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Better Training on Early Years Urged for Principals

Experts call for them to get good professional development on pre-K-3.

By **Dakarai I. Aarons**

The nation's elementary school principals lack access to the focused professional development to help them meet the higher expectations of modern early-childhood education, experts and advocates say.

In a bid to stamp out the achievement gaps that often plague poor and minority children before they start school, groups in early-childhood education and school leadership are emphasizing the need for principals to be poised to lead good practices for pupils in prekindergarten to grade 3.

"The primary motivator for us in addressing this particular area is the reality that children who come into elementary schools behind their peers tend to stay behind their peers, and those gaps grow wider as they continue in the early years and result in serious consequences," said Gail Connelly, the executive director of the Alexandria, Va.-based National Association of Elementary School Principals.

"We believe through the right kind of focused, targeted professional development for principals," she said, "we can level that playing field and close that gap for more of those children."

Programs that give principals expertise are in "rare supply," Ms. Connelly said, which is why her organization has produced early-childhood standards and is lobbying hard on this issue.

And with the budget cutbacks forced by the economic downturn, professional-development spending, especially for administrators, has been cut significantly in school districts nationwide.

Some federal help may be on the way. U.S. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., introduced a **NAESP-affiliated bill** last month that would create a grant program to support mentoring and professional learning for principals to help boost their knowledge of early-childhood education.

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The federal government already provides nearly \$3 billion annually through Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for principal and teacher professional development, but experts say relatively few of those dollars are ever spent on principal training.

Supporters hope to have the grant program sponsored by Sen. Udall included in the reauthorization of the ESEA.


Changing Times

Having principals who understand how, for example, expectations have changed for kindergartners is critical, said Barbara Chester, a Portland, Ore., elementary school principal and the president of the NAESP.

“When we all went to kindergarten, it was very different from what it is now. Our kindergarten [now] is very academic—we are all about reading, writing, and arithmetic from the beginning,” she said. “When kids come to kindergarten unprepared, they struggle and continue to struggle.”

Akimi Gibson, the deputy executive director for strategy and content integration at the Washington-based National Association for the Education of Young Children, said helping leaders understand their role is vital.

“The principal, as the educational leader, has to set the context where developmentally appropriate practices are not just OK to do, but necessary to do,” she said. “They are supporting the ways in which it will happen.”

Ms. Gibson’s organization reinforces that message through the training it conducts with principals and other school leaders, and it has published a **position statement on “developmentally appropriate practices”**  for children from birth to age 8 to help educators. The position statement, for example, talks about the importance of play as a method for young children not only to learn self-regulation, but also as a vehicle for improved oral language and social skills.

Douglas B. Reeves, the founder of the Denver-based Leadership and Learning Center, a professional-development and publishing company, said principals require the kind of training that helps them lead their schools with the nuanced understanding of early learning needed for success.

High-Quality Programs

“One of the most critical needs is literacy in early-childhood education. There remains in some quarters a stubborn resistance to the idea, for example, that kindergartners should be able to read and write. The truth is that kindergarten reading readiness is important,” Mr. Reeves said.

“Failure to have early-childhood literacy really has some long-term consequences. This is a boundary leaders have to set, as surely as they would set boundaries on safety and health for children. They have to have literacy expectations.”

Principals, Mr. Reeves said, need places where they can come together and model good practices, which helps their colleagues learn in a tangible fashion.

Not only is principal training critical, but the quality of training matters, said Earl Ball, the co-director of the School Leadership Program at the University of Pennsylvania's graduate school of education.

"If you want programs to develop leaders who are intellectually attuned and see themselves as instructional leaders, you can't put them in programs that lack intellectual focus and stimulation and strong instruction," he said.

"Often, the programs that are preparing people are not intellectually engaging, and they don't marry theory and practice very well," Mr. Ball added.

At Penn, prospective principals in the leadership program are exposed to all levels of schooling, but given an opportunity to focus on specialty areas.

One student, Mr. Ball said, was able to spend much of her time looking at interactions among kindergartners to help her prepare for the principalship of an elementary school.

Mr. Reeves agreed, noting that principals need the type of training that focuses on outcomes, not merely inputs and credit accumulation.

"The mistake we have made in the past is to mandate certain types of hours or courses. It is a much more effective policy to talk about what principals really do, not just what they hear," he said. "One problem in professional development for administrators and teachers is all the prescriptions about courses and hours that are not about deep implementation."

Cheryl Dunkle, a former Colorado elementary principal, said the best training she received was on concrete practices that could be applied at the school level. She instituted weekly dialogue groups at her school to help ensure the professional learning that she and the teachers received later turned into educational practice.

Ms. Chester of the NAESP said learning what developmentally appropriate practice looks like can be a challenge for any principal, but especially for those who come to elementary schools from secondary school backgrounds.

"That is a huge leap in and of itself. And to not only learn what you need to know about K-5 or K-6, but if you happen to have a preschool or an established bridge, you are totally at a loss," she said. "We are looking for ways for our principals to have more training and understanding of what they should be able to do and know."

The goal, she said, is not to make school for the youngest children into a "mini-kindergarten," but for principals to learn how to link up with early-childhood providers that operate in their communities and sometimes even in their school buildings in a way that makes that transition for the youngest children easier.

Armed with information, Ms. Chester said, principals can coach teachers in using best practices for early learners.

Families and Communities

The challenge, however, is finding the place and the time to learn what the latest research in early-childhood education says, Ms. Chester said. Principals are expected to study a wealth of information as instructional leaders, and accessing information on educating the youngest learners through the limited training some districts provide or taking initiative to dig through research can be time-consuming.

Armed with such information, Ms. Gibson said, principals will understand the need to take the good practices beyond classroom walls.

“When we talk about education, we don’t just talk about education in the context of the school environment,” she said. “We do engage families and communities.

“It is important for the principal to make way not just for the practices to happen in the school, but also the school’s mission to engage families as well. It’s a pedagogical underpinning, not just a philosophical tenet of schooling.”

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