood interventions have stronger effects on particular populations of children, thereby contributing to overall increases in achievement for all participating students and providing particular boosts to children who need it most.²⁴ Elementary principals who have a deep understanding of the demographics of their community will be able to adapt their efforts to maximize their students' strengths and better support their needs. This does not happen by chance, but instead requires principals' deliberate, ongoing engagement with families and community organizations (see Competency 3) and participation in professional learning (see Competency 4) that deepens their understanding of the specific populations their schools serve.²⁵

A principal's understanding of their students' demographics shows up in practical choices. Signs and written communications are in the languages families speak at home. The school calendar reflects the religious and cultural observances of the community it serves. Classroom libraries, wall displays, and curricular materials mirror the identities of the children

sitting in the room. Data reviews focus on the populations of children who fall furthest behind on assessments, who are chronically absent, or who most often receive exclusionary discipline. Teachers receive professional learning in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, and universal design for learning (UDL) as sustained practices, not one-time workshops. Families have real and repeated opportunities to share what they know about their children and to shape how the school serves them.

Strategy 1.3

Build collaborations with Pre-K programs and educators, including those that share a campus with the elementary school and those that are community-based, in recognition and support of the importance of what happens prior to kindergarten.

Principals set the expectation that learning begins well before kindergarten, and Pre-K students and educators are essential to the fabric of the school community. Effective leaders of the Pre-K–3rd grade vision recognize the importance of learning opportunities children experience before they enter kindergarten. With increased investments in state- and local-funded Pre-K programs, the number of children enrolled



in public Pre-K programs reflects a return to pre-pandemic levels. Despite this growth, access remains uneven and quality is a concern in many programs.

A Pre-K–3rd grade vision includes embracing the power and efficacy of high-quality Pre-K programs, no matter where they are delivered. Even as school-based Pre-K continues to grow, many families choose to send their children to community-based, faith-based, or home-based programs. Given that nearly all 4-year-olds will eventually transition into public kindergarten, principals who embrace Pre-K–3rd grade respect and engage *all* of these settings. In practice, principals establish ongoing communication and collaboration with the various settings in which Pre-K programs are delivered to build trusting, collaborative relationships and to share information and discuss the strengths of the students entering kindergarten. Creating partnerships with public and private Pre-K programs requires investing time, resources, and trust; there is a growing body of evidence that provides strategies for doing so.²⁶ These connections not only help to maximize resources dedicated to young children's learning but also unify schools and community programs around shared goals.

To enact a Pre-K–3rd grade vision, principals explicitly and publicly embrace students' pre-school learning experiences as fundamental to the school's mission. This requires principals to integrate Pre-K students and educators as valued members of all aspects of the school community (e.g., school events and communications, joint professional learning, cross-grade planning). This communicates a clear message to students, teachers, families, and community stakeholders that Pre-K isn't merely an "add-on."

In short, Pre-K–3rd grade is about more than physical proximity between Pre-K and the K–3 grades; it requires a mindset shift by school leaders about how high-quality Pre-K contributes to young children's learning and helps foster a respect for the variety of programs and settings that provide it. The goal is that more elementary principals refer to themselves and behave as "Pre-K–5th grade principals" rather than "K–5th

grade principals" (or, if not 5th grade, whatever grade level is the highest grade in the school).

Strategy 1.4

Ensure the K–3 grades provide strong academic foundations and joyful learning opportunities that build on the growth experienced in Pre-K.

Evidence shows students continue to make growth when provided with high-quality instruction in the years following a high-quality Pre-K experience. With a shared vision for Pre-K–3rd grade education in place, a key role for principals becomes ensuring K–3rd grade teachers are supported to design and deliver high-quality instruction that reflects developmental progressions, is rigorous across content areas within each grade, and relies on playful, engaged pedagogical practices that reflect the science of learning for young children.

Doing this requires elementary schools to provide classroom teachers with the systems and structures that reflect and support consistent and developmentally-based academic *and* social-emotional goals that are aligned year after year across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. Alignment can reduce unnecessary repetition of instruction, supporting students to broaden their understanding of concepts through opportunities to practice and apply their skills in increasingly complex learning contexts. Although many schools engage in response to intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks, they also must strive to embed differentiation within everyday practices in classrooms (Tier 1). To ensure scaffolded learning for students, Pre-K–3rd grade teachers need to utilize frequent, curriculum-aligned formative assessments connected to standards and administered with students' developmental needs in mind (see Competency 5).

With compelling evidence that high-quality full-day kindergarten positively influences student achievement, and with longer school days benefiting working parents, the kindergarten year deserves special attention. Thoughtful consideration of staffing, professional learning, and classroom environments — as well as

meaningful transition practices established in collaboration with families — will lead to better outcomes for students. The longer school day in a full-day kindergarten program should be thoughtfully designed in a way that adjusts over the course of the year, demonstrating closer alignment to Pre-K programs in the fall, and leaning toward first grade expectations in the spring.

Strategy 1.5

Promote seamless grade-to-grade transitions to maintain instructional alignment and continuity, with an emphasis on the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten.

A Pre-K–3rd grade vision recognizes that the full continuum of years — Pre-K, kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades — demand special attention and differentiated supports from the upper grades due to the developmental needs of young children. Achieving this vision requires aligning different elements of instructional practice and school policy, focusing on strategies that smooth transitions and build coherence from one grade level to the next. The goal in a Pre-K–3rd grade vision is for schools to set the conditions under which teachers have the knowledge and support to connect concepts, skills, and learning approaches in one grade to what children learned in the previous grade, and to what will be learned in the following grade. Strategies to accomplish this are presented throughout this guide.

Kindergarten is often the bridge year between children's Pre-K setting and public school. Effective transitions into kindergarten set the tone for long-term school engagement and help children grow both academically and socially.²⁷ No matter what children's prior experiences were, the first day of kindergarten brings new people, routines, activities, schedules, expectations, and priorities into their lives. Most families are uncertain of how to navigate a new school system, and children will often experience shifts in the goals, demands, and classroom structures of kindergarten, since they are often different from those in Pre-K and child care settings.



Transitions have traditionally been emphasized as a set of one-time activities. A growing body of evidence points to the importance of creating a continuum of transition activities that support children and families, regardless of their home language and culture, socio-economic status, or diagnosed disability.²⁸ Transition practices that support positive relationships between children, families, and educators can substantively impact child outcomes.²⁹

To ensure smooth and predictable entry into kindergarten, school leadership teams can create a transition process built on expectations collaboratively established by the school and the full range of Pre-K programs available in the community. These expectations focus less on children's readiness for school and more on the school's readiness to support young students and their families by providing developmentally informed transition strategies and learning opportunities. The first step is to ensure an organized, easy-to-navigate, accessible registration process, which requires intentional consideration of families' home languages and cultures, as well as an understanding of trusted community partners who can facilitate communication with families (e.g., public libraries, faith-based organizations, community centers).

Effective principals intentionally support not only the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten but also other transitions from grade-to-grade and teacher-to-teacher across the full Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. Throughout all of the work, children's experiences as they move from classroom to classroom and grade to grade should be the focus, with principals identifying ways to partner with teachers and families to ensure that school feels familiar and fun to young children year after year.

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★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

The achievement gaps that exist in 3rd grade (state tests) and in 4th grade (NAEP) provide strong evidence of the lack of quality and coherence of learning opportunities prior to those grades. Use disaggregated data to understand which students are thriving and which are not, and design strategies accordingly that remove barriers to learning.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

Consider the ways that your leadership for Pre-K–3rd grade is visible to your school and community. In what ways are you building the Pre-K–3rd grade vision among your staff (leading across), within your school district (leading up), and through your community (leading out)?

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

A Pre-K–3rd grade vision not only influences those grades but also has ripple effects that last throughout all grade levels — beyond the upper elementary grades and into middle and high school. Carefully watch grade level transitions, specifically at the threshold of 3rd to 4th grade where data suggest a measurable drop in engagement, attendance, and academic growth.

Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Bardige, B., Baker, M., & Mardell, B. (2018). *Children at the center: Transforming early childhood education in the Boston Public Schools*. Harvard Education Press.

Sullivan-Dudzic, L., Gearn, D. K., & Leavell, K. (2010). *Making a difference: 10 essential steps to building a Pre-K–3rd grade system*. Corwin.

Takanishi, R. (2016). *First things first! Creating the new American primary school*. Teachers College Press.



Self-Assessment Competency 1

Enact a PreK-3rd Grade Vision

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- A Pre-K-3rd grade vision is not a central improvement strategy.
- The vision, in its limited capacity, is not anchored to developmental research or evidence-validated pedagogy for young learners.
- Use of demographic data is minimal or limited to reporting requirements and is not used to better understand the community.
- There are few or no intentional partnerships with Pre-K providers.
- Instructional practices in K-3 are independent of Pre-K, emphasizing narrow academic skills over developmentally appropriate, engaging learning.
- One-time transition events are held for children entering kindergarten.

Emerging

- A Pre-K-3rd grade vision is articulated, but implementation is uneven, inconsistent, and considered an intervention strategy.
- School leadership and staff have some understanding of early childhood learning and pedagogy; but only in Pre-K and kindergarten.
- Efforts are made to understand family and student demographics, though information is not used to drive decisions.
- Partnerships with Pre-K programs exist but lack depth or shared goals and are limited to those connected to the school.
- K-3 instruction shows partial alignment with Pre-K.
- Transition practices are present but inconsistent across grade levels.

Establishing

- A clear vision is established and communicated that prioritizes Pre-K-3rd grade as foundational to long-term learning success.
- Strong early learning experiences are valued across leadership and staff.
- School practices are informed by a deep understanding of community demographics, strengths, and needs.
- The principal fosters collaborative relationships with both school- and community-based Pre-K providers.
- K-3 instruction is intentionally aligned to build on Pre-K learning, emphasizing academic foundations and joyful, developmentally appropriate experiences.
- Transitions between grades, especially Pre-K to kindergarten, are coordinated and support continuity for students and families.

Sustaining

- A deeply embedded Pre-K-3rd grade vision drives all aspects of school improvement and is embraced by leaders, educators, and staff.
- Community knowledge is systematically gathered and leveraged to ensure responsiveness.
- Strong, reciprocal partnerships with Pre-K programs, both in the school and in the community, result in shared accountability for student outcomes.
- Instruction across Pre-K-3rd grade is fully aligned, developmentally appropriate, and promotes both academic excellence and student well-being.
- Seamless transitions are institutionalized, with proactive systems ensuring continuity of learning, relationships, and supports across every grade level.

Spotlight

Hawthorne Elementary (Everett, WA)

Jacob Ellsworth, Principal

Hawthorne Elementary, led by Principal Jacob Ellsworth, is a highly diverse urban school with approximately 83% of students facing economic challenges. Principal Ellsworth's focus on a Pre-K–3rd grade vision grew out of seeing early gaps only getting bigger over time and realizing that the best chance to change students' long-term outcomes starts in the earliest years. When he stepped into his role as principal, preschool felt separate from the rest of the school, almost like it was “renting space” rather than being part of the community. He made a deliberate shift to integrate preschool into the school's culture. Preschool staff were brought into leadership structures, professional learning, and schoolwide events and a P-3 committee comprised of preschool through 3rd grade teachers helped define a shared Pre-K–3rd grade vision. This vision translates into structural and instructional changes that align early learning experiences across grades. Preschool through 2nd grade educators participate in shared training around foundational literacy and child development. This cross-grade collaboration ensures that instruction builds seamlessly from year to year. Just as important, the school has rethought its use of data, leveraging preschool assessment information to begin interventions within the first weeks of kindergarten rather than waiting months. This earlier, more responsive approach has been a major shift in practice.

Principal Ellsworth developed a team action plan, with a vision to “create equitable access

and intervene as early as possible to eliminate gaps in student opportunity, early childhood development, and academic achievement.” The plan centers on elevating Pre-K–3rd grade as a core focus of the school and ensures that early learning environments reflect the diversity of the student population. Instructionally, the plan emphasizes building stronger, more consistent practices across Pre-K–3rd grade, especially in literacy, math, and social-emotional learning. This is accomplished through professional learning, aligned curriculum and routines, and greater access to enrichment opportunities. Family engagement now starts in preschool and continues into the elementary grades, with shared events and home visits, helping build relationships early. The school is strengthening transitions into kindergarten, aligning assessments from preschool through the primary grades, and refining MTSS to better meet the developmental needs of young learners. Schedules, classroom structures, and supports have been adjusted to allow more student collaboration and small-group learning, with additional adults supporting students during center time. At the same time, the school is paying closer attention to early grade data and outcomes, raising the importance of those years across the building. Early results are already showing in improved kindergarten readiness and primary grade assessments, reinforcing the idea that investing in the earliest years is key to long-term success.



Competency 2

Understand Brain Development and Child Development

Science provides persuasive rationales for focusing on Pre-K–3rd grade. Multiple fields of study (e.g., developmental science, neuroscience, molecular biology, and economics) point to the fact that children develop at a young age the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions that are foundational to their later learning and ongoing success.³⁰ **Young children from birth to about age 8 are in the “early childhood” developmental phase, a span of time during which remarkable changes happen in the brain and in every other domain of development.**

Brain development is a bottom-up process that starts before birth. It begins with the formation of fundamental neural pathways and evolves over time into the sophisticated circuits required for adult cognition and behavior. Cutting-edge research has established how early experiences, both positive and negative, affect the growth and development of the young brain, and in particular how children’s social and emotional context influences learning.³¹ In addition to brain development, principals who embrace a Pre-K–3rd grade vision understand that children’s physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and executive function skills are also going through rapid changes during these years. Recognizing the interrelationship of these developmental domains is essential to effectively support young children’s learning. Further, principals will benefit from understanding how the contexts in which children grow up influence their behaviors and skill development. Developing an assets-based perspective on the roles of families is necessary for strong school leadership.³²

Competency 2

Strategies

- 2.1** Understand the fundamental influence of brain architecture and development and how nature and nurture interact.
- 2.2** Understand the complexity and interrelatedness of the domains of child development in young children.
- 2.3** Prioritize a deep understanding of young students’ social and emotional development, recognizing it as foundational to self-regulation, behavior, learning, and the ability to engage with academic content.
- 2.4** Acknowledge and respond to the lasting impacts of toxic stress and early adversity on young students’ development and learning.

The primary years offer a critical period for language acquisition, sensory integration, and foundational logic. Exposure to diverse stimuli such as music, second languages, and tactile arts is more effective in the early years than at any other time in a student's life. Hands-on, discovery-based learning creates more robust neural networks. In addition, classroom practices that promote healthy brain development in young children emphasize consistent routines, playful and experiential learning, multi-sensory instruction, and positive reinforcement.

During this early stage of development, because their brains are still maturing, young children often experience intense emotions that they are unable to regulate. Supporting young children as they navigate emotions and self-regulation is a core tenet of Pre-K–3rd grade work. When schools prioritize these skills, they aren't just managing behavior — they are building the cognitive architecture required for long-term academic and social success.³³ Because emotional development and regulation continue to develop throughout elementary school, principals benefit from knowing how to nurture these skills beyond Pre-K and kindergarten.

Further, research continues to expand awareness of the long-term negative effects of some young children's early experiences. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as food insufficiency; housing instability; and exposure to violence, abuse, or neglect; can have detrimental short- and long-term

effects on a child's development.³⁴ Prolonged activation of the stress response system without adequate support can result in toxic stress, which can lead to significant alterations in brain development and increased health problems.

Strategy 2.1

Understand the fundamental influence of brain architecture and development and how nature and nurture interact.

Brain development in young children is a dynamic process influenced by the social and cultural contexts surrounding the experiences a child has and the neurological development occurring in the brain. Every child inherits genes from their biological parents and there are genetically driven developmental processes that guide the basic organization of the body and the brain. However, genes “turn on or off” within the context of cellular environments inside the body and experiential environments outside the body.³⁵ In other words, while genetics set the initial blueprint, children's daily experiences and relationships ultimately shape how the brain develops. While the young brain is remarkably resilient, it is also highly sensitive to its surroundings; positive, stable environments foster healthy brain architecture, while chronic toxic stress can disrupt these vital foundations. Science increasingly confirms that brain development is not nature versus nurture, but rather nature and nurture.

Young children from birth to about age 8 are in the “early childhood” developmental phase, a span of time during which remarkable changes happen in the brain and in every other domain of development.

During the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed every second; connections that are re-enforced and nurtured are strengthened, while those that are weak or redundant are pruned. This is the most active and rapid period of brain development during one's lifetime.³⁶ Early brain development influences children's language in terms of speech, reading, and bilingualism — all of which have been determined to predict future reading abilities. For example, children for whom English is not their home language develop similar skills in two or more languages *simultaneously*, providing them with cognitive advantages related to their ability to plan, regulate their behavior, and think flexibly,³⁷ which can serve them well in both school and future careers.

Brain development also impacts children's cognition, including memory, problem-solving, and mathematical and technical skills; these are all essential to young students' success in school and beyond. Finally, brain development affects young children's empathy, self-identity, and self-confidence. Effective principals understand that this period of rapid and intense brain development is unique to the early years and recognize that classroom environments, from noise levels to responses to student behavior, can directly shape a child's brain development. The implication for principals is clear: possessing a firm understanding of brain development is crucial for creating school environments that work *with* a child's development rather than against it.

Strategy 2.2

Understand the complexity and interrelatedness of the domains of child development in young children.

Throughout their lifespan, young children mature and change, at their own rate, experiencing distinct periods of growth across multiple domains of child development. These domains encompass the skills, knowledge, and behaviors that children develop as they interact with the world around them. With explicit knowledge of child development, principals will be better equipped to provide targeted support for

children, families, and teachers across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. Table 1 provides a brief overview of five domains of development and their implications for young children in schools.

While each developmental domain has its own unique milestones and trajectories, they are all deeply connected and work together. Progress in one domain often sparks growth in others. For example, when children get better at expressing themselves (language development), they are also better equipped to share their feelings and connect with peers (emotional and social development). It is essential to recognize that the nervous system is the control center behind all this development, orchestrating and managing how children grow across every domain.

Although general progressions and age-defined milestones in development and learning can be identified, variations exist. Individual children may develop skills at different ages than their peers, and even the sequence in which they acquire them may vary. The skills that a child demonstrates are also episodic and may vary from day to day. For example, one day a child may be able to tie her shoe, but struggle with that same task the next day. Instruction, family contexts, and individual differences can affect both age and sequence of development. Recognizing the general trajectories in skill development³⁸ can help teachers and principals know what “the next step” is for each child and provide instruction and other supports³⁹ that are just beyond children's current understanding.

Scaffolding is an important teaching method in the early grades that provides temporary support tailored to a student's needs, allowing them to perform tasks they cannot yet accomplish independently. This process involves the teacher modeling a skill, offering hints or prompts, and then gradually removing these “supports” as the child demonstrates increasing mastery and confidence. By operating within a child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding ensures that learning is appropriately challenging without becoming overwhelming, ultimately fostering self-regulation and a sense of agency in young children.

Strategy 2.3

Prioritize a deep understanding of young students' social and emotional development, recognizing it as foundational to self-regulation, behavior, learning, and the ability to engage with academic content.

Principals and school leaders who bring a depth of understanding about child development to their work recognize that children in Pre-K–3rd grade thrive when their learning opportunities emphasize social and emotional development. During Pre-K and the early grades, children develop their own unique patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving in a wide variety of circumstances. The kinds of experiences provided to children greatly influence these patterns. Across this age span, playful learning is essential. Play involves interacting with others and, therefore, provides an ideal opportunity to improve receptive language, expand expressive language, and establish one's own perspective while also understanding the perspectives of others.⁴⁰ In addition, play provides opportunities for children to recognize and manage their emotions, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, negotiate and compromise, and navigate challenging situations. Opportunities for play need not be limited to a particular time in the daily schedule, but can be embedded into multiple disciplines including art, music, science, and social studies, in addition to literacy and math.

Another critical facet of young children's social and emotional development relates to their behavior. Because young children are still developing the ability to identify and regulate their emotions, their behavior often serves as a form of communication, signaling a need for adult support. In preschool and the early grades, children are still developing the brain-based capacities for impulse control, sustained attention, working memory, emotional regulation, flexible thinking, and delayed

gratification.⁴¹ These skills develop significantly between ages 3–8, meaning **many challenging behaviors are developmentally expected rather than intentional misconduct**. Therefore, when teachers understand development, they respond with support and empathy.

When young children self-regulate, they think first and then act. Without self-regulation, they act first and think later. Acting before thinking can lead to impulsive actions like cutting in front of another student in line, marking another student's drawing, or refusing to share the classroom materials, which can then be labeled as classroom misbehavior. When adults misinterpret immature regulation skills as defiance or disrespect, children are more likely to experience punitive responses, such as exclusionary discipline, rather than the co-regulation and instruction they need.⁴² Research continues to document that Pre-K and early grades suspensions and expulsions disproportionately affect Black children, particularly Black boys,⁴³ which may have long-term implications on a child's overall school experience and their sense of belonging.⁴⁴ School leaders should continue to examine their policies and expectations around behavior and interrogate their alignment with child development and brain science.

To reduce disproportionate disciplinary practices, principals and teachers can provide continuous opportunities and supports for children to learn how to control their emotions, thoughts, and actions. Within the school and classroom contexts, leaders and teachers can teach self-regulating behaviors like peer scaffolding with the same intentionality, patience, and resourcefulness as when they teach content. Activities like make believe play, dramatizations of stories, and playful learning games are just a few examples of activities that support self-regulation. A cornerstone of social and emotional development is supporting students' language development and conflict resolution skills by engaging in meaningful and extended conversations with students to help them identify and solve problems.

Table 1. *Domains of Child Development*

Domain	Components of Development	Implications for Children's Learning
Physical Development: one of the most visible aspects of a child's growth	Gross motor skills: big movements using large muscles, like crawling, walking, running, and jumping Fine motor skills: small, precise movements such as picking up objects, holding a pencil, or buttoning clothes	Essential for overall health and well-being. As children develop greater control over their bodies, they are better able to explore their environment, engage in social play, and express themselves creatively.
Cognitive Development: a child's ability to think, learn, and problem solve	Problem-solving skills: figuring things out on their own Learning abilities: acquiring new information Understanding the world: making sense of what's happening around them Memory: remembering what happened yesterday or last week Creativity and imagination—thinking up new ideas in innovative ways	Lays the foundation for future learning and success in school and beyond. During the Pre-K–3rd grade years, children transition from the preoperational stage (they begin to engage in symbolic thinking and use language to represent objects/ideas) into the concrete operational stage (they develop logical thinking skills and can solve concrete problems).
Language Development: a child's ability to understand and use words to express themselves and communicate with others	Phonological development: learning to recognize and produce speech sounds in language Vocabulary development: acquiring and understanding words to express oneself effectively Grammar and syntax: utilizing rules for structuring words into meaningful phrases and sentences Social language: using words appropriately in different social situations and contexts Narrative skills: telling stories in a logical sequence, with detail and meaning	This domain is closely linked to cognitive development, as language skills are essential for learning, problem-solving, and critical thinking.
Emotional Development: a child's ability to understand and express their own feelings, as well as recognize and respond to the emotions of others	Learning to identify what they are feeling inside Showing their emotions in healthy ways Picking up emotional cues from others Developing empathy and appropriate responses	Crucial for building self-awareness, empathy, and resilience, which are essential skills for navigating life's challenges and fostering healthy relationships.
Social Development: a child's ability to form relationships, communicate with others, and engage in cooperative activities	Secure attachments: possessing strong bonds with parents and caregivers; feeling loved and supported Play and peer Interactions: learning to share, take turns, and cooperate Emotional intelligence: recognizing, understanding, and expressing emotions	The strength of children's social development significantly influences their academic success and overall emotional well-being.

Strategy 2.4

Acknowledge and respond to the lasting impacts of toxic stress and early adversity that break the predictable, nurturing patterns of young students' development and learning.

Over the past two decades, research has deepened understanding of how toxic levels of stress can disrupt children's behavior, cognitive development, and emotional and physical health. The term toxic stress describes the most dangerous form of stress response in children.⁴⁵ Unlike normal stress, which can be helpful for growth, toxic stress occurs when a child experiences strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse, or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship without receiving adequate adult support. Chronic stress can impair executive functioning, attention, memory, and higher-order thinking because the brain prioritizes survival over learning when stress responses remain activated.⁴⁶ Toxic stress is defined not simply by the presence of adversity, but by the absence of supportive relationships to mitigate its effects. Strong, responsive relationships between children and caregivers are essential to protecting children from the harmful impacts of toxic stress.⁴⁷

While they are closely related, there are differences between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress. ACEs serve as the external inputs or events, while toxic stress is the internal biological output. ACEs represent experiences — such as neglect, abuse, or household dysfunction — that a child may face before the age of 18. In contrast, toxic stress describes the physiological state the body enters when those ACEs are frequent, intense, or sustained without the protective buffer or support of a stable caregiver. Essentially, ACEs are the potential triggers, and toxic stress is the damaging response that can compromise a child's immune system and brain architecture over time.

Schools are uniquely positioned to serve as a buffer against toxic stress by providing students opportunities to engage in developmentally rich learning experiences and to develop positive relationships with supportive adults. Research also points to how schools can help to alleviate the effects of toxic stress by increasing their efforts to implement trauma-informed practices (TIPs), such as establishing a consistent, calm, and safe environment; helping students identify and cope with emotions; teaching relaxation, stress management, and mindfulness skills; and developing behavior plans that are based on reinforcement, not punishment. Principals also need to recognize that without proactive support



and expert collaboration, the secondary stress of working with trauma-impacted students can take a heavy toll on teacher well-being.

Aligning trauma-informed practices to existing school frameworks ensures consistency and accountability. Effective principals recognize the need to provide sustained, hands-on training in TIPs tailored to their teaching staff's needs, especially across early learning and the early grades. In addition, allocation of materials, time, and resources, as well as collaborative spaces, allow teachers room to apply and refine trauma-informed approaches. For principals and Pre-K–3rd grade teachers, these approaches include predictable routines; emotionally safe classrooms; strong adult-child relationships; co-regulation and calm adult responses; and culturally affirming learning spaces. The promising news for school leaders and teachers is that the effects of toxic stress do not have to be permanent, and schools that provide stable, nurturing relationships and intentional interventions can reverse many of these biological and developmental effects.

Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Corwin.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2022). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8 (4th ed.)*. Author.

Wood, C. (2017). *Yardsticks: Child and Adolescent Development Ages 4-14*. Center for Responsive Schools.

★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

Understand the episodic nature of development and the cultural diversity related to developmental benchmarks in young children, acknowledging that research may not be inclusive of all children, and that benchmarks may not be inclusive of the many ways children exhibit growth and change. Developmental milestones can be deeply influenced by the values, physical environment, and social expectations of a community or culture that determines which milestones are prioritized, when they occur, and how they are celebrated.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

Deepen your own learning around child development and brain development to understand how your school structures (schedule, transitions, classroom environments, trauma informed practices) support or hinder optimal brain development. How does your Pre-K–3rd grade vision align with how young children's brains actually grow? How can you ensure your school uses developmental milestones to build the self-regulation and foundational skills required for future learning?

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

While brain development slows in upper elementary, students must consolidate skills by transitioning from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." This requires maintaining explicit literacy instruction through vocabulary development, cross-curricular writing, and structured discourse, alongside targeted foundational support. As playful learning evolves into active inquiry and project-based learning, work on fostering a growth mindset to combat the rising risk of fixed mindsets driven by increased social comparison.



Self-Assessment Competency 2

Understand Brain Development and Child Development

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- The principal demonstrates a surface-level understanding of early brain development. Correlation to social-emotional growth is non-existent.
- School practices prioritize compliance and strict behavior management. Developmentally appropriate supports that foster genuine student engagement are lacking.
- There is limited awareness of how trauma and toxic impact a student's cognitive and behavioral regulation.
- The school focuses on compliance, limiting the effectiveness of instructional interventions and responsive learning.

Emerging

- The principal demonstrates a foundational understanding of early brain development.
- Awareness of the importance of social-emotional development is growing, though implementation remains inconsistent.
- The school is beginning to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices into instruction and discipline systems.
- Staff are developing greater awareness of the effects of trauma and adversity.
- The school is progressing toward a more holistic, trauma-informed approach that increasingly aligns practice with research.

Establishing

- The principal actively applies his/her understanding of brain architecture to shape schoolwide structures and adult practices.
- Integrated instructional approaches support cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical development.
- The principal prioritizes social-emotional growth through trauma-informed, developmentally responsive systems that support belonging, regulation, academic success, and attendance
- The principal builds staff capacity through targeted professional learning, mentoring, and coaching focused on child development and supportive classroom practice.

Sustaining

- The principal leads a schoolwide Pre-K–3rd grade vision rooted in brain science and child development. The school leader ensures these principles drive all instructional, assessment, and support systems.
- Social-emotional learning is integrated into the core curriculum, fostering student self-regulation and positive identity.
- To combat the effects of toxic stress, the principal designs and refines comprehensive, trauma-informed systems.
- Through ongoing strategic analysis of behavior, attendance, and early learning data, the principal continuously monitors and improves the effectiveness of student supports.

Spotlight

Sayre Language Academy (Chicago, IL)

Sade Adekunle, Principal

When Principal Sade Adekunle arrived at Sayre Language Academy more than a decade ago, she came from a middle school background and, by her own admission, entered early childhood education with little background knowledge. That unfamiliarity became a strength. Rather than imposing assumptions, she approached Pre-K–3rd grade classrooms with curiosity, asking, “What are we doing here? Why does it matter? What can these kids do?” Over time, her leadership journey has been defined by challenging deeply held beliefs about young learners, grounded in a conviction that they are “super bright” and often underestimated. That mindset shift became the foundation for a systemwide transformation.

Early on, classrooms reflected what Principal Adekunle described as “orderly compliance,” where students were “dutiful...doing what [they’re] supposed to do,” completing worksheets and adhering to routines. Through cycles of inquiry, the school began to reimagine the student experience, moving from passive demonstration of learning such as repeating back what was taught, to active engagement in the learning. “What do students get to do as an outcome of learning?” became a driving question. Over several years, this led to a fundamental instructional shift: classrooms evolved into spaces where even the youngest

learners wrestled with complex ideas through movement, storytelling, collaboration, and real-world connections. As Principal Adekunle reflected, “You can give little kids really complex material...if you add reality...physical response...music...storytelling.” This was not a quick change. It required building a culture where teachers felt safe to take risks, iterate, and move beyond compliance-driven models toward deeper, more authentic learning.

Sustaining this transformation required systemic supports. The school established a leadership team with instructional coaches embedded across grade bands, alongside a shift in how student success is defined and measured. Moving beyond sole reliance on test performance, the school now prioritizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. Principal Adekunle explained that this work is explicitly tied to long-term outcomes, addressing the reluctance to take learning risks seen in upper grades by building those habits early. By embedding reflection, peer collaboration, and “don’t-give-up strategies” in the primary years, the school is not only transforming early learning experiences but also reshaping students’ trajectories, ensuring they enter later grades as confident, capable learners prepared to think, persist, and engage deeply.



Competency 3

Foster Partnerships with Families

A child's education does not begin or end at the school door. Families are young children's first and most important teachers, and education is a journey that extends far beyond the classroom walls. At its core, education is a collaborative effort among schools, families, and the broader community; grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and ongoing partnership. Families play an instrumental role during the Pre-K–3rd grade years, in particular, because children rely almost exclusively on adults in their lives for planning their daily schedule, transporting them to and from school, and facilitating their learning at home.

Elementary principals understand that family partnerships are built on a firm foundation of mutual trust, respect, and a shared commitment to the most vital mission: nurturing a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional well-being. To support student growth, school leaders must prioritize deep engagement with families and forge strong ties with a broad network of community-based organizations that create nurturing ecosystems for families and their children. **Ultimately, the principal's role is to unite staff, families, and community partners under a single shared purpose of ensuring every child thrives.**

Consistently, research points to the positive impacts that family partnerships and meaningful home-school relationships have on attendance, transitions to kindergarten, and student achievement through 3rd grade.⁴⁸ Providing a range of opportunities for families to collaborate and serve as knowledgeable advocates for their children's learning, while recognizing the assets each family holds, will

Competency 3

Strategies

- 3.1** Recognize and engage families as their child's first and most important teachers and as essential partners in fostering learning, attendance, belonging, and joy.
- 3.2** Cultivate a welcoming school culture for families that prioritizes strong, trusting relationships in order to enhance authentic partnerships between home and school.
- 3.3** Engage families intentionally by diversifying communication and partnership strategies to meet the strengths and needs of students across grade levels.
- 3.4** Facilitate and broker connections to community supports and services that help meet the diverse needs of families.
- 3.5** Invite stakeholders, including families and community partners, to understand data trends and provide input on program recommendations.



help these partnerships thrive.⁴⁹ Engaging families is neither a one-way nor a one-time transaction; it is a mindset that views families as “co-creators” of the learning experience rather than people who need to be “fixed” or “taught.” When principals honor and affirm the culture, beliefs, and background of all of the families and community members they serve, they model the level of commitment needed to provide a school experience that meets the needs of all students.⁵⁰ Through ongoing communication and partnership, school staff and families can build “dual capacity” to support each student’s success and well-being — meaning that both schools and families will be strengthened by the collaboration.⁵¹ Ultimately, through these partnerships, principals empower families with shared agency and leadership within the school community to impact lasting change.

Community organizations also play an important role in supporting student success across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. For young children in particular, before- and after-school as well as summer programs are essential because families’ work schedules may not permit them to be home during non-school hours. Many families may also benefit from a wide array of community programs that focus on health/wellness, mental health, economic stability, adult education, or

other services. These community partners may provide safety net services, or new opportunities, to families. Therefore, principals focused on implementing a Pre-K–3rd grade vision help make life better for children and families by recognizing the important roles of community organizations, facilitating connections to help families access supports and services to meet their critical needs.

Strategy 3.1

Recognize and engage families as their child’s first and most important teachers and as essential partners in fostering learning, attendance, belonging, and joy.

Principals who publicly acknowledge that learning starts long before kindergarten will set the tone for constructive collaboration with families. Schools must reject deficit-based views of families, instead embracing them as equal partners and essential experts on their children’s lives and communities. By engaging with families to understand their hopes and dreams for their child, schools honor families’ values and beliefs. Effective Pre-K–3rd grade school leaders realize that families are the essential bridge between the home and the classroom, serving as the primary influencers who establish the routines,

expectations, and emotional security necessary for a child to show up ready to learn every day. When families feel seen as partners, the child receives a consistent message about the value of learning in the context of *both* home *and* school.

Students' engagement in learning is about more than academic skill development. Engagement also depends on children feeling like they enjoy learning and that they are important members of the school community. Children cannot learn if they are not in attendance at school. Unfortunately, chronic absenteeism has almost doubled since the pandemic, especially among children living in poverty and students with disabilities.⁵² Chronic absences in the early grades can adversely affect children's developmental and educational outcomes and are linked to later achievement gaps and high school drop-out rates.⁵³ Familial factors largely influence young children's absenteeism including lack of reliable transportation, caregivers working long or inflexible hours, unstable or unaffordable housing, inadequate health care, or neighborhood violence. Proactive partnership between schools and families transforms attendance from a daily requirement into a shared commitment to children's long-term growth and belonging. Robust family engagement is a much more powerful predictor of student attendance than a family's socioeconomic background.⁵⁴ Schools with high levels of family engagement prior to 2020 saw significantly smaller declines in achievement and attendance during and after the pandemic.⁵⁵

Principals can demonstrate their commitment to family partnerships by using chronic absence data as a diagnostic tool to identify where family-based prevention and early intervention strategies are needed. Effective principals deal with attendance issues from a lens of understanding and support as opposed to punitiveness. An environment where young students and their families feel they belong and experience genuine joy requires a connection-first philosophy. The overarching goal is to move from simply monitoring attendance to actively cultivating an environment where every family feels that their child's presence is not just recorded, but truly celebrated. When a

school successfully bridges the gap between the classroom and the home, it doesn't just improve academic outcomes; it builds a resilient foundation for children and their families. Schools become a community where children and their families feel a deep, intrinsic sense of "This is where I belong."

Strategy 3.2

Cultivate a welcoming school culture for families that prioritizes strong, trusting relationships to enhance authentic partnerships between home and school.

School leaders set the tone for their buildings and in doing so signal to families that the schools are ready to support their young children. Meaningful engagement with families requires more than a series of one-time activities to which young children's caregivers are invited. Welcoming school cultures build relationships with families early and then make intentional efforts to sustain those relationships over time. Elementary schools that prioritize families have explicit spaces in the school to welcome family members as well as an open-door policy. Effective school leaders engage with families not simply to convey information, but to learn about families' hopes and aspirations for their children. Building strong connections before the first bell rings sets the tone for the entire school year by establishing a culture of reciprocity that aligns children's school-day learning with children's learning experiences at home.

Welcoming school cultures link all family activities to what students are learning. A sense of shared responsibility and collective understanding can be initiated by deepening the dialogue about, and broadening the venues for, learning among educators and families. Most importantly, families need to feel that they are true partners in the learning process and not just volunteers. This means that school leaders involve families in all major decisions, not only about their own child's learning but also about overall issues facing the school community.

Another aspect of school culture that nurtures relationships is one that recognizes purposeful play as the essential bridge for building trust and curiosity. School personnel and families alike

must remember that play is not a break from learning; it is the primary vehicle for student joy and social integration. Schools can prioritize play by allowing students to experience the power of choice, collaborative games, and learning through discovery. Not all families feel comfortable with traditional academic homework, but every family can engage in play. For schools, sharing playful strategies like storytelling, outdoor exploration, family game night, or building together validates the family's role as the child's first teacher. When families are involved in playful learning at school, through interactive events, they gain a front-row seat to their child's social development. By proactively and purposefully inviting parents and caregivers into the school through the lens of joy and play, principals transform their building into a vibrant hub of mutual trust, belonging, and collective investment.

Strategy 3.3

Engage families intentionally by diversifying communication and partnership strategies to meet the strengths and needs of students across grade levels.

For principals in today's schools there has been a shift in effective school leadership from sending home weekly folders to building a comprehensive ecosystem where communication is a two-way endeavor. When providing information to families, all modes of communication must be easily accessible, including translation into multiple home languages and formats for individuals with disabilities. Translation signals that every family is a valued member of the school community. Diversifying ways for parents and other caregivers to provide input is essential. Family surveys, interactive coffee chats with the principal, and opportunities to share their cultural heritage are just a few ways that school leaders provide family members with two-way communication opportunities. Schools' communication strategies must also provide flexibility for varying schedules, literacy levels, transportation availability, cultural preferences, and literacy or language differences.

Principals who consistently diversify communication embrace, but do not solely rely on, technology. Principals need to ensure that

no family feels that they have been dismissed by the school's choice of technology modalities (e.g., email, texts/instant messages, podcasts, blogs) and that a variety of communication options are available to families. As principals consider the most impactful ways to communicate with their families, they must consider multilingual accessibility, no technology versus low technology options, and audio recordings like podcasts delivering on-demand content. Effective principals survey their families throughout the year to discover what methods of communication work best for them.

High performing schools possess a leadership mindset that embraces communication strategies that move beyond traditional engagement like open houses to more meaningful and sustained partnerships.⁵⁶ What does this look like across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum?

In Pre-K and kindergarten, schools are onboarding students and families for their educational careers. Communications that are warm, welcoming, and reassuring and that clearly delineate expectations, routines, and procedures are needed. In addition to weekly newsletters, short videos of what children experience in their classrooms give

Ultimately, the principal's role is to unite staff, families, and community partners under a single shared purpose of ensuring every child thrives.

families a visual to help their understanding of play as an appropriate, high-level cognitive activity for children of this age range.

In 1st–3rd grade, the emphasis is on skill building and academic benchmarks, especially in reading and math. Social-emotional growth is also paramount during this time. Consistent, regular communications from school to home can occur in multiple ways, such as newsletters or texts that give families tips and tools to support their child's learning. For example, providing caregivers open-ended questions to ask during home reading that check for comprehension, encouraging family members to share a narrative of their day, or inspiring family members to take the opportunity to read environmental print with their children in the car are a just few no-cost ways that families can reinforce their child's learning.

It is the principal's role to identify the barriers that may be limiting authentic communication between families and schools, and to lead the way in implementing practices that mitigate the challenges. By diversifying communication strategies, a principal ensures that parents and caregivers possess an active voice in their child's learning, trusting relationships are prioritized, and authentic partnerships between home and school are fostered.

Strategy 3.4

Facilitate and broker connections to community supports and services that help meet the diverse needs of families.

Effective principals help families and children connect with enriching experiences and opportunities. These connections may be directly related to students' learning and include out-of-school and summer learning opportunities, or other year-round resources like libraries and museums. Alternatively, they may be related to family stability and well-being and include linkages to health or social services in the community. Most importantly, effective principals are well-equipped to respond immediately and effectively when students and families need support.

Facilitating connections begins with principals raising their own awareness of the broader community's demographics, challenges, strengths, and available resources. Understanding the assets and needs of a community — whether it be assets such as immigration or faith-based communities, or needs such as housing insecurity or a lack of health care — is critical knowledge for connecting with the most relevant external partners and organizations. Teachers and staff benefit from actively staying informed about the needs and current context of their community. In addition to increasing awareness of resources available in the community, principals and staff alike need to be well-versed in family-centered, culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Together, these skills and this knowledge increase a school's ability to connect and build trusting relationships with families, especially those from traditionally marginalized communities. Effective schools often play a vital but unseen role in helping to prevent and mitigate crises.

Effective Pre-K–3rd grade principals create a visible presence in the community by getting involved in projects and becoming a vocal advocate for services that benefit children and families. Their leadership is visible to external partners — for example, through participation in community events and meetings and engagement with local organizations. Their leadership is also visible to the school's community — for example, through dedicated efforts to provide links to community resources on school bulletin boards, websites, or a family/parent resource room located within the school. Depending on the availability of resources, principals may also consider utilizing the skills and interests of the staff or hiring a family/community liaison or social worker, either funded by the school or by partnering with a community organization. Having additional layers of support and community connection can frequently serve as a bridge between principals, teachers, and families when needed.

Strategy 3.5

Invite stakeholders, including families and community partners, to understand data trends and to provide input on program recommendations.

A useful framework for thinking about families, communities, data, and continuous improvement identifies at least three levels of practice.⁵⁷ First, families and communities can be sources of data. In school efforts, this is the most common approach and includes using data *about* students and families including, but not limited to, student achievement or kindergarten “readiness” data, attendance, discipline rates, and enrollment in programs or services. A second level of data-driven practices recognizes that families and other stakeholders possess important perspectives to inform continuous improvement efforts. Here, schools actively engage and support families and community members to collaboratively interact with data to inform or advocate for change. The third and most infrequently enacted practices are those in which families play *leadership* roles alongside principals, teachers, and district administrators.

Usually, elementary schools share data with families to inform them of their child’s progress during parent-teacher conferences or via data dashboards. This approach is valuable for ensuring families have access to the data being gathered about their own child and about the school’s student population. Ideally, schools also welcome family input to identify strategies to support their child both at home and in the classroom. To increase families’ agency, effective Pre-K–3rd grade leaders solicit feedback from families about not just their child, but also about the school’s climate, services, and supports. Importantly, thoughtful principals ensure that they create accessible ways for all families to contribute.

Standard surveys can often rely on methods that favor dominant groups in a school. Families who are non-native English speakers, have limited digital access, or work multiple jobs may find these surveys inaccessible, impersonal, or irrelevant. This results in a dynamic where only the most resourced families have a voice. Engaging a diversity of



families to reflect on data requires intentional, creative strategies. For example, a school may ask families themselves to design surveys or convene meetings to solicit input and ideas about how to improve the school's Pre-K–3rd grade efforts. By establishing regular avenues for sharing and discussing data, principals can engage families and the community in dialogue focused on collective identification of areas of strength and improvement needed by the school. By reaching out to families and communities, principals can reinforce the importance of their input and collaboration in continuous improvement efforts (see Competency 6).

Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Epstein, J. L. & Sheldon, S. B. (2023). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Routledge.

Henderson, A. T., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V. R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. The New Press.

Ishimaru, A. M. (2020). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.

★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

Families are children's first and most important teachers. Families also are the anchor for children's cultural and linguistic belonging. Make sure you recognize the need for intentional strategies to reach families that want to support their child's education who are often hindered by a lack of confidence, information, practical skills, or language barriers.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

As you make critical decisions on behalf of students, staff, and families, walk through the implications of your decision with a particular family of a young child in mind. How do they experience the outcome of your decision? Might there be unanticipated consequences or newly imposed barriers because of this decision that are especially impactful across early learning and the early grades?

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

A strong Pre-K–3rd grade family engagement strategy creates high expectations for partnership, trust, and communication early on. The implication for upper elementary is clear: family engagement should not wane. It should evolve in ways that match students' increasing need for autonomy, agency, and social independence. For example, instead of families managing every detail of the child's schoolwork, the school helps families transition into a coaching role.





Self-Assessment Competency 3

Foster Partnerships with Families

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- Family engagement is primarily event-based, at the start of the school year, and not differentiated for a family's first school experience.
- Communication is one-way, inconsistent, or not accessible to all families.
- There is limited recognition of families as partners in learning and understanding that a child's family is their first teacher.
- Staff have little knowledge of early learning resources and community partners. Connections are few, informal, and/or reactive.

Establishing

- The school offers a welcoming, inclusive culture where families experience trust, respect, and belonging across grade levels.
- Families are engaged as partners in supporting learning, attendance, and student well-being in differentiated approaches across the developmental continuum.
- The school implements a range of communication and engagement strategies (e.g., two-way communication, flexible meeting formats, multilingual supports) aligned to family needs.
- Established partnerships with community organizations create clear systems to connect families to supports and services.

Emerging

- Some structures exist to create a welcoming environment for families of young children in Pre-K classrooms, though implementation is inconsistent and not evident in the school as a whole.
- Families are recognized as important contributors to a child's early learning but the school conveys an overall sense that it is the expert.
- Multiple communication methods are used with families, but they are not tailored to family needs or preferences.
- Community resources are shared with families, only after needs arise.

Sustaining

- School culture is co-created *with* families, reflecting shared ownership and mutual trust.
- Families are empowered as leaders and decision-makers in shaping Pre-K-3rd grade practices and student experiences.
- Differentiated engagement strategies are continuously refined based on family feedback and data.
- Strategic partnerships with community organizations provide integrated, wraparound supports for families.
- The impact of family partnerships is evaluated by family and student outcomes (e.g., attendance, engagement), then continuously improved.

Spotlight

Lanakila Elementary (Honolulu, HI)

Kerry Higa, Principal

The student body at Lanakila Elementary is highly diverse. Nearly 70% of students live in economically disadvantaged households and approximately 80% are Asian and Pacific Islander. Of the English Learner population, the majority identify as Chinese, Micronesian/Chuuk, Filipino, Samoan, with most students speaking Mandarin, Chuukese, and Marshallese. At the heart of Principal Higa's approach to develop an environment where every child feels they belong is a deliberate effort to design a school where every child is seen, included, and connected from the moment they arrive. One of the most visible strategies is the daily "morning huddle," a schoolwide gathering that brings together students across grade levels, including those in Pre-K, English learners, and students with special needs. Through shared activities like movement, dancing, celebrations, and aligned social-emotional learning, the huddle creates a consistent space where students interact across differences, build relationships, and begin the day with a sense of belonging. The principal sees this not just as a routine, but as a unifying structure that increases attendance, builds community, and reinforces shared values.

Recognizing that most students entered school without consistent preschool experience, Principal Higa leveraged state funding to expand access, prioritizing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, and students with families experiencing homelessness. These preschool classrooms are fully integrated into the broader Pre-K–5th grade system. Teachers collaborate across grade levels, including preschool educators in faculty meetings and instructional planning, ensuring that students build skills early that carry into kindergarten

and beyond. This alignment has led to stronger readiness, particularly as students engage more in talk, play, and shared experiences that support both academic and language development.

Across the school, a focus on collaboration, communication, and interaction serves as a central strategy for meeting diverse needs. Whether through structured approaches like Building Thinking Classrooms or intentional groupings of students across languages, cultures, and abilities, students are consistently expected to talk to each other, collaborate, and support one another. Language development is treated as a shared responsibility, with general education teachers, specialists, and even peers contributing to growth. Students act as language ambassadors, helping new students navigate both the school and the language. This emphasis on peer interaction not only accelerates language acquisition but also strengthens empathy and connection among students.

Underlying these efforts is a strong culture of collaboration among staff and families. Teachers are given time to analyze data, co-design strategies, and learn from one another, including dedicated opportunities for special education and general education teachers to work together. The principal has worked to shift mindsets toward shared ownership, emphasizing that all students, regardless of needs, belong in the same community. This extends to families as well, where targeted efforts to engage underrepresented groups, such as Micronesian families, have transformed participation and strengthened connections between home and school. Through these aligned systems, the school has built an environment where belonging is a daily practice.



Competency 4

Build Professional Capacity

Inside schools, classroom educators have the most direct influence on young students' learning. A Pre-K–3rd grade vision requires nimble expertise from adults across the grade levels who can differentiate instruction to meet individual students' needs while also ensuring a level of rigor that encourages growth. Because of the episodic nature of child development, especially during the early grades, students' skills vary and require different levels of teacher support, or scaffolding, to help them learn. Traditionally, Pre-K teachers may have more background and experience in playful pedagogy, and K–3 teachers may have more background and experience in content areas such as early reading and math. Bridging these experiences is the goal of building professional capacity across Pre-K–3rd grade.

Creating the infrastructure and conditions for high-quality instruction that serves all students effectively is not a principal's responsibility alone. One of the most essential roles for principals is to engage staff in leading the vision (see Competency 1), empowering teachers to improve their practice and create shared responsibility for student experiences and outcomes. Inherent to this is reframing the role of teaching as collaborative, rather than isolated, work. Without meaningful engagement from teachers in both early learning and the early grades, teacher collaboration and instructional alignment within and across grades, will be imbalanced.⁵⁸

Pre-K–3rd grade teachers are generalists, not specialists. They are required to have knowledge of many subjects, to be able to nurture their students' motivation to learn, and to base both on a deep understanding of how young children

Competency 4

Strategies

- 4.1** Structure a routine for the leadership team that models joint work and shared responsibility for the Pre-K–3rd grade vision and ensures there is strategic representation from each grade level and specialty roles.
- 4.2** Design aligned, rigorous, and relevant professional learning experiences that enhance collaboration and strengthen teacher practice.
- 4.3** Foster a healthy, resilient culture that nurtures the well-being of self and staff, intentionally modeling self-care in a way that enables the school community to effectively support and serve students and families.
- 4.4** Use knowledge of educators' strengths to determine optimal hiring decisions and teaching assignments, with the long-term goal of recruiting and retaining effective teachers.

develop. Effective professional learning embodies what is known about *adult* learning — it needs to be on-going, collaborative, job-embedded, and focused on content and process.⁵⁹ It is not passive, but rather requires in-depth efforts to engage teachers to reflect on their own practices, observe and collaborate with other teachers, and co-construct strategies aligned with educational standards and developmental milestones. By creating intentional time for teams of teachers to engage in collaborative inquiry, principals can redefine teaching as a joint endeavor.

Principals who lead with a strong Pre-K–3rd grade vision make deliberate staffing decisions. Research shows that young students benefit significantly from access to strong teaching, with improved outcomes and reduced achievement gaps,⁶⁰ even as accountability pressures may tempt schools to concentrate their strongest teachers in tested grades. Rather than treating early learning and the early grades as less critical, principals intentionally place their most skilled and effective teachers in Pre-K–3rd grade.

Additionally, when principals build cohesive and impactful Pre-K–3rd grade teams they ensure students experience multiple *consecutive* years of effective teaching, which strengthens gains across literacy, mathematics, self-regulation, and motivation. They also attend to the importance

of representation, recognizing that students often achieve better outcomes when taught by teachers who share their cultural backgrounds and experiences.⁶¹ Taken together, these practices require principals and district leaders to approach hiring and teacher assignment strategically — aligning talent, experience, and diversity to ensure that every young student has consistent access to excellent, developmentally responsive instruction.

Being an effective elementary principal is emotionally demanding work. The very nature of being in a helping profession, and leading in organizations with multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., staff, students, families, community members, central office, the state) that place both explicit and implicit demands on principals' time and attention, can be exhausting for principals. Supporting families and students who are experiencing adversity or trauma can be challenging and stressful, and, for many, lead to burnout.⁶² Estimates of annual principal turnover are as high as 21% in schools with high proportions of students experiencing poverty.⁶³ To mitigate this, teachers and principals will benefit from focusing on their own health and well-being, creating professional support networks, and engaging in personal development strategies, such as mindfulness activities and physical self-care.

When principals build cohesive and impactful Pre-K–3rd grade teams they ensure students experience multiple consecutive years of effective teaching, which strengthens gains across literacy, mathematics, self-regulation, and motivation.



Strategy 4.1

Structure a routine for the leadership team that models joint work and shared responsibility for the Pre-K-3rd grade vision and ensures there is strategic representation from each grade level and specialty roles.

Sharing leadership includes principals providing opportunities for teachers to serve as leaders within Pre-K-3rd grade implementation efforts. Effective leadership in schools is a social and collaborative practice rather than an individual role. Joint leadership is the idea that leadership is not held by the principal alone, but rather, is enacted collectively across educators, teams, and roles.⁶⁴ The leadership team plays a critical role in turning a Pre-K-3rd grade vision into coherent daily practice. This is accomplished by establishing and communicating a shared vision for student success that values academic growth, social-emotional development, and belonging. Effective team members align curriculum, instruction, interventions, and transitions across grade levels to create a seamless learning continuum for children and families. They use multiple sources of data to guide decisions and provide support that strengthens high-quality teaching. Importantly, they allocate time, staffing,

and resources to prioritize early learning and determine which student groups need it most. Grounded in child development and authentic family partnership, the team shares responsibility across roles and continuously improves systems and practices so that every child experiences consistent, responsive, and high-quality learning from Pre-K-3rd grade.

To be most reflective of a Pre-K-3rd grade vision, the leadership team should include teachers who represent specific areas of expertise, such as special education, dual language and English Learners, and, most critically, teachers from every grade level, including Pre-K and kindergarten. Pre-K teachers, in particular, are often left out of an elementary school's teacher teamwork, sometimes because they are supervised by someone other than the principal, other times because they are not seen as essential to the school's mission (see Competency 1). By intentionally establishing collaborative systems in which decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, family partnership, and school culture are made collectively rather than in isolated departments or grade-level silos, the principal demonstrates their commitment to shared leadership.

Pre-K-3rd grade principals intentionally, explicitly, and consistently embrace Pre-K and kindergarten teachers to be partners and leaders in the school's

planning efforts. These teachers will offer insight and leadership around child development and pedagogical strategies grounded in playful and hands-on engagement. When Pre-K and kindergarten teachers share learning time and space with teachers in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades, there is more opportunity for developmentally informed and joyful teaching practices to “push up” into those primary grades. Together, this leadership team can problem-solve, plan, and collaboratively implement meaningful strategies to enhance teachers’ instructional skills and strategies across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.

A strong principal structures consistent routines for the leadership team that model joint work and shared responsibility for the school’s Pre-K–3rd grade vision. Effective principals facilitate regular leadership team meetings, data reviews, learning walks, planning cycles, and problem-solving routines that focus on coherence across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. They use these structures to align expectations, identify trends, strengthen transitions between grades, allocate resources strategically, and monitor progress toward shared goals. By modeling collaboration, distributed leadership, and collective accountability, the principal builds trust, reduces fragmentation, and creates a unified system in which every leader shares responsibility for student success from preschool through 3rd grade.

Strategy 4.2

Design aligned, rigorous, and relevant professional learning experiences that enhance collaboration and strengthen teacher practice.

Effective classroom instruction, interactions, and learning environments for young children are distinctly unique from those for older students. Principals, therefore, need to incorporate differentiated professional learning for Pre-K–3rd grade teachers throughout the year. While teacher preparation programs play a significant role in producing teachers, school districts and principals bear responsibility to put structures in place that support teachers’ ongoing learning and genuine collaboration, which includes high-quality professional learning and job-embedded coaching

and mentoring. The science of learning and development *for young students* is expanding rapidly. While Pre-K–3rd grade teachers will benefit from participation in schoolwide professional learning, their engagement in targeted opportunities that focus on up-to-date child development and pedagogical strategies is a proven strategy to improve instruction and increase student outcomes.⁶⁵

Professional learning is not simply staff receiving new knowledge — it can also incorporate teachers conducting peer classroom observations, followed by cross-grade level team reflection time to share observed examples of high-quality practices. As part of teachers’ professional learning, principals can provide the necessary conditions for Pre-K and K–3rd grade teachers to participate in horizontal (within-grade) and vertical (cross-grade) teams to plan, reflect, and work with one another to improve practice. Vertically aligned collaboration can be especially effective for teachers to understand the trajectories of development and learning. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can significantly enhance educators’ shared understanding and responsibilities by creating structured opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and continuous improvement (see Competency 6) focused on the unique needs of young children. Through PLCs, educators can analyze student work and observational data, sharing effective strategies for literacy, numeracy, language development, playful learning, and social-emotional growth. Team collaboration that focuses on learning intentions and success criteria, even for the youngest learners, ensures universal expectations across classrooms, so a child’s opportunity is not dependent on their classroom placement.

Time for teachers to plan and collaborate can be a challenging resource to expand yet may be one of the most important. Research identifies collective teacher efficacy, the shared belief that together they can positively impact student learning, as one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. What teachers believe together may matter more than almost any structural reform. Collective efficacy turns schools from a group of individual classrooms

into a coherent, high-impact learning system.⁶⁶ Creative school leaders find ways to prioritize high leverage collaboration routines and expectations within the Pre-K–3rd grade vision. For some, aligning teachers' planning time across the school's weekly or monthly schedule and creating shared decision-making with teachers to establish clear routines, protocols, and expectations for how to use that time, are options. For others, extending the school day or increasing contract hours to provide regular time for teachers to collaborate are options, although these may require negotiation with unions and school boards.⁶⁷

Paraprofessionals may play a pivotal role in a young child's educational experience. Principals can build the capacity of paraprofessionals in Pre-K–3rd grade classrooms by clearly defining their instructional role and ensuring they are meaningfully included in the school's vision for supporting strong relationships and individualized learning. This includes providing targeted professional learning on child development, early literacy and numeracy practices, and effective ways to support playful and small-group instruction. Principals should also create structures for paraprofessionals to collaborate with teachers, such as participating

in planning conversations or PLCs, so their work is aligned with classroom goals. When paraprofessionals are included in team meetings, recognized for their impact, and supported with coaching and feedback, they are more likely to take ownership of their role and engage more intentionally with students.

Strategy 4.3

Foster a healthy, resilient culture that nurtures the well-being of self and staff, intentionally modeling self-care in a way that enables the school community to effectively support and serve students and families.

Paying attention to adults' emotional state in relation to their jobs — such as satisfaction, engagement, and collegial relationships — matters deeply when considering principal and teacher turnover, as well as a school's ability to support students and families. To remain engaged and responsive to the evolving needs of the school, principals and teachers will benefit from spending time developing a strong sense of purpose and coping strategies, both individually and as a collective. Studies show that teachers with stronger emotional





well-being experience less burnout and stress; have more cognitive bandwidth for instruction; and are more responsive and flexible with students, leading to more effective instruction and differentiation.⁶⁸ Modeling these behaviors, especially for impressionable young children, supports their own learning about emotional well-being and regulation.

Paramount to both teachers' and principals' well-being is establishing a school climate built on mutual respect, high levels of trust, and an appreciation of each other's differences. When these values are in place, interactions between adults (e.g., administrators, teachers, staff) mirror the interactions that are desired between teachers and students; among staff, family members, and community stakeholders; and most importantly, between young children. Research shows that teacher well-being is positively associated with both student well-being and learning. This parallel process ensures that adults, too, experience the power of community, voice, and diversity. Importantly, principals should create opportunities for teachers and staff to share individual and collective celebrations, participate in shared positive storytelling, and nurture their creativity

and problem-solving skills. A Pre-K–3rd grade vision should be built and reinforced on strengths and celebration — enhancing a culture of promise, hope, and possibility.

Educator well-being, therefore, is a foundational condition for Pre-K–3rd grade success because the quality of early learning depends heavily on the adults who create children's daily experiences. When teachers, support staff, and leaders feel valued, supported, and emotionally healthy, they are better able to build responsive relationships, provide consistent routines, respond patiently to student needs, and deliver strong instruction during the years when children are developing core skills. Well-being also influences collaboration, decision-making, and the ability to sustain a coherent Pre-K–3rd grade vision across grade levels. In contrast, chronic stress, burnout, and high turnover can disrupt classroom stability, weaken instructional quality, and interrupt the trusting relationships that young children need to thrive. Prioritizing educator well-being through manageable workloads, professional trust, supportive leadership, and meaningful collaboration strengthens both adult effectiveness and student outcomes across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.

Strategy 4.4

Use knowledge of educators' strengths to determine optimal hiring decisions and teaching assignments, with the long-term goal of recruiting and retaining effective teachers.

When considering staffing, it is important for principals to make decisions about teacher placement based on the understanding that high-quality Pre-K–3rd grade classrooms need teachers with strong background knowledge in the science of learning and development and its implications for both instructional approaches and learning environments. For Pre-K–3rd grade teachers who have more experience teaching older students, principals may need to provide them with differentiated and specific support to increase their knowledge of child development. This support may entail on-going instructional coaching and mentoring on creating content-rich and engaging instruction for young learners. Ultimately, as a result of supportive and continuous feedback, principals can maximize the instructional capacity of all Pre-K–3rd grade teachers.

A strong Pre-K–3rd grade principal uses deep knowledge of educators' strengths, expertise, dispositions, and growth potential to make strategic hiring decisions and teaching assignments that maximize student learning while building long-term staff capacity across the school. This means carefully considering each teacher's skill in early literacy, numeracy, child development, relationship-building, classroom culture, differentiation, family partnership, and collaboration when determining placements from preschool through 3rd grade. Effective principals recognize that different grade levels and roles require different strengths — for example, some educators may excel in foundational skill development, while others excel in language-rich instruction, inquiry-based learning, intervention, or mentoring colleagues — and intentionally match teachers to positions where they can have the greatest impact. They also consider team composition, balancing experience levels, instructional expertise, and leadership capacity across grade bands so that every team has

strong models of practice and support for newer teachers. Hiring decisions should prioritize candidates who understand developmentally responsive practice, culturally responsive teaching, high-quality instructional materials, and the importance of continuity across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum.

Beyond placement, effective principals revisit assignments over time based on student needs, teacher performance, and school priorities rather than relying on tradition or convenience. A robust evaluation process encourages optimal staffing in Pre-K–3rd grade by providing meaningful evidence about educators' strengths, areas for growth, and overall readiness to meet the unique needs of young learners. A strong evaluation process also reveals professional learning needs, allowing leaders to build an internal talent pipeline for future Pre-K–3rd grade roles and leadership positions.

Given that retention of effective educators is important, principals create conditions that keep strong teachers in the profession through supportive supervision, meaningful feedback, job-embedded professional learning, collaborative planning time, recognition, and pathways for leadership without leaving the classroom. When used as a tool for growth rather than compliance, evaluation systems help ensure that every classroom is staffed with educators who are equipped to provide consistent, high-quality learning experiences during the most critical years of child development while simultaneously encouraging a reflective, joyful, and collaborative *adult* learning culture.

Strong induction supports for new career teachers in Pre-K–3rd grade are especially important. In the early years, teachers must skillfully balance instruction in foundational literacy and numeracy with play, language development, relationship-building, self-regulation, and developmentally responsive classroom structures. New educators benefit from structured onboarding; mentoring from experienced Pre-K–3rd grade teachers; regular coaching; and protected time to plan, observe, and reflect. Induction should also build knowledge of child development, family partnership, early intervention systems,

transitions across grade levels, and strategies for recognizing emerging needs before they become larger challenges. When schools invest in strong induction systems for Pre-K–3rd grade teachers, they strengthen retention, accelerate teacher effectiveness, and ensure young children experience the consistent, high-quality instruction and care that matter most during these critical years. By aligning talent decisions to a coherent Pre-K–3rd grade vision, principals strengthen instructional quality, increase staff stability, improve student outcomes, and create a sustainable pathway for effective educators who can grow with the school over time.

Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Brackett, M. (2025). *Dealing with feeling: Use your emotions to create the life you want*. Celadon Books.

Venables, D. R. (2017). *Facilitating teacher teams and authentic PLCs: The human side of leading people, protocols, and practices*. ASCD.

Wiliam, D. (2016). *Leadership for teacher learning: Creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed*. Learning Sciences International.

★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

Collective teacher efficacy — teams believing *together* they can impact outcomes — leads to shared ownership for *all* students, not just those in one classroom; collaborative problem-solving around inequities; and consistent practices across classrooms and grade levels from Pre-K–3rd grade. This results in reduced variability in young learners' experiences, which is a major driver of inequity.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

Seek out opportunities to build your own professional learning by engaging in professional learning communities and networks comprised of other leaders and practitioners who are prioritizing Pre-K–3rd grade investments. In what ways are you building the capacity of others in your school to share leadership and responsibility for the Pre-K–3rd grade vision? How are you ensuring that you and your staff are caring for the well-being and joy of one another?

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

Professional learning experiences for upper elementary teachers should consider the evolution of pedagogy across the continuum, drawing on the science of brain development and accentuating continued joy for learning. At the same time, there should be intentionality toward the rigor and content specific to teaching and learning in upper elementary as students prepare for the transition to middle school.





Self-Assessment Competency 4

Build Professional Capacity

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- Leadership structures are inconsistent or primarily compliance-driven.
- Staff collaboration across Pre-K–3rd grade is limited, and early learning alignment is not clearly established.
- Decision-making is often isolated or principal-dependent.
- Hiring practices do not prioritize expertise in early learning.
- Professional learning is episodic and not consistently connected to early learning development.
- Attention to staff well-being is informal with limited connection to instructional capacity or student learning conditions.

Establishing

- The principal establishes coherent systems that promote shared leadership across Pre-K–3rd grade teams.
- Staffing decisions are strategic and consider the early childhood expertise of educators.
- Professional learning is ongoing, job-embedded, and explicitly connected to early learning research.
- There are clear expectations for implementation, with structures in place to monitor and support practice through collaboration.
- The principal recognizes that teacher emotional well-being influences classroom climate, student engagement, and early learning outcomes.

Emerging

- Some systems exist to support collaboration, shared leadership, and professional learning aligned to Pre-K–3rd grade vision.
- Alignment of staff practices and priorities is uneven.
- Hiring practices demonstrate inconsistent prioritization of early learning experience and expertise.
- Professional learning occasionally addresses early childhood development.
- Shared expectations for instruction and assessment are not consistently applied across grade levels.
- Staff well-being is acknowledged but not viewed as essential to instructional effectiveness.

Sustaining

- The principal sustains a collaborative Pre-K–3rd grade culture with authentically distributed leadership.
- Professional learning is embedded in daily practice and grounded in the science of learning and development.
- Professional learning intentionally includes school and community-based early learning providers.
- Staffing structures are designed to strengthen continuity across early grades.
- Hiring and retention decisions are grounded in early childhood development research.
- Staff well-being is embedded in leadership systems.

Spotlight

Dr. Catherine Ellison-Rosa Parks Early Education School (Mattapan, MA)

Dwayne Nunez, Principal

Principal Dwayne Nunez is in his third year as principal of Dr. Catherine Ellison-Rosa Parks Early Education School (Ellison Parks) in Mattapan, MA in Boston Public Schools. Ellison Parks serves children K0 (age three) through 3rd grade; nearly all (97%) families identify as African American or Latino. While working at the district level, Nunez saw a gap between ideas and implementation, "If folks can't see it in practice. . . then we're just giving people guidance." That realization led him to pursue building a "flagship school" where strong instruction, aligned systems, and student outcomes could be seen in action throughout the building.

In year one, he entered the school with a clear sense of purpose. He worked to shift a culture he believed prioritized adult comfort over student needs. His changes included restructuring how paraprofessionals were scheduled to create more consistency for students and using high-quality instructional materials across grade levels. Principal Nunez spent much of his time in classrooms, modeling lessons and giving feedback. He made coaching non-negotiable, no matter where staff were in their career journey. He strengthened support for students' social-emotional needs. "Now we truly are an inclusion school. We support all students and when kids get challenging, we get intentional about the way we support." He also built teachers' capacity to support students with the most challenging behaviors. "Intentional capacity building leads to a team of people who feel confident in the work that they do."

In year two, Principal Nunez started sharing greater responsibility with his staff. He created leadership structures, including an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and teacher-led groups focused on school culture and family engagement, building the capacity of those teams to develop a clear purpose. While he was still closely involved in

guiding the work, these teams began to take on more ownership. While schoolwide data showed an increase of students meeting or exceeding expectations, he realized that they were "sending 50% of our students out of this building *not* meeting or exceeding expectations." As a result, he revised the school's mission to "100% of our kids will meet or exceed expectations academically and socially." This shift focused decisions and made existing efforts more intentional, including family events that were now tied more directly to student learning. The school started to see improvement in student outcomes, and staff culture began to recover from the strain of the first year.

By year three, leadership was more distributed. Principal Nunez shifted into more of a supporting role, even when decisions were not exactly what he would have chosen. "I had to allow folks to lead," he explained. The ILT started leading collaborative planning time for their colleagues and planning and developing professional learning for the whole school. As a team they developed a set of clear instructional expectations known as the "EP way." Teachers observed each other's classrooms, participated in cross-classroom visits, and used shared expectations to guide feedback and planning.

Over time, the school has developed systems that are more consistent, expectations are clearer, and teachers play a larger role in leading the work. Principal Nunez focuses on supporting and sustaining these efforts, rather than driving every decision. To maintain high expectations, he reinforces a simple message, "You can do more, but you can't do less." What began as an individual vision has become a collective effort, grounded in shared responsibility and a focus on meeting the needs of all students.



Competency 5

Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments

The content, quality, and delivery of instruction are what matter most in Pre-K–3rd grade efforts.⁶⁹ While this feels like common sense, the reality is that the curriculum, pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, and classroom environments that most elementary schools deliver are often not well matched with the science of learning and development for young children. A starting point is ensuring that curriculum and instructional practices are aligned, beginning in Pre-K and continuing grade after grade. Alignment of instructional materials, including curriculum and assessments, across Pre-K–3rd grade can mitigate the “push down” of a narrow set of academic expectations from the primary grades onto Pre-K and kindergarten. It can also encourage the “push up” of developmentally informed pedagogical practices into the primary grades. Without connecting learning across grade levels, children often struggle to see how what they are learning connects to their everyday lives or prepares them for their future.

Meaningful Pre-K–3rd grade alignment is not simply a question of matching standards or pacing guides across grades, but of building “productive continuity” in both academic instruction and the social climate and classroom-management practices that shape children’s social-emotional development.⁷⁰ Preschool and elementary teachers often hold different beliefs about the relative importance of social-emotional development and academic skill. Standards and accountability systems

Competency 5

Strategies

- 5.1** Establish and clearly communicate the importance of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), including curricula that address goals in all developmental and content domains and provide strong guidance for teaching effectively.
- 5.2** Foster strong teacher–student and student–student interactions through purposeful, playful, project-based, and exploratory learning experiences.
- 5.3** Design warm, organized, and child-centered environments that reinforce learning that is culturally responsive and intentionally supportive of different learners and learning styles.
- 5.4** Identify and implement high-quality, aligned assessments that measure academic (especially reading and math) and social-emotional milestones.
- 5.5** Promote the intentional use of technology to support and amplify, rather than replace, effective teaching and learning.

between Pre-K and the early grades are frequently misaligned, and Pre-K and elementary classrooms are often not even in the same building. Closing those gaps requires more than a curriculum map. It requires enacting strategies that build shared understandings and beliefs about what and how young children should learn. A coherent approach to high-quality instruction, pedagogy, and learning environments can be nurtured through ongoing and shared professional learning across Pre-K–3rd grade teachers (see Competency 4) related to curriculum implementation, formative assessment, supports for English language learners, and classroom management. The result of this is children experiencing a coherent set of expectations and relationships rather than a series of unrelated experiences from one grade to the next.

Some populations of students — including those from low-income families or living in low-income neighborhoods, English Learners, and students with disabilities — often receive narrow conceptions of instruction that emphasize low-cognitive-demand tasks and procedural skills.⁷¹

When coherent, evidence-validated instruction is layered with sustained adult learning and a whole-school approach, young children’s outcomes improve across domains, not just on the tested subject.

Some students are also pulled from Tier 1 instruction in favor of intervention approaches that are misaligned with grade-level expectations, further hindering their access and opportunity to consistent, effective instruction. High-quality instruction prioritizes the development of deep conceptual understanding; sparks joy, confidence, and engagement in young children; and reflects a scope and sequence that follow research-validated learning trajectories.⁷² Inclusion is also designed, not assumed, as part of high-quality instruction. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides multiple ways for children to engage with content, access information, and show what they know, making classrooms effective for more children more of the time. Well-resourced, full-inclusion models for children with disabilities consistently outperform more restrictive alternatives in the early grades.⁷³ Multi-tiered systems of support frameworks (MTSS), layered onto developmentally appropriate core instruction, make it possible to respond early when any child is struggling without fragmenting the school day.

Recent research has sharpened what high-quality instruction looks like in practice. A study of high-quality practice — when coupled with targeted intervention, peer coaching, and shared professional learning — found measurable gains not only in mathematics but also in reading, attendance, and disciplinary outcomes, with slightly larger benefits for students of color.⁷⁴ Findings like these reinforce a lasting lesson for principals: when coherent, evidence-validated instruction is layered with sustained adult learning and a whole-school approach, young children’s outcomes improve across domains, not just on the tested subject.

Strategy 5.1

Establish and clearly communicate the importance of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), including curricula, that address goals in all developmental and content domains and provide strong guidance for teaching effectively.

High-quality instructional materials (HQIM) are one of the highest-leverage decisions a principal influences. A growing research base shows that

when teachers are given coherent, evidence-aligned curricula with built-in teaching supports, students learn more. This is true in Pre-K–3rd grade as much as it is in later grades, and the effect is often largest for students who have historically had less access to strong instruction.

At the same time, school leaders in the early grades face a persistent market challenge: there are relatively few comprehensive Pre-K–3rd grade curricula designed to ensure continuity and coherence across grade levels, and even fewer full-day, integrated models that span developmental and academic domains. As a result, principals are often required to piece together multiple resources, increasing the importance of selecting materials that are aligned in approach and expectations.

“High-quality” has a specific meaning in early learning and the early grades.⁷⁵ Research and professional standards point to curricula that address the full range of developmental and content domains — language and literacy, mathematics, science and inquiry, social studies, the arts, motor development, and social-emotional learning — rather than narrowing to tested subjects only. High-quality curricula also provide strong, practical guidance that helps teachers plan and deliver effectively without requiring heroic improvisation; are culturally and linguistically responsive to the children in the classroom; reflect current research on how young children learn (for example, evidence-aligned literacy instruction and number-sense development in mathematics); and leave room for teacher professional judgment and child interest, rather than scripting every minute of the day.

In elementary schools, reading and math often dominate curriculum attention. Evidence-aligned literacy instruction should explicitly teach decoding and phonemic awareness while continuing to build vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension. Strong mathematics programs should be rooted in number sense and conceptual understanding, with consistent use of manipulatives and other concrete representations to make abstract ideas visible. However, reading and math are

not the whole curriculum. **Children in Pre-K–3rd grade also deserve rich science, social studies, the arts, motor development, and deliberate social-emotional learning — the full breadth supported by research that subsequent grades depend upon.**

Learning trajectories provide a research-based foundation for sequencing instruction. Recent research shows that early mathematics develops along predictable progressions. It also shows that when curricula and teaching are intentionally aligned to these progressions, with each level of thinking building in sophistication and with instructional strategies matched accordingly, students demonstrate stronger learning that persists into later grades.⁷⁶ A similar evidence base has emerged in early literacy.⁷⁷ Research grounded in the science of reading demonstrates that reading development follows a cumulative progression — from oral language and phonological awareness to decoding, fluency, and comprehension — and that systematic, explicit instruction aligned to these processes leads to stronger and more durable outcomes.

Principals lead this work in several ways, even in systems where curriculum adoption decisions are made at the district or state level. They play a critical role in how curriculum is implemented, shaping who is involved in local decision-making, how materials are introduced, and how coherence is maintained across classrooms. Where there is local decision-making, principals may also influence selection processes, ensuring clear criteria are used and that the teachers most affected have meaningful input.

Principals communicate, explicitly and often, that curriculum matters and why. They protect teachers’ time to learn and implement the curriculum well. They check that materials arrive in classrooms with full teacher guides, assessment components, and supplementary resources. They also avoid the common pattern of adopting a strong curriculum on paper while simultaneously overloading teachers with competing initiatives that make full implementation impossible.

Strategy 5.2

Foster strong teacher-student and student-student interactions through purposeful, playful, project-based, and exploratory learning experiences.

If instructional materials are the “what,” pedagogy and interactions are the “how.” A large body of research shows that the quality of teacher-child and child-child interactions is one of the strongest predictors of young children’s learning and development.⁷⁸ Interactions that are warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating foster motivation as well as better academic and social-emotional outcomes. Teaching practices that prioritize active student engagement greatly increase the productivity of instructional time; interactions that are rote, controlling, or disengaging do the opposite.

Strong interactions in Pre-K–3rd grade include purposeful talk because children build language, social skills, and conceptual understanding through working with other children, not only through receiving information from adults. Examples of effective interactions include teachers asking open-ended questions and giving children space to respond; extended back-and-forth conversations about ideas children care about; project-based and inquiry-driven experiences that let children investigate real questions over time; ample peer collaboration; and playful engagement, with play understood not as the opposite of learning but as the engine of it. Importantly, principals and their teachers understand that play remains a valued experience as children matriculate beyond Pre-K and kindergarten, and they design schedules, instructional blocks, and teaching moves that encourage exploration, inquiry, and hands-on learning within intentional, guided play.⁷⁹

Perhaps the greatest influence principals have is through the conditions they create for teaching and learning. They ensure teachers have adequate time in the day for extended, uninterrupted learning blocks — project work, play, investigation — rather than schedules fragmented by rotations and specialists that break children’s thinking. They build a coaching culture where teachers get feedback on interaction quality, and they protect the intellectual

life of the early-grade classroom against pressure to convert the day into test preparation, worksheets, or compliance drilling. Principals also support teachers in helping students as young as age 4 and 5 develop clarity around their learning and an understanding of what success looks like. Together, the teacher and the student have opportunities to reflect on the child's learning, so the teacher gradually takes on the role of guide while children begin to drive and assess their own learning.

Strategy 5.3

Design warm, organized, and child-centered environments that reinforce learning that is culturally responsive and intentionally supportive of different learners and learning styles.

An engaging learning environment begins with a school atmosphere and classroom spaces that are warm and welcoming, organized to promote diverse learning experiences for young children, and focused on celebrating students' varied abilities and backgrounds. Furniture, equipment, and learning materials should provide rich, engaging, and multisensory learning opportunities for young learners. The arrangement of furniture and materials must maximize small-group interactions, student collaboration, problem-solving, creative play, and physical movement within the classroom. A well-balanced early childhood classroom features imagination corners, block areas, and reading nooks; a diverse classroom library; safe or quiet spaces; and activity centers that emphasize the arts.

Young children learn with their whole bodies, in relationship with adults they trust, in spaces that make sense to them. The physical and social environment of an early-grade classroom is integral to the instruction, not a backdrop to it. Research on early learning and early grades environments is unusually consistent: warm, predictable, and organized classrooms — with clear routines, accessible materials, distinct areas for different kinds of work, and developmentally appropriate furniture — support better attention, self-regulation, and engagement.⁸⁰ Child-centered environments give children meaningful choice,

genuine agency, and opportunities to act on their own interests within a structure teachers have carefully designed. Environments that reflect students' lives make children visible in the languages on the walls, the books on the shelves, the images in the room, and in the ways classroom artifacts connect home and school.

Environments also need to work for the full range of children who enter them. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)⁸¹ offers a practical framework: give children multiple means of engaging with learning, multiple means of taking in information, and multiple means of showing what they know. Trauma-informed design — predictable routines, calming spaces, relational safety — matters especially for children who have experienced adversity. For children with disabilities, the research increasingly points toward well-resourced full inclusion as both more effective and more than just segregated alternatives. For multilingual learners, environments that treat multiple languages as assets rather than problems open up learning; environments that require children to leave their language at the door shut it down.

Principals lead this work through explicit attention to it. They walk classrooms with a specific environmental lens. They provide time and resources for teachers to arrange classrooms reflective of children's development and refresh them over time. They ensure classroom libraries, materials, and wall displays reflect the children in the building. They invest in ongoing professional learning on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, UDL, and trauma-informed practice. They also protect classroom routines from disruptions like pull-out schedules that remove children from the space their teachers work so hard to create.

Strategy 5.4

Identify and implement high-quality, aligned assessments that measure academic (especially reading and math) and social-emotional milestones.

Assessment in early learning and the early grades is powerful when used well and harmful when used poorly. The difference is largely a function of

principal leadership. It is an essential part of high-quality instruction, providing reliable information about each child's strengths, needs, and progress. Assessments serve multiple purposes. They can carry high stakes, but they are also important for diagnosing needs and informing instruction. Too often, however, schools collect data for compliance without using it to improve teaching and learning.

Over the past two decades, federal- and state-mandated assessments have increased visibility into student outcomes and opportunity gaps, driving important change. At the same time, they have put significant pressure on schools, leading to more time spent on test preparation and growing concern from families about over-testing, even for the youngest learners. Balancing the value of student-level data with appropriate use is essential, particularly in Pre-K–3rd grade, where assessment is most defensible when it is brief, diagnostic, instructionally useful, and developmentally aligned. There are real challenges in assessing young children. Results can be inconsistent due to rapid development, limited testing familiarity, and the complexity of measuring domains like self-regulation. Assessment data are also easily misused to track or label students, reinforcing inequities, particularly for multilingual learners, whose results may reflect language proficiency as much as underlying skills.

Effective early-grade assessments are:

- Brief and minimally intrusive — designed not to crowd out instruction, often embedded within classroom activities
- Developmentally appropriate — aligned to how young children demonstrate learning, including observation, performance, and conversation
- Instructionally useful — providing timely information to guide next steps in teaching
- Reflective of students' languages and experiences — accessible for multilingual learners and grounded in children's contexts

What is assessed also matters. Early literacy and mathematics have the strongest evidence base for screeners and progress monitoring, enabling early identification of needs in foundational

skills. Social-emotional development, executive function, and approaches to learning also warrant attention, supported by growing research and observational tools. Other domains — science, social studies, the arts, and motor development — can be assessed more lightly but should not be overlooked.

Principals lead assessment by making intentional decisions about which tools are used, how often, and for what purpose. They protect instructional time, ensure data are used meaningfully in teaching and learning, and build a culture where assessment serves instruction and children's growth.

Strategy 5.5

Promote the intentional use of technology to support and amplify, rather than replace, effective teaching and learning.

Technology in Pre-K–3rd grade classrooms has moved from a peripheral consideration to a daily reality. Devices, adaptive software, digital content, and increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) tools are now part of what principals must lead thoughtfully. Once considered a necessity for staying current with modern society and increasing children's access to educational content, the role of digital environments is increasingly being problematized because of its negative influence on child (and adult) well-being and mental health.

The research in this area is evolving quickly but points to a few sturdy principles, particularly in Pre-K–3rd grade. First, passive screen time is not a substitute for interaction with caring adults and peers; in the early years, the relational, conversational, and hands-on nature of learning cannot be replaced by a device. Second, when used thoughtfully in early-grade classrooms — co-engaged with an adult, integrated into rich learning experiences, and designed for creation rather than passive consumption — technology can add value, especially for accessibility, differentiation, and extending learning beyond the classroom. Third, emerging tools such as generative AI and adaptive assessment bring both promise and risk. Concerns about bias, student data privacy, and the over-reliance on

automated recommendations are particularly significant for young learners, where professional judgment and human relationships are essential.

Family and community concern about screen time in the early grades has grown sharply. Across the country, there are increasing incidents of parent pushback, with concerns about kindergartners receiving iPads, YouTube videos played at snack time and indoor recess, advertising jingles surfacing in young children's vocabulary, and "brain breaks" that consist of flashy commercial content. Some school districts and state legislatures are considering measures to limit or ban classroom education technology in the youngest grades. However, principals should be alert to the unintended consequences of broad screen-time bans, particularly in the early grades. Blanket restrictions may inadvertently limit access to tools that support accessibility, including assistive technologies, language supports for multilingual learners, adaptive practice, and connections to expertise beyond the classroom.

Compliance-driven policy can also push schools toward surface-level fixes such as locking down devices, narrowing acceptable software lists, or relying on age-verification systems that

actually collect more data on young children. Instead, policymakers and school leaders alike should engage the harder pedagogical questions about when and how technology meaningfully adds value. The more useful frame is not "screens or no screens," but a deliberate distinction between technology that replaces high-quality interaction (and should be limited) and technology that extends it (and should be intentionally supported).⁸²

Principals lead this work by deliberately setting clear schoolwide expectations — what technology is used, for what purposes, at what age, for how long, with what adult co-use. They resist the drift toward devices as classroom management or fillers (snack time, indoor recess, transitions). They invest in teacher capacity to use technology pedagogically, not just operationally. They examine which children have access to high-quality digital experiences and which do not, and what the school is doing to close the gap. They scrutinize vendor claims and watch for products that overpromise or introduce bias. Most importantly, they protect the heart of Pre-K–3rd grade — relational, playful, language-rich, embodied learning — from the quiet substitution of device time in place of human interaction.



★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

Both *what* children learn (curriculum) and *how* children learn (pedagogy) are powerful levers to foster holistic and healthy development and academic success for every child. Ensure that HQIM incorporate the experiences, cultures, languages, strengths, and needs of the children in your school. Strengthen Tier 1 instruction as the primary lever for ensuring all students have access to high-quality instruction.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

Protect developmentally informed practice in the face of pressure to accelerate, narrow, or over-test young children. Exercise your responsibility as the instructional leader to keep play, language, inquiry, and collaboration in the school day for children Pre-K–3rd grade (and beyond!) Where might pressure to accelerate, narrow, or over-test be influencing your approach? What is one concrete action you can take to better protect play, language, inquiry, and collaboration for Pre-K–3rd grade learners?

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

Developmentally informed practice does not end at 3rd grade. Grades 4–6 classrooms benefit from the same core conditions: strong relationships, student choice and reflection, collaborative work, culturally sustaining curriculum, and careful assessment used in service of instruction. Play itself also continues; it just evolves.



Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Nesbitt, K., Lautenbach, C., Blinkoff, E., & Fifer, G. (2022). *Making schools work: Bringing the science of learning to joyful classroom practice*. Teachers College Press.

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (2020). *Catalyzing Change in Early Childhood and Elementary Mathematics: Initiating Critical Conversations*. Author.

Wexler, N. (2025). *Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning*. ASCD.



Self-Assessment Competency 5

Focus on High-Quality Instruction, Pedagogy, and Learning Environments

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- Leadership practices are inconsistent and fragmented.
- Limited attention is given to aligning materials that support early literacy, numeracy, and whole-child development.
- Classroom interactions and learning environments are varied.
- Assessment systems are underdeveloped or compliance-driven.
- Technology use is inconsistent or may replace instruction and interactions.

Emerging

- Leadership demonstrates growing attention to strengthening teaching and learning across Pre-K-3rd grade.
- Some quality materials, aligned assessments, and supportive learning environments are in place, though implementation is varied.
- Positive teacher-student relationships and engaging learning experiences are not consistently embedded across the early grades.
- Technology is used in some classrooms to support learning, though alignment to developmentally appropriate practice remains uneven.

Establishing

- Leadership promotes strong teaching and learning across Pre-K-3rd grade.
- High-quality instructional materials support foundational literacy, mathematics, language development, and whole child growth.
- Classrooms reflect purposeful interactions, play-based learning, and child-centered environments that support diverse learners.
- Assessment systems guide instruction and intervention.
- Technology is intentionally used to strengthen instruction, relationships, and student learning.

Sustaining

- Leadership creates a highly coherent and responsive Pre-K-3rd grade system.
- Instructional materials are continually refined to ensure strong alignment from Pre-K through 3rd grade.
- Classrooms consistently foster curiosity, language-rich experiences, joyful learning, and a strong sense of belonging.
- Comprehensive assessment systems drive timely support and continuous improvement.
- Technology is strategically integrated to enhance excellence in teaching and learning.

Spotlight

Payne Elementary (Washington, DC)

Stephanie Byrd, Principal

Payne Elementary is an urban public school located in a large city setting (DC Public Schools), serving a diverse Pre-K–5th grade student population. From the earliest grades, Principal Byrd advances a dynamic approach to math instruction. She holds a core belief that, “if students don’t get a good understanding of how math works. . . early, then students would struggle later.” Her instructional approach moves beyond traditional memorization toward a more conceptual, student-driven model of learning. Rather than prioritizing “numerology and quantification,” the school approaches math as “its own language. . . about relationships.” This vision begins early, when students first learn that numbers represent quantities, and then quickly move into exploring how those quantities relate to one another. In one kindergarten classroom, a lesson on decomposing ten became an opportunity to expand thinking, moving beyond “five and five” so that students begin to see that “a quantity can be decomposed in many, many ways.” This early emphasis on flexibility and relationships builds a foundation so that by 2nd and 3rd grade students can “easily manipulate and understand how the quantities relate to one another and have fun with it.”

To support this, the principal emphasizes both strong curriculum implementation and deep teacher understanding. Teachers are expected to maintain fidelity to the curriculum while also “unpacking the standards” to identify the most essential concepts students must master. Teachers consider where students are, when to provide additional supports, and when to extend learning beyond the lesson. A key instructional shift is creating space for student thinking. “If we stop talking, and give them that space to

explore and to struggle,” students often exceed expectations. This focus on metacognition and “productive struggle” means students are encouraged to wrestle with ideas, explain their reasoning, and even learn from incorrect answers through discussion.

In classrooms, this philosophy translates into highly interactive and exploratory math experiences. Lessons often begin with a thinking problem before formal instruction, allowing students to experiment, explore, and make sense of ideas. Students engage in brief fluency practice, followed by problem solving, a short, targeted lesson, and then applying their learning. Manipulatives are central to student learning. Tools like ten-frames and connecting cubes help make abstract concepts concrete. Over time, these materials become readily accessible, empowering students to independently select what they need. Classrooms are filled with conversation, as students are “encouraged to talk” through their thinking, while teachers facilitate small groups and provide targeted support. Across grades, students are invited to create their own problems and connect math to the real world, reinforcing that it is “not scary” but instead a way of “putting things together and taking them apart.” In early childhood classrooms, this might look like students using tally marks on a nature walk to count acorns or extending a subtraction story about dinosaurs into new scenarios driven by their own questions. When students ask, “what if,” it reflects the school’s belief in trusting children’s thinking. By giving students space, the right questions, and meaningful tools, the principal has created classrooms where math becomes both accessible and engaging.



Competency 6

Promote Continuous Improvement

A culture of continuous improvement is the glue that holds together a Pre-K–3rd grade vision. It ensures they Pre-K–3rd grade strategies are enacted not as one-time efforts, but as expected practices that can be sustained over time. “Coherence” has become an omnipresent term in education circles, and for good reason. Principals who understand and value coherence reduce the number of unrelated or ineffective initiatives and align the work of every adult and every priority around the instructional core.⁸³ Incoherence appears in schools as too many curricular priorities, too many teachers working in isolation from one another, too many “special” projects that take on a life of their own, and too many initiatives that are not monitored and do not produce desired results.

Within a culture of continuous improvement, effective Pre-K–3rd grade leaders build trust, a shared vision, and collaborative commitment to explore and improve the learning opportunities provided to young students. Continuous improvement relies on commitments from both district central office leaders and school principals to recognize that students are not the sole learners in schools and to ensure data are used to inform decision-making and change. Continuous improvement for Pre-K–3rd grade focuses on developing and supporting systems and processes to provide ambitious high-quality instruction, authentic relationships with families and communities, and internal accountability for progress.⁸⁴ At their core, continuous improvement efforts emphasize:

Competency 6

Strategies

- 6.1** Create routines for teachers and teams to frequently calibrate around high-quality Pre-K–3rd grade assessments that are appropriate, cohesive, and comprehensive and that provide information on both growth and proficiency.
- 6.2** Implement data analysis systems that rely on multiple data points for the leadership team to effectively monitor strategy implementation and its impact on student learning.
- 6.3** Integrate Pre-K–3rd grade priorities into annual improvement efforts and plans that are already established and expected, in order to align schoolwide policies, programs, and initiatives and to drive resource allocation and decision-making.
- 6.4** Ensure that the parts of a student’s educational experience fit together within the Pre-K–3rd grade vision, including both instructional coherence and systemic coherence.



- Redesigning and adapting the system versus only focusing on evaluating individuals within the system;
- Changing the structures and processes that impact outcomes, rather than an exclusive focus on the outcomes themselves; and
- Engaging the entire organization in cycles of learning and reflection.⁸⁵

Elementary principals face multiple pressures from federal, state, and local reforms including, but not limited to, mandated reading and math assessments at 3rd grade, kindergarten entry assessments, teacher evaluation systems, and increased emphasis on evidence-based instruction. Often, these pressures lead to the development of a high stakes culture within schools by overemphasizing achievement, while underemphasizing growth, learning, and active engagement of every student. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that Pre-K–3rd grade approaches positively affect student outcomes, but the influence on 3rd grade test scores is neither direct nor immediate. In reality, student outcomes might look worse in the short term as ineffective routines are eliminated and new, not-yet-familiar practices are incorporated.⁸⁶ Principals who lead with a Pre-K–3rd grade

vision examine multiple data points to understand root causes and the trajectory of change.

To this end, effective principals interpret information from student assessments *in the context of* understanding the classrooms and environments in which children learn. These environments, in turn, are contextualized with an understanding of the resources and supports available. For these reasons, continuous improvement in Pre-K–3rd grade requires intentional, thoughtful collection of data and use of measures that assess things *other than* student learning and progress.⁸⁷ For example, principals can prioritize gathering data, in collaboration with teachers, to also consider how time is spent inside classrooms,⁸⁸ the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions,⁸⁹ families' experiences with the school,⁹⁰ teachers' satisfaction with their professional learning, or staff's comfort in the school culture.⁹¹ Similarly, decisions about teacher effectiveness cannot be validly based on information from student assessments or even from direct observation without also understanding teachers' access to resources, professional learning, coaching, supervision, and collegial teamwork.

By intentionally collecting and reviewing both student outcome data *and* other data about the

school's efforts, Pre-K–3rd grade leaders will gain a well-rounded understanding of what is working, for whom, and what needs improvement. Data must be used in meaningful and effective ways, and principals play a key role in reinforcing the belief that data are “a tool for *building* the program, not merely grading it.”⁹² This is the critical mindset behind continuous improvement.

Strategy 6.1

Create routines for teachers and teams to frequently calibrate around high-quality Pre-K–3rd grade assessments that are appropriate, cohesive, and comprehensive and that provide information on both growth and proficiency.

A crucial component of continuous improvement is a principal's willingness to build a Pre-K–3rd grade culture that welcomes and values regular opportunities for teachers to collaboratively reflect on their own and others' instruction and classroom environments. Teachers thrive when they hold the confidence to explore their own challenges and questions and can trust and respect one another without fear of reprisal. Effective principals embed opportunities for teachers to participate in informal feedback loops, such as peer observations, and classroom walkthroughs and instructional rounds, to increase trust among teachers and build a shared commitment to instructional improvement. By building safe and encouraging systems that observe and assess practice and pedagogy, principals and their teams can tighten the throughline for understanding the relationship between leadership, instruction, and learning. Although high-stakes tests for young children are inappropriate, Pre-K–3rd grade leaders recognize the value of monitoring student progress across developmental domains. As discussed in Competency 5, when choosing assessment tools to monitor student progress in early learning and the early grades, it is important for principals to rely on their knowledge of child development to guide their decisions about which tools to use and for what purposes. For young learners, the most valuable assessment tools allow teachers to gather data within the context of daily classroom activities over time.

Specific to continuous improvement, principals need to support teachers' understanding and use of these assessments as teaching tools. A key component of effective teacher **practice** is skillfully leveraging multiple assessment purposes, including diagnostic, formative, interim (or benchmark), and summative assessments. Once teachers can effectively apply the various types of assessments, principals can support collaborative teams in leveraging the multiple measures to inform instructional decisions. By using developmentally informed assessments frequently, teachers can identify students' individual needs for differentiated support and make instructional changes to increase student growth.

Identifying common planning time and establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) to meet during that time are examples of creating routines, structures, and processes for collaborative inquiry (see Competency 4). However, without adequate guidance and support, teachers may use that common planning time to hold grade-level meetings to discuss upcoming field trips, supply needs, or personnel concerns. Principals and teachers, together, will benefit when they shift their mindset and agree to dedicate PLC time exclusively to using data to guide and monitor their teaching practices and improvement efforts, asking questions of:

- What do we want children to learn?
- How will we know they have learned it?
- How will we respond when children have learned it or if they need more time/a different approach?

The Pre-K–3rd grade leadership team plays an important collective role in continuous improvement for a Pre-K–3rd grade vision. The team is responsible for collecting and reflecting on the multiple data points across the throughline between leadership, teacher practice and student learning. Improvement relies on the adults in the school — leaders, teachers, instructional coaches, staff, community partners — learning how to improve. This requires changes in beliefs and mindsets, as well as structures and processes, to support adult learning.⁹³

Strategy 6.2

Implement data analysis systems that rely on multiple data points for the leadership team to effectively monitor strategy implementation and its impact on student learning.

Student progress is only one marker for how a school is doing. It is important for principals to expand their focus beyond individual student data to include assessments that measure the contexts, supports, and environments that influence student learning. Principals and school communities will benefit from understanding, for example, the quality of instruction in classrooms, the effectiveness of teachers' professional learning, or feedback about how staff and families experience the school culture. These kinds of data are essential for identifying target areas for improvement within the school and among its community partners. They are also important to recognize where resources may be inequitably allocated or differentiated. While some commercial tools exist that measure classroom interactions, school climate, family satisfaction, and other school-level variables, investing in expensive new data partnerships is not necessary. Many of these variables can be explored by implementing two-way communication strategies with teachers, staff, families, community partners, and/or other key stakeholders (see Competency 3); and by prioritizing time to consistently observe in classrooms.

Responsive leadership is a shared practice of using data to guide schoolwide decisions. Principals leading for the success of every child commit to a habit of looking honestly at how the school is working, and for whom. That means going beyond schoolwide averages. Leaders ask the critical questions about who is being served well in the Pre-K–3rd grade setting and integrate practices and policies that do not exclude groups of students from access and opportunity. Several tools can support the deep work of data interpretation: opportunity audits, inquiry-based data protocols, and structured root-cause analysis. The goal is not to produce a report. The goal is to produce a shared understanding

of what the school is currently doing well, what it is not, and for whom — and to convert that understanding into specific next steps the team will take.

Student data are only part of the picture. Notably, the classroom environment and interactions also need a leader's attention. The Pre-K–3rd grade leadership team can draft a look-for tool for principal and collegial learning walks as they observe classrooms. This type of data collection provides information on alignment of learning goals across classrooms; implementation of professional learning; indicators of child-friendly learning spaces; and considerations for resource allocation. Principals examining school data alongside classroom observation can ask: are these conditions present in every classroom, or only some? If only some, why — and which children are affected? As a result, patterns that would otherwise stay hidden — a grade transition where children visibly lose connection, a practice that is serving some children far better than others, a policy whose effects no one has examined — become actionable.

Strategy 6.3

Integrate Pre-K–3rd grade priorities into annual improvement efforts and plans that are already established and expected, in order to align schoolwide policies, programs, and initiatives and to drive resource allocation and decision-making.

Integrating Pre-K–3rd grade priorities into existing annual school improvement plans is a high-leverage strategy for ensuring coherence, sustainability, and equitable outcomes across the school. Research consistently demonstrates that alignment of not just curriculum and instructional practices *but also policies* across early learning and the early grades strengthens academic trajectories and reduces achievement gaps.⁹⁴ Embedding these priorities into established planning structures — rather than creating parallel initiatives — supports organizational coherence and reduces initiative fatigue and contradictory priorities, both key factors in successful school improvement efforts.⁹⁵ Recent studies further highlight that integrated planning

enables schools to align resource allocation, professional learning, and family engagement strategies with a unified early learning vision, resulting in stronger implementation fidelity and improved student outcomes.⁹⁶ By leveraging existing improvement frameworks, school leaders can ensure that Pre-K–3rd grade priorities are not siloed, but instead drive alignment across programs, policies, and practices.

Growth and evaluation systems are also often overlooked resources in which Pre-K–3rd grade can be integrated. Principal goals should be intentionally nested within a Pre-K–3rd grade strategy so leadership priorities, accountability measures, and daily practice are aligned around the developmental and academic needs of young learners. When principal goals emphasize areas such as early literacy, strong instructional practices across grade levels, family partnership, and equitable student outcomes, they create clear direction for the entire school. Teacher goals should then be directly aligned to these priorities, ensuring that classroom practice supports the broader vision through coherent instruction and collaborative planning.

Principals care deeply about the quality of teaching in their schools. Teacher observation frameworks vary considerably across the country and are often designed to be used across the K-12 grades. Teacher evaluation systems (see Competency 4) play an important role in strengthening Pre-K–3rd grade approaches when they are designed to reflect the instructional practices, developmental knowledge, and

relationship-centered teaching that are essential in early learning settings. Effective evaluation systems move beyond compliance and provide meaningful feedback on areas such as language-rich instruction, developmentally appropriate practice, early literacy and numeracy foundations, classroom climate, and family engagement. When aligned across Pre-K–3rd grade, evaluation systems create consistent expectations for high-quality teaching across grade levels. By using evaluations as a growth tool rather than solely an accountability measure, principals can build teacher capacity, strengthen implementation of Pre-K–3rd grade priorities, and ensure strong learning experiences for young children.

A school that takes the success of every child seriously is willing to distribute time, talent, money, and attention unevenly — in the service of meeting each child where they are and being strategic about aligning resources where there is the greatest need. Principals have meaningful authority over some of this, and they should use it. This includes placing the strongest early-grades teachers where they have the greatest impact. This also includes investing in evidence-validated literacy and math instruction that honor multilingual learners' strengths. It ensures that classrooms are well-resourced and maximizes access to general education for students with disabilities through in-class supports.

Aligning resources is also about voice. Principals committed to the success of every child examine who sits at the table when big decisions are made — attendance policies, discipline protocols,



enrollment practices, staffing formulas, schedule design, curriculum implementation — and intentionally make space for staff who are closest to the work, families who represent the whole school community, and community partners who are invested in Pre-K–3rd grade. Decisions shaped by the people most affected by them tend to hold up better over time for lasting impact.

Strategy 6.4

Ensure that the parts of a student's educational experience fit together within the Pre-K–3rd grade vision, including both instructional coherence and systemic coherence.

A strong Pre-K–3rd grade approach depends on continuity of instruction across grade levels and coherence across both instruction and systems.⁹⁷ As children grow, the content of instruction should evolve to reflect their expanding skills, language, understandings, and capacity for deeper participation, with intentional sequencing and scaffolding that build on prior learning while reducing unnecessary redundancy from year to year.⁹⁸ At the same time, effective pedagogical practices should remain consistent across grades, so that inquiry, play-based, and engaging learning experiences in Pre-K and kindergarten continue to develop into rich, student-centered learning rather than shifting to rote instruction in later grades.⁹⁹ Coherence must also extend to instructional supports, ensuring that coaching,

intervention, and other services are tightly aligned to core classroom learning. Achieving this level of coherence can be difficult because Pre-K and K–3rd grade have historically operated as separate systems, with principals sometimes lacking direct authority over Pre-K programs, staffing, or professional learning. In addition, traditional district silos between subjects such as literacy, mathematics, and leadership frequently conflict with the integrated and developmentally responsive approaches that best support young children from early learning through the elementary grades.¹⁰⁰

Research on Pre-K–3rd grade systems consistently shows that student outcomes are stronger when the parts of a child's educational experience fit together through both instructional coherence and systemic coherence. Studies of Pre-K–3rd grade alignment note that preschool gains are more likely to persist when elementary grades intentionally build on what children learned rather than repeating content or shifting to disconnected instructional approaches. Research also finds that continuity in curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom expectations helps children experience smoother transitions and more consistent learning opportunities across grades.

At the systems level, it needs to be emphasized that coherence requires aligned leadership structures, professional learning, assessment systems, and instructional oversight so that schools can support educators in delivering a connected Pre-K–3rd grade experience. When

A strong Pre-K–3rd grade vision is not simply about adding preschool to elementary schools; it is about designing a seamless continuum in which instruction, supports, and systems work together from early learning through 3rd grade.

preschool and elementary programs operate as separate systems with different expectations, governance, and priorities, schools struggle to sustain high-quality pathways for children. A strong Pre-K–3rd grade vision is not simply about adding preschool to elementary schools; it is about designing a seamless continuum in which instruction, supports, and systems work together from early learning through 3rd grade.

Leading for coherence with a Pre-K–3rd grade vision should be a central priority for a principal because young children benefit most when the adults, structures, and learning experiences around them are aligned from preschool through 3rd grade (see Competency 1). Principals leading for coherence also bridge historical divides between Pre-K and elementary programs by coordinating staff collaboration, common planning, transitions, and shared expectations for teaching and learning. By reducing fragmentation and competing priorities, principals create the conditions for teachers to focus on high-quality instruction and for children to experience a seamless, supportive progression of growth from early childhood through the elementary years.

Resources for Principals

For your bookshelf:

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

Forman, M. L., Stosich, E. L., & Bocala, C. (2017). *The internal coherence framework: Creating the conditions for continuous improvement in schools*. Harvard Education Press.

Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2014). *Thanks for the feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well (even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you're not in the mood)*. Viking.



★ Ensuring All Students Benefit

Establish and practice clear systems and structures that monitor the growth and development of a targeted group of young children for whom previous strategies for mitigating gaps and opportunities have not been successful.

★ Leadership Moves/Reflection

Consider how you model setting and monitoring annual professional growth goals that are connected to the Pre-K–3rd grade vision. Then, align staff professional learning to those goals so that there are integrated efforts across school, leadership, and teacher goals for high-quality implementation and impact. Everything is nested!

★ Implications for Grades 4-6

A strong Pre-K–3rd grade vision does not stop at 3rd grade; it creates important continuous improvement implications for upper elementary and beyond. If early learning is prevention-oriented, then upper elementary must *sustain, extend, and refine* that foundation so gains are not lost and inequities do not re-emerge.



Self-Assessment Competency 6

Promote Continuous Improvement

Characteristics and Descriptors

Initiating

- A coherent Pre-K-3rd grade system is not yet established.
- Assessment practices are isolated, with little to no calibration across grade levels in the early years.
- Data use is fragmented, reactive, or primarily compliance-driven, with no consistent system for using multiple data sources.
- Pre-K-3rd grade priorities are absent or not meaningfully integrated into improvement planning or schoolwide initiatives.
- Engagement with families and community partners is minimal and primarily one-way communication.

Emerging

- Components of a Pre-K-3rd grade system exist but are inconsistently implemented.
- Calibration of assessments occurs sporadically and varies by teacher or team, with uneven alignment across grade levels.
- Data are collected but reviewed in silos or used infrequently, with limited impact on instruction and decision-making.
- Pre-K-3rd grade priorities appear in planning documents but are minimally aligned to daily practice.
- Family and community engagement is limited to occasional updates or events, with minimal connection to data, learning progress, or decision-making.

Establishing

- A coordinated Pre-K-3rd grade improvement system is in place, resulting in coherence.
- Staff engage in regular calibration of developmentally appropriate common assessments.
- Leadership teams use multiple data sources to track progress and inform decisions, though integration and timeliness may vary.
- Pre-K-3rd grade priorities are clearly reflected in school improvement plans and aligned with most major initiatives.
- Families and community partners are informed of data trends and provided opportunities for input, though engagement is primarily consultative rather than collaborative.

Sustaining

- The Pre-K-3rd grade system operates as an integrated and coherent improvement framework.
- Staff routinely calibrate high-quality, aligned assessments that measure both growth and proficiency across grade levels.
- Leadership teams actively use a comprehensive, multi-measure data system to guide improvement and monitor impact.
- Pre-K-3rd grade priorities are deeply embedded in schoolwide plans, policies, and staffing.
- Families and community partners are engaged as active collaborators in interpreting data, identifying needs, and shaping program decisions.

Spotlight

Shoshoni Elementary (Shoshoni, WY)

Andrea Gilbertson, Principal

In a rural district located in a town with a population of 600, where access to early childhood programming is nonexistent, Principal Gilbertson and staff have built a comprehensive early learning system that begins well before preschool and extends through the elementary grades. With no child care options in the community, they created a child care that serves as an entry point for many families, enrolling children from infancy through age 3 before they transition into the school's preschool program. Even at this earliest stage, the focus is intentionally educational: grounded in child development, play-based learning, and developmentally appropriate expectations. This approach continues into preschool, where the use of early learning standards ensures a consistent, whole child foundation. Together, these efforts reflect a clear vision: investing early and building strong developmental foundations directly shapes long-term success as students move through school.

That commitment to children is most visible in the intentional transition points between early learning settings and the elementary grades. The school has implemented a transitional kindergarten program for children who need additional time to develop before entering kindergarten, with placement decisions made through close partnerships between teachers and families. This individualized approach is reinforced through alignment of standards, as kindergarten teachers blend early learning standards with kindergarten expectations to create continuity in instruction. The addition of a summer "kinder camp," co-taught by preschool and kindergarten teachers, further strengthens this transition, helping children

enter kindergarten already familiar with routines, peers, and expectations, fundamentally changing the first-day experience and setting students up for success.

All preschool children receive early screenings administered by the Wyoming Department of Health. Those identified with additional needs receive services within the school setting. This support continues through kindergarten, with formal transition meetings ensuring continuity of services. The school district provides on-site physical, occupational, and speech therapists, allowing for consistent, proactive support in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, where every child has access to these services on a rotating basis. This early, integrated approach often reduces the need for more intensive, longer-term interventions. Ongoing collaboration with behavioral health consultants ensures that academic, developmental, and social-emotional needs are addressed.

As students move into kindergarten through 3rd grade, the school builds on this early foundation through a culture of inclusion and shared responsibility. Special education and general education are fully integrated, with co-teaching models and flexible roles among staff supporting all learners in various configurations. Early intervention remains a guiding principle, with teams continuously monitoring student progress and adjusting supports as needed. Across all grades, the school focuses on understanding each child's development, responding to their needs in real time, and ensuring that the strong start provided in the earliest years continues to drive success throughout their educational journey.

Glossary of Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) —

Stressful or potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (e.g., experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community). Can also include aspects of children's environment that undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding (e.g., growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, or separation from parents).

Alignment — Efforts to create continuity of supports and learning opportunities for students across the Pre-K–3rd grade continuum. It is an ongoing and comprehensive endeavor that has both structural elements (the policies and regulations that structure children's learning opportunities) and process features (what children actually experience in classrooms). Alignment can work horizontally as children experience a single grade level and vertically as children move up through grade levels.

Cognitive development — The varied and rich bodies of knowledge children develop. During early learning and the early grades, cognitive development is a robust mix of children gaining new competence and concepts. For example, their explicit knowledge of specific subjects (e.g., language; characteristic of people, animals, and environments around them) increases, as does their implicit understanding of how things operate (e.g., cause/effect).

Coherence — The alignment and connection of goals, strategies, and actions across a system so that all efforts work together consistently to support outcomes.

Culturally responsive — A teaching approach that recognizes, responds to, incorporates, accommodates, and ultimately celebrates the entirety of the children they serve to make learning more relevant to and effective for them. This includes students' languages and literacies, prior experiences, cultures, race, frames of reference, critical thought, and performance styles.

Developmental domains — The general categories of development and learning – physical, cognitive, social and emotional, language and literacy.

Executive function — The network of abilities that enable one to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behavior as they pursue goals. These include attention, working memory, self-regulation, reasoning, problem solving, and approaches to learning.

Experiential learning — An approach to learning that relies on active engagement with people, materials, and ideas. Experiential learning emphasizes process, not outcomes. It is grounded in the experiences students have and allows students the opportunity to understand the world through both concrete and abstract ways.

Inquiry-based learning — An educational strategy in which students learn about a topic through self-directed investigations. It teaches students how to think and act scientifically by, for example, formulating hypotheses and testing them by conducting experiments and/or making observations to solve problems. It is a method that can be used effectively across content areas.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) — A comprehensive framework that integrates academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support across multiple levels of intensity, using data to identify student needs early and provide targeted interventions to improve outcomes for all learners.

Peer Scaffolding — When classmates offer the temporary support needed to help a child manage their emotions, focus their attention, or control their impulses.

Playful learning — An instructional approach in which children learn through purposeful, guided, and joyful experiences that promote exploration, creativity, imagination and social interaction while building academic and developmental skills.

Methodology

Pre-K — the year of formal education just prior to kindergarten, commonly applied to programs and classrooms that are delivered by or in schools (e.g., district-led, state-funded, special education). In this guide, the term is used to include a wide variety of pre-kindergarten settings students may experience — that may or may not be co-located within an elementary school — including Head Start, child care, family child care, and other early learning settings.

Response to Intervention (RTI) — a multi-tiered framework used in schools to identify and support students' academic or behavioral needs early, by providing increasing levels of targeted instruction and monitoring progress to guide decisions about additional support.

Scaffolding — A teaching approach in which educators provide temporary, targeted support to help students access new learning, gradually removing that support as students gain independence and proficiency. The support fades in and out as needed.

Toxic stress — Can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity — such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship — without adequate adult support.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) — a framework for designing instruction that proactively meets diverse learner needs by offering multiple and varied formats for students to access content, engage in learning, and demonstrate understanding.

Zone of Proximal Development — a continuum of learning where a student can complete tasks with guidance or support, but not yet independently, making it the optimal space for teaching and growth.

The development of this guide was a collaborative endeavor of experts and practitioners across the country. The methods used to update the guide included:

Literature Update. A review of relevant research published since 2020 was conducted to update the empirical grounding for the competencies and strategies in this guide. A full list of the cited research can be found in the Endnotes/References.

Thought Leaders Convening. We convened thought leaders in research, policy, and practice who study, support, or lead Pre-K–3rd grade efforts across the nation (see Thought Leaders for names). This group provided expert guidance on revisions needed and current priorities in the field.

Advisory Panel of Principals. Through a nomination process within the NAESP governance structure and individual outreach to National Distinguished Principals and other school leaders, we convened a group of 15 practicing principals (see Principals' Advisory Panel for names). The Review Panel provided feedback on the competencies, strategies, spotlights, and resources presented throughout the guide.

Outreach with Principals. Each of the spotlights that appear in this guide were written in collaboration with the school's principal. The spotlights were gathered through a nomination process and were reviewed by each principal to ensure accuracy.

Principals' Advisory Panel

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Principal, Irvington Academy
Irvington Public Schools (NJ)

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Principal, Waddell Elementary School
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Creighton School District (AZ)

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Principal, Margaret Beeks Elementary School
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Dalton Public Schools (GA)

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Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions from Tracey O'Brien, Amanda Seibel, and Grace Gonzalez of The Evaluation Center at University of Colorado Denver. Amy Brenton of the National P-3 Center and Honor Fede of NAESP were also valued collaborators supporting this work.

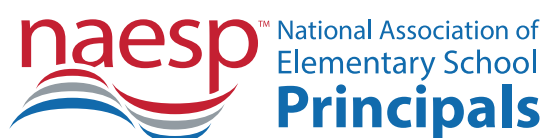
Many other principals shared their stories of Pre-K–3rd grade successes with us. Due to space constraints, they were not all included here. The authors want to lift up, though, the amazing work of:

- Principal Ed Cosentino, Phelps Luck Elementary (Howard County, MD)
- Principal Aisha Florez, Waddell Elementary (Manchester, CT)
- Principal Kristine Kinghorn, Andersen Elementary (Chandler, AZ)
- Principal DeeAnne Miree, Cambridge Early Learning Center (Nashville, TN)
- Principal Kara Scholl, South Shades Crest Elementary (Hoover, AL)
- Principal Andrea Sifers, Fort Gibson Intermediate Elementary (Fort Gibson, OK)
- Principal Amanda Smith, Geneva County Elementary School (Hartford, AL)

Pre-K–3rd grade is a movement that is gaining momentum across the country. The authors celebrate the countless other principals who devote their time, energy, and heart to ensuring every young child is given a strong foundation across early learning and the early grades.

A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K-3rd Grade)

2ND EDITION



National Association of Elementary School Principals

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The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is the strongest unified voice for Pre-K–8th grade leaders across the U.S. and around the world. NAESP's mission is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children. NAESP's vision for Pre-K–8th grade leadership includes principals having the vision, courage, wisdom, and professional knowledge to lead learning communities that create opportunities for all children to achieve their highest potential. NAESP was founded in 1921 by a visionary group of principals who sought to advance the profession.

NATIONAL



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The goal of the National P-3 Center is to improve the education continuum that children experience pre-school through 3rd grade by transforming elementary schools. The Center accomplishes this by bridging divides between early care and education (ECE) and Pre-K–12 organizations and systems. Race, class, culture, and zip code demand explicit strategies to mitigate their effects on children's learning opportunities. The Center understands and values both the ECE and Pre-K–12 systems and engages in strategic work with a focus on organization and system change at school, district, and state levels.