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SCHOOL LEADERS ARE KEY TO BRINGING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INTO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Preschool attendance is now the norm, and preschool is increasingly incorporated into K-12 school systems. In many respects, as kindergarten has become the new first grade (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Russell, 2011), preschool is the new kindergarten. This commentary is on the role of school leaders in incorporating preschool productively into elementary schools. We draw on our four-year study of two school districts' efforts to create coherent educational pathways from preschool through the early grades.

Continuity and Alignment

Advocates for preschool (preK) through third grade (P-3) continuity focus primarily on district policies and practices. But many studies have demonstrated that leaders at the school level play a pivotal role in interpreting and moderating the effects of district decisions (Coburn, 2005; Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2017; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, et al., 2002). District policies or practices will not likely be effective in promoting high quality and coherent instruction across preschool and the early elementary grades without the well-informed and wholehearted support of school leaders. Our 2016-2020 study of six elementary schools, three each of two large California districts surfaced specific district strategies that effectively engaged school leaders in improving P-3 alignment and continuity in schools. We call the districts Almond Valley Unified School District and Cypress Unified School District. All six schools that participated in the study served predominantly children from low-income homes.

Elementary school principals at both districts formally supervised the preschools on their campuses and leadership in both districts were committed to creating continuity between preschool and the early elementary grades. Their goal was to create a seamless educational experience for children, where each grade built on what was learned in the grade before, sustaining the gains made in preschool and improving developmental and learning outcomes overall. School leaders at both districts spoke about the benefits of having a preschool program integrated into elementary school, but they described their role in relation to preschool very differently.

Low Confidence and Support

Interviews of principals and other school leaders in Cypress Unified School District revealed low confidence in their ability to provide meaningful supervision and support. They expressed some resentment at having to take on the additional work of preschools, engaging with preschool mainly around operational issues like compliance paperwork and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). As one school leader explained:

“I would say right now where I am with the preK is mostly around the operational, cause there’s a ton of operational stuff with preK.”

Principals reported that they were not prepared to supervise preK and transitional kindergarten (TK).¹ The following comments are illustrative of this perception:

“And then looking at the preK standards... it's more of me asking questions, which is different than what I do. I mean, I still ask questions in elementary, but I know a whole lot more.”

“My biggest concern is when I’m [in preK classrooms] and watching what they do because [preschool children] really don’t have a lot of language. I’m not sure how people are knowing what they know. I’m still not sure. How do you know?”

Some expressed resentment toward the policy of moving preschools under the supervision of elementary school principals, seeing it only as a strategy to save money:

“PreK, I think, needs its own site manager or somebody who is devoted. If not solely to preK, at least 75% to that, to early education. But I know that's not the direction that the district is going.”

Because most school leaders in this district lacked knowledge of early childhood education, they did not try to play an instructional leadership role. Early education coaches provided instructional support to teachers, with very limited involvement from school leadership. As one school leader explained, rather than providing support to teachers, the school leaders deferred to teachers themselves as the experts:

“I think that because my experience is with elementary, my expectations are at an elementary level. So I rely heavily on the preK teachers to tell me if those expectations are unrealistic. Like, ‘I want preschoolers reading,’ and then they’ll say, ‘Well, wait a minute...’ So then my question becomes, ‘Okay, well, how does this look in preK?’”

High Investment and Ownership

By contrast, in Almond Valley Unified, principals expressed a strong sense of responsibility for the success of preschool, and they engaged instructionally with the preschool classrooms. When asked to describe their role in relation to preschool, principals emphasized supporting preK and TK teachers’ instruction. They conveyed that their responsibilities in relation to

¹ Transitional kindergarten (TK) is California’s public school option for children who missed the cutoff for kindergarten entry by three months, giving older 4-year-olds a preK experience. TK will be expanded to all 4-year-olds by 2025.

preschool were not different from their responsibilities in relation to the other grade levels. Principals talked about the need to provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment where the teacher differentiates according to the needs of the students. They included the preschool classrooms in their walkthroughs and provided feedback to teachers based on their observations.

In brief, while these principals said they were responsible for ensuring the smooth operation of the preschool program, they also saw instruction in preschool as a key aspect of their leadership role. The following comments are illustrative of this perception:

“We have to make sure that we’re providing what’s required by state law to facilitate preK, but also providing a rigorous learning environment that’s developmentally appropriate.”

“My responsibilities in relation to preschool are the same as every other grade level and every other student. Walking classrooms and making sure instruction is taking place specific to their grade level and/or needs. Making sure that it’s engaging, and lessons are scaffolded and differentiated for their kids.”

“With preK, one of my goals this year has been—especially since we have a new preK teacher—to build her capacity in our early learning goals with getting students to do the free exploration, but everything tied to, ‘What am I learning here?’ It’s not just free exploration for the sake of play, but how does that discovery become part of practicing the shapes, or the numbers, or identifying sounds in something? How is that all tied to the early learning target areas? That’s been my big goal with my preK this year. I want her to understand, what you’re doing is building the blocks for kindergarten.”

In our study we examined district practices that might explain why elementary school leaders in the two districts viewed their roles in relation to preschool so differently. Next, we describe some of the differences we observed in district approaches to creating continuity between preschool and the early grades and to involving school leaders in this process.

Professional Development in Early Childhood Education

The two districts differed significantly in the way they approached professional learning for school leaders. Cypress Unified School District offered few opportunities to principals for professional development related to early childhood education. The learning was isolated and not part of a systematic effort to build the capacity of principals to be instructional leaders of preschool and the early grades. The early education director at Cypress reported facing resistance to putting early childhood education on the agenda for elementary school principal professional development meetings. One explanation was that some of the assistant superintendents who supervised the principals indicated that early learning was a relatively low

priority. Principals at Cypress expressed interest in understanding California’s early learning standards, and the early education department at Cypress hosted occasional meetings with school leaders about the standards and other topics, such as licensing requirements, child development milestones, and formative assessment. There was, however, low participation from school leaders in these meetings, perhaps because some of the assistant superintendents did not emphasize the role of school leaders in relation to preschool.

Almond Valley Unified School District, in contrast, provided intensive professional development for principals when preK and TK were expanded in the district. Principals were not required to attend, but over a few years it reached all the principals and began to include assistant principals. The early education department at Almond Valley developed the Early Learning Lab, which offered five 3.5-hour sessions of professional learning. The sessions drew from six competencies outlined in the National Association of Elementary School Principals guide, “Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice”: 1) embrace the preK-3 early learning continuum; 2) ensure developmentally-appropriate teaching; 3) provide personalized learning environments; 4) use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning growth; 5) build professional capacity across the learning community; 6) make schools a hub of preK-3 learning for families and communities.

In addition to the sessions, practicum principals from the Early Learning Lab taught lessons in an early childhood classroom and then reflected on their experience. The district led group walkthroughs of preK, TK, and kindergarten classrooms, giving principals an opportunity to learn from one another’s schools. After the walkthroughs, principals met to reflect on their observations, and the hosting principal worked on a plan to implement changes. This practice contributed to school leaders’ professional development and knowledge of classroom instruction and they informed decisions about professional development and other supports for teachers.

School leaders expressed gratitude for the professional development:

“The Early Learning Lab really increased my knowledge around what’s expected and what’s appropriate for that age level. That’s been huge. It made me take a look at how important differentiation is, how important it is to work with small groups of students at every grade level.”

A principal further explained the effect of participating in the learning sessions:

“I feel a lot more prepared after going through the Early Learning Lab. For instance, we looked at how do you take a standard, and how do you create learning targets based on that standard? We already knew the kindergarten standards to go to, but I was like, ‘No, for TK, we have to give them an opportunity to do that with the Preschool Learning Foundations.’ I was able to

go in and say match it and be able to look at it. The coach did such a great job of helping prepare us.”

Instructional Oversight

Independently from the Early Learning Lab, in Almond Valley principals conducted walkthroughs regularly with their supervising assistant superintendent which included preschools. The walkthroughs were guided by an observation tool that collected data on specific standards. During our study, principals focused on seeing and analyzing rigor in elementary mathematics classrooms. These regular walkthroughs gave district and school leaders an opportunity to observe both instructional quality and coherence in a way that influenced professional development priorities. Leaders also used the data they collected from the walkthroughs to inform policy and practice decisions at the school.

Cypress assistant superintendents also conducted instructional practice walkthroughs with the principals they supervised. The walkthroughs were infrequent, however, did not involve data collection, and rarely included preK or TK classrooms. Thus, they did not enable school leaders or district leaders to engage with early childhood classrooms on their sites as part of school improvement efforts. They also did not provide information about the degree to which there was continuity in instruction across preschool and elementary school.

Coherent Messaging

Almond Valley gave clear and consistent messaging related to the importance of preschool. First, the district committed to preschool for all students, allocating district resources to ensure that any child who wanted to attend preschool at the district was able to do so. Second, the school invested in the Early Learning Lab to support teachers and prepare school leaders in early childhood education. Third, district administrators conducted regular walkthroughs that included preK and TK classrooms, conveying that preschool was integral to the elementary schools for which school leaders were responsible. Last, the district allocated substantial resources to preK, TK, and kindergarten for coaching and teacher professional development, which reinforced the message that early childhood education was important.

While district leaders in Cypress rebranded messaging to communicate the expanded preK-12 offerings, there was an uneven commitment to preK at other levels of the system. Most notably, there was uneven support for preK among the assistant superintendents who supervised the principals. Consequently, school leaders did not receive clear and consistent messaging about fulfilling an instructional leadership role in relation to preschool. It is possible that the lack of encouragement and support from district leaders contributed to the way principals framed their role in relation to preschool as mainly focused on operations and

compliance. It could also have detracted some principals from actively seeking opportunities to learn about effective early childhood instruction.

Conclusion

While school leaders in these two districts described their role in relation to preschool differently, they all commented on the benefits of having preschool programs connected to elementary school. Some pointed out that preschool gave families an opportunity to become familiar with the school staff and school routines, and to develop a sense of belonging at school. School leaders' appreciation of preschool signals that they are well positioned to advance district goals if they receive adequate professional development and clear and consistent messaging from district leadership that both preschool and P-3 coherence are priorities. District leaders need to both convey clearly that school leaders are responsible for instructional quality, and provide school leaders with a deep understanding of developmentally appropriate and effective preschool instruction. Without this, districts are not likely to realize the potential benefits of preschool or achieve the goal of P-3 alignment.

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