

Spreading the Word on Early Education



Principals' influence on teaching and advocacy can help children in poverty overcome the early learning gap.

By Helen Blank and Karen Schulman

By the time children from poor families enter kindergarten, many are already far behind children from higher-income families. And some will never catch up. At as early as 18 months of age, there are profound disparities in vocabulary and language development between children in low-income families and those in high-income families. Over time, the gap continues to widen. By age 3, children from the lowest-income families have heard 30 million fewer words and have only half the vocabulary as children from the highest-income families. This language gap puts poor children at a significant disadvantage and hampers many of them throughout their school and work careers. But there is a proven and practical solution to help children in poverty overcome this learning gap: high-quality early education. And school principals—as key education and community leaders—can play a critical role in expanding and strengthening pre-kindergarten in their schools and communities.



Multiple studies show that children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to succeed in school, graduate from high school, attend college, and gain stable employment as adults. Yet, fewer than 3 in 10 4-year-olds are currently enrolled in high-quality preschool, because many parents cannot afford it. Moreover, while children from low-income families stand to benefit the most from preschool, they are also more likely to lack access to it.

Without preschool, these children are missing key opportunities to gain language skills and expand their vocabulary, develop social skills through interactions with other children and adults, explore the world around them, and acquire a love of learning.

Principals across the country witness this education gap play out in their schools and many are doing something about it. Early education can and should be an integral part of principals' core mission. As education leaders, principals are naturally positioned to advocate for increased investments in pre-kindergarten at the local, state, and national levels. Principals can make an impact by:

- Helping to start pre-kindergarten programs in their own schools and communities;

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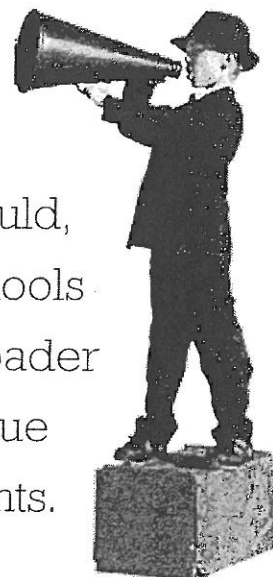
Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/MarApr14

Join the movement for accessible early childhood education by visiting NAESP's advocacy page, where you can find P-3 resources and take action by **contacting your legislative representative.**

Find **tools for providing a seamless learning experience for pre-K-3 learners** in the *Principal* archives. The Sept/Oct 2013 Early Learning issue features articles on play, alignment, and literacy.

The National Center for Children in Poverty offers a guide on how to **promote social and emotional health and school readiness** in young children.

Principals' advocacy for early education can, and should, extend beyond their own schools and communities into the broader national debate about the value of pre-kindergarten investments.



- Making sure that the most vulnerable children have a chance to participate;
- Supporting pre-kindergarten teachers; and
- Helping their kindergarten and elementary teachers build on early education experiences.

Over the long run, leading a pre-kindergarten program can actually make principals' jobs easier—and their schools more effective—by giving their students a running start on the path to success. "It's a tremendous investment," says Joseph Cullen, principal of Branch Brook Elementary School in Newark, New Jersey. "If you get children at an early age, when they're still impressionable and open, you'll build a strong foundation that will reap benefits for years to come."

Seize Funding Opportunities

Branch Brook Elementary receives pre-kindergarten funding through a state program that supports high-quality preschool for three- and four-year-olds in New Jersey's low-income districts. Forty other states also fund pre-kindergarten. A few of these states, including Oklahoma and Georgia, make pre-kindergarten available to all children whose families want them to participate. Most states target their pre-kindergarten programs to low-income and disadvantaged children.

In the majority of states, including New Jersey, the funds can be used to offer pre-kindergarten classes in a range of settings, including schools,

child care centers, and other community-based settings. In addition to state funding, schools and principals may also support pre-kindergarten using Head Start funds, Title I dollars, local sources, or private funds. And the federal Preschool Grants program under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) helps support pre-kindergarten for children with disabilities.

For example, Wisconsin makes funding available to any district that wants to offer pre-kindergarten—and if a district chooses to offer prekindergarten, it must make it universally available to all children. Waukesha (Wisconsin) School District first adopted its universal pre-kindergarten program after it hired a new superintendent who had seen the positive results in his previous district. Deborah Wells, who is currently the principal of the district's early learning center and the supervisor of district pre-kindergarten programs, jumped on board the superintendent's initiative and worked closely with him to sell the program to parents, teachers, and school board members. Wells believes that all children, regardless of income or other background factors, should have access to pre-kindergarten.

Support Effective Teaching

Principals such as Cullen and Wells help teachers in both their own schools and community-based programs to set up effective, developmen-

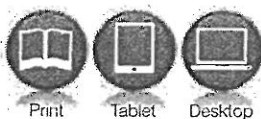
tally appropriate pre-kindergarten classrooms. "Pre-kindergarten is not just a boot camp for kindergarten," says Wells. She helps pre-kindergarten teachers implement a curriculum that is centered on play planning. At first, children use drawings to represent their planned activities, and over the course of the year, they gradually begin to incorporate simple written words to describe their plans. This curriculum helps them develop early literacy skills along with the decision-making and self-motivation, skills that are essential to learning in school and throughout their lives.

Principals also play an important role in working with teachers in community-based pre-kindergarten programs. These programs may have available space for pre-kindergarten that a public school may lack, and can also provide child care for children of parents working full time. Principals are successfully integrating these community-based programs into efforts to expand early education options. Principal Wells frequently visits child care centers and other community-based partners in her district that offer the state-funded pre-kindergarten program. Even though she is not supervising or formally evaluating the teachers at these sites, Wells gives them support and feedback. And several teachers routinely contact Wells for advice on teaching and curriculum.

As children enter kindergarten, principals help their teachers build on the progress students have made in pre-kindergarten. Principal Cul-len notes that children with pre-kindergarten experience start kindergarten "ahead of the game" since they already have math and literacy skills. Kindergarten teachers can take advantage of these gains and help children continue to move forward. To encourage this process, pre-kindergarten teachers frequently provide a portfolio to kindergarten teachers for each incoming student. This valuable record offers a window into each child's progress prior to starting kindergarten, clarifies individual

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strengths and weaknesses, and pin-points areas that call for additional assistance.

Provide Support Beyond the Classroom

Pre-kindergarten provides a valuable opportunity to identify challenges that children face in school and at home that interfere with learning. A child may have an undiagnosed hearing problem or may have a parent struggling to find a job or housing. Or, perhaps a child has never been to a dentist or a pediatrician. Principals have a front row seat in identifying these challenges and figuring out how to address them.

Schools meet these challenges by reaching out to social workers, nurses, guidance counselors, and other professionals working at the school or through community partners. Services may be provided at the school site to allow families to receive support in a familiar and unthreatening setting. Schools can also help families gain access to useful resources and programs in the community. Some schools, often called community schools, hire a coordinator to collaborate with agencies in the community to arrange services that will meet the needs of children and their families.

Advocate for Early Education

As educators and thought leaders, principals can become persuasive advocates for pre-kindergarten. They can begin locally by sharing information and organizing brainstorming sessions with their immediate colleagues to identify strategies to strengthen preschool programs. Principal Wells is always on the lookout for research that demonstrates the merits of early education, such as the analysis of Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman, showing the high return on investment that early education guarantees. "At every opportunity I get, I share compelling research that makes the case for early education with my colleagues and other advocates."

Principals' advocacy for early education can, and should, extend beyond

their own schools and communities into the broader national debate about the value of pre-kindergarten investments. This is already happening. NAESP, a longstanding supporter of early education, endorsed the Strong Start for Children Act. This bipartisan bill would significantly expand access to high-quality early education for children from low- and moderate-income families. Principals can help support this legislation by calling or meeting with their representatives and senators, organizing local events, using social media to share stories and information with their networks, and writing op-eds.

As trusted and knowledgeable voices, principals offer a valuable inside-

NAESP on Early Childhood Policy

High-quality early learning opportunities are essential to the future success of our nation's children, especially for those from low-income homes.

NAESP has long been a strong advocate for implementing early childhood education nationwide, and providing support for schools and educators who teach young children. The Association continues to provide support through publications and resources, such as *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. This body of work, which is currently being revised and updated, sets key early-learning standards that promote readiness for at-risk children.

NAESP supports The Continuum of Learning Act, which promotes early learning by strengthening connections between early childhood programs, school districts, and elementary schools. The legislation makes changes to the reporting of Title I funding, and encourages states to use these funds for early childhood programming.

Additionally, NAESP has recommended a subpart be added to provide dedicated funding to improve the knowledge of elementary school principals with regards to pre-K through grade 3 alignment.

NAESP also supports the Strong Start for America's Children Act. The legislation would authorize federal expansion of early childhood education programs, including funds for Head Start and Early Head Start over a ten-year period, and provide matching funds to states to improve access to high quality pre-K for all 4-year-old children. It also encourages early learning and K-12 alignment to ensure success throughout a child's academic career.

Through its continued support of legislation, NAESP seeks to ensure that every child has access to a quality education, including aligned early learning. For more information on the principal's role in early childhood education and P-3 alignment, visit www.naesp.org/advocacy.

er's perspective on the importance of pre-kindergarten. They know firsthand the dire consequences of children falling behind—through no fault of their own—based on their economic background or where they happen to live. Principals know that it is time for America to close its education gap by investing in high-quality early education. And they know our children cannot afford to wait another day. ■

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