



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | JULY 2016

National Principals' Survey on Early Childhood Instructional Leadership

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Instructional Leadership In Schools

An emerging theme in school reform is preK to third grade alignment and the importance of readiness that leads to academic success. The urgency of improving leadership and management in school-based early childhood programs has been fueled by the expansion of preschool programs in school districts (NAESP, 2014) and increased accountability for principals to meet student growth targets. Central to the dialogue has been the preparation of principals as instructional leaders and supervisors of early childhood teachers (Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014). Some have raised concern as to whether principals are adequately prepared to oversee preK classrooms and evaluate preK teachers (Shue, Shore, & Lambert, 2012; Sokoloff-Rubin, 2014)—many are not prepared for these responsibilities (NAESP, 2014).

As instructional leaders, principals provide “organizational management for instructional improvement” by staffing a school with high-quality teachers and providing supports and resources for student success (Hornig & Loeb, 2010). Increasingly, they must have knowledge of the quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) standards in their states and how to meet them. The National Association of Elementary School Principals recently published a framework to help principals serving students from age three to grade three ensure a successful preK-3 continuum by identifying specific competencies in practice that are required of the primary instructional leaders in schools (NAESP, 2014). However, it is generally understood that personnel serving in a variety of other roles also contribute to the instructional leadership in school-based early childhood classrooms including curriculum directors, early childhood administrators/directors, teacher leaders, and literacy coaches. Members of an instructional leadership team help teachers become more intentional about classroom practices related to the learning environment, curriculum, and data-informed decision making (Skiffington, Washburn, & Elliott 2011).

The evidence about distributed leadership models in schools, especially related to early childhood and primary grade-levels, is thin. The Wallace Foundation commissioned research that explored the relationship of distributed leadership to student outcomes (Louis, Leithwood, Whalstrom, and Anderson, 2010). Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, and Davis (2014) proposed the *Effective Leadership Conditions Framework* that includes a strand for fostering a culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement. Spillane (2002) clarified that distributed leadership extends beyond the individual and is manifest as an activity shared by multiple participants. Lambert, Zimmerman, and Gardner (2016) proposed that schools employ *constructivist leadership*, a complex, dynamic process that is focused on reciprocal learning. A growing body of evidence exists of the effects of distributed leadership in community-based early childhood programs (Talan, 2010), but models specific to distributed leadership in school-based preK have not been developed.

Similarly, only scant research is available about the administrative structures that specifically address early childhood classrooms. Some districts consolidate preK classrooms in dedicated buildings with several hundred preschool children. A more traditional approach places a few preK classrooms in each elementary school across a district. It is apparent from these dichotomous examples that the approach to instructional leadership and teacher supervision of school-based early childhood programs is likely to differ widely, but little is known about how districts are organizing for these functions and who is performing in these roles. In conducting the 2010-2015 National Survey of Early Care and Education, researchers commented that they were not able to report on the characteristics of program leaders in centers and schools—as they were for teachers—because over 200 role titles were identified in the preliminary findings (M. Zaslow, personal communication, July 8, 2014). An in-depth understanding about who is providing instructional leadership and the organizational structures in which this leadership function is delivered is essential for developing resources and tools to promote a preK to third grade alignment agenda.



National Principals' Survey On Early Childhood Instructional Leadership

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University, and New America partnered to study early childhood instructional leadership in schools. The National Principals' Survey on Early Childhood Instructional Leadership was conducted in 2016 with the NAESP membership. This environmental scan collected basic descriptive data about the roles within schools and districts that contribute to instructional leadership and teacher supervision in preK classrooms. The survey was designed to examine the distribution of leadership functions; the influence of elementary principals on supporting children transitioning to kindergarten; classroom activities in preK and primary classrooms; and the alignment of curriculum, standards and instruction across the PreK-3 continuum. The primary research questions included:

- 1) What is the structural organization of preK in school districts across the United States? Do dimensions of instructional leadership differ by the structural organization of the schools?
- 2) What are the positions and roles of personnel performing instructional leadership functions in preK classrooms across the United States?
- 3) What are the positions and roles of personnel performing supervision functions of early childhood teachers in school districts across United States?
- 4) What are the educational level and specialized knowledge and skills of personnel performing instructional leadership and/or supervision functions in preK classrooms across the United States?
- 5) Do principals implement a distributed leadership approach? Does the distributed leadership approach include the preK classrooms?
- 6) In what ways do schools support children through the preK-3 educational continuum, especially as children enter kindergarten?
- 7) How do principals perceive the importance of various classroom activities and does the degree to which they place importance differ for preK, kindergarten, and 1st grade classrooms?

Results

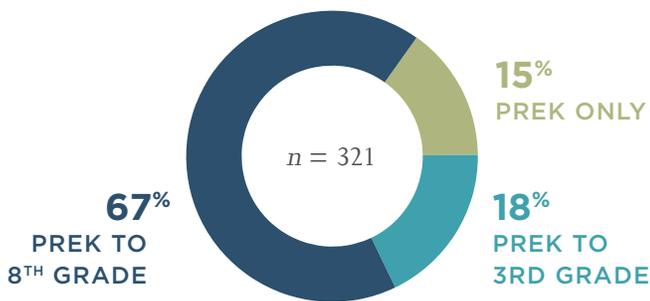
SAMPLE

NAESP members were invited to participate in an online survey in January 2016. Of the 550 principals who responded to the survey, 459 fully completed at least one section. Of these, 321 (70%) reported they had an early learning program in their school. Of those that did not have a preK program, 78% were interested in establishing an early learning program and 12% did not consider it a priority for their school. Respondents' schools were located in 49 states or territories and the District of Columbia.

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

The respondents' schools were grouped by three configurations of grade-levels offered: early childhood centers (schools with only preK classrooms), preK to primary grades (Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and/or 3rd), and preK through grades higher than primary (4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and/or 8th). Most of the schools (67%) offered preK up to middle school, while 18% had preK and primary classrooms and 15% were exclusively early childhood centers.

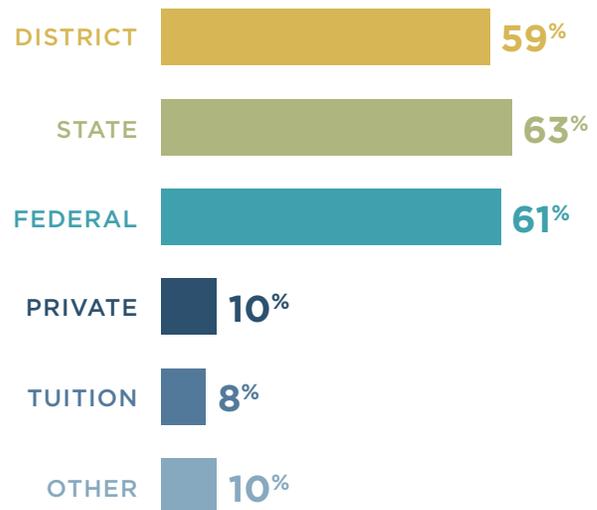
School Type by Grade-Level Groups



The average preK enrollment of all the schools that offered early childhood was 90 children. PreK enrollment was also examined for the three different grade-level configurations and significant differences were found. The average preK enrollment of early childhood centers was 160 children. Schools that offered preK to primary grades had an average enrollment of 89 preK children. Of those schools that had preK through grades higher than primary, the average preK enrollment was 62 children. Sixty-three percent of districts operated preK in multiple locations.

PREK FUNDING SOURCES

Principals reported that a majority of the funding for their preK programs came from district, state, or federal sources. Private and philanthropic funding was available for 10% of the schools. Parent-paid tuition contributed to the funding for 8% of the schools and 10% of schools received funding from a variety of other sources.



n = 321

CAPACITY TO SERVE LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS

The survey also assessed the capacity of schools with preK classrooms to serve children who speak languages other than English. Forty-seven percent of principals indicated that they had a need for more linguistically diverse teachers. For 34% of the schools, principals believed they had linguistically diverse personnel who could be teachers.

PRINCIPALS' BACKGROUNDS

Principals also reported about their personal formal education, training, or teaching experience related to early childhood development. Nearly one-fourth of the respondents held early childhood certification. A majority of the principals had coursework in either their teacher or principal preparation curricula and had teaching experience in early childhood or elementary classrooms. Survey results showed that of 321 principals, their backgrounds included:

- Early childhood certification - 24%
- Teacher preparation that included early childhood - 60%
- Principal preparation that included early childhood - 59%
- District-funded professional development with an early childhood focus - 58%
- State-funded professional development with an early childhood focus - 46%
- Professional development from associations with an early childhood focus - 13%
- Early childhood or elementary teaching experience - 62%

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

Principals were asked about who had primary responsibility for instructional leadership functions in their schools. For each of 13 functions they selected a role title from 19 different positions. Some of the role titles were differentiated as to whether they were at the district-level or the building-level. The role titles were:

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Principal Consultant
- Early Childhood Director
- Site Director/Supervisor
- Teacher Leader
- Education Coordinator
- Curriculum Coordinator
- Special Education Coordinator
- Early Childhood Coordinator
- Literacy Coordinator
- Early Childhood Specialist
- Quality Manager

Results showed that most of the instructional leadership functions were performed by five role titles—principal, early childhood director, early childhood coordinator at the district level, district curriculum coordinator, and teacher leader—as indicated in the following chart.

Instructional Leadership Roles (n = 321)

Instructional Leadership Function	Principal	Early Childhood Director	EC Coordinator (District)	Curriculum Coordinator (District)	Teacher Leader
Formal teacher evaluation	80%				
Observation, feedback, and support	72%				
Ensuring professional development	40%	23%	13%		
Individual professional development planning	49%	16%	9%		
Fostering collegiality	81%	7%			
Mentor relationships	53%	11%	8%		
Curriculum implementation	51%	14%	7%		
Aligning curriculum to the PreK-3 continuum	34%	12%	9%	29%	
Ensuring appropriate child assessment	28%	20%	13%	9%	
Establishing data systems for teaching	37%	16%	8%	9%	
Communities of practice	52%	14%	8%		7%
Supporting family engagement	42%	9%			25%
Community partners	49%	12%	7%		12%

Other role titles were infrequently identified as primary instructional leaders in early childhood classrooms.

Therefore, principals performed as the primary individual for the following instructional leadership functions in 40% or more of the schools:

- Conducting formal evaluation of teachers
- Providing observation, feedback, and support
- Guiding individual professional development planning
- Fostering collegiality for a positive work environment
- Coordinating mentor relationships
- Overseeing curriculum implementation
- Building and sustaining communities of practice
- Cultivating a shared responsibility for children’s learning with community partners

In addition to principals, three of the role titles were reported to be the responsible in 20% or more of the schools. Early childhood directors were found to be the primary instructional leader for two functions: ensuring professional development and ensuring appropriate child assessment. Curriculum coordinators at the district-level were frequently identified as the person responsible for aligning curriculum to the PreK-3 continuum. Interestingly—in addition to principals—teacher leaders assumed key roles in supporting family engagement.

TRANSITIONING CHILDREN ALONG THE PREK-3 CONTINUUM

As schools have kindergarteners transitioning from a variety of early childhood experiences, the National Principals’ Survey collected information about school interventions to make these transitions seamless. Principals reported about their knowledge of and relationships with feeder programs to their schools. Feeder programs are centers or other organizations that typically serve children prior to attending their school for kindergarten, and may include Head Start, publicly funded preK housed in a non-public school setting, private child care centers, and family child care homes. These programs could include programs located and/or operated by the school or district. The 321 principals with preK classrooms in their schools perceived their relationship with feeder programs in the following aspects:

- Principals know of the feeder programs – 82%
- Principals communicate with the feeder programs – 72%
- Principals have relationships with program directors of feeder programs – 64%

The survey included items to assess how schools support teachers’ planning for children entering kindergarten. Responses showed that 208 (65%) of the schools did some type of transition planning with feeder programs. Of these, principals reported the following types of supports:

- PreK and kindergarten teachers had an established time to plan for transitions – 181 (77%)
- Information is shared about kindergarten expectations – 101 (49%)
- Incoming kindergarteners have a field trip to visit the school – 161 (62%)
- Curriculum and instruction is formally aligned – 90 (43%)
- Agreements are established to share information about incoming kindergarteners – 85 (41%)

In addition to the interventions that schools provided related to feeder programs, principals also reported about support functions and systems that existed within their schools. The frequency of schools that included supports for leadership teams to function across the preK-3 continuum were:

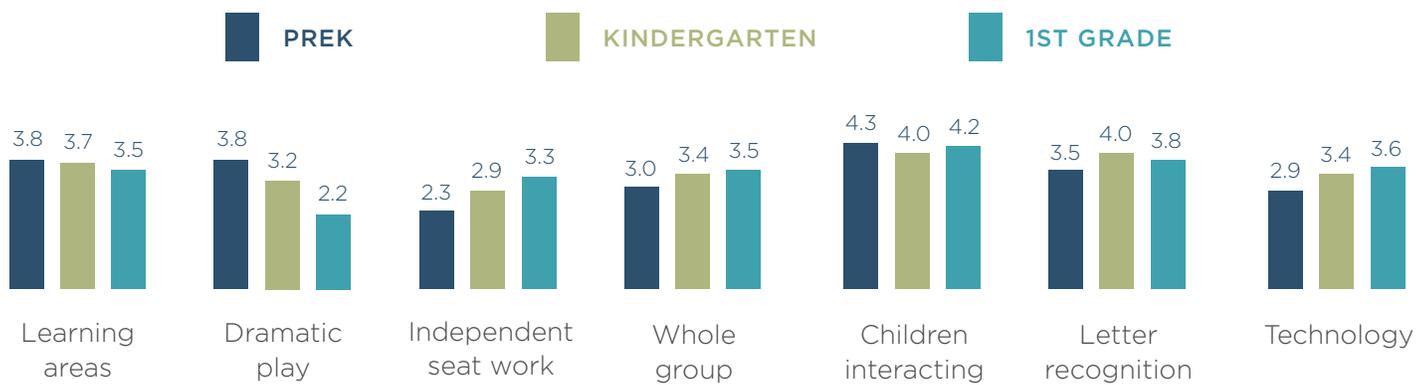
- Vertical professional learning communities across grade levels - 22%
- Joint vertical planning across grade levels - 9%
- Aligning curriculum and standards across grade levels - 25%
- Assessment inventory - 12%
- No functions or systems exist to support children across the PreK-3 continuum - 8%
- Other functions or systems - 7%

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

To understand how principals perceived an ideal pedagogy across early childhood grade levels, they were asked to rate the level of importance for children to be engaged in each of seven activities in classrooms. They answered identical questions separately for each grade level (kindergarten, 1st grade, and 2nd grade). The following items were presented as a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important to 5 = extremely important):

- Children select many of their own activities from a variety of learning areas that the teacher prepares (writing, science, blocks, etc.)
- A dramatic play center
- Children work independently on seat work
- Whole group teacher-directed instruction
- Opportunities for children to interact with other children
- Reading instruction that emphasizes letter recognition
- Technology is used as a personalized learning activity

Principals' responses indicated that *opportunities for children to interact with other children* was the highest rated activity and was consistent across all three grade levels. Similarly, *reading instruction that emphasizes letter recognition* was rated highly and differed only slightly between grades. It was most highly rated for kindergarten. Two of the activities—*children select many of their own activities from a variety of learning areas* and *a dramatic play center*—decreased in importance from preK to 1st grade. *Dramatic play* was rated “not very important” for first graders. Three of the activities were rated by principals as increasing in importance as children progressed through the preK to 1st grade continuum: *children work independently on seat work*, *whole group teacher-directed instruction*, and *technology is used as a personalized learning activity*.



Discussion And Implications

These findings help us to understand some of the differences in the structural configuration of school-based preK in the United States and the roles and titles of individuals that are performing various instructional leadership functions. Of the schools that offer preK, about one-third are either schools operated by districts that are exclusively composed of preK classrooms or those that offer only primary grades—preK up to 3rd grade. With the \$7 billion spent on preK expansion, districts and principals are exploring many options for which grade levels should be included in elementary schools. The impact of different grade-level configurations warrants additional study, especially investigation of the effects of collectively educating

young children in specialized preK centers. Further studies may also reveal how differences in the grade-level composition of schools impacts preK-3 transitions and whether creating school that are exclusively composed of preK classrooms diminishes the benefits of neighborhood community schools.

The finding of five primary instructional leadership roles is helpful as we seek to construct frameworks for schools. The overwhelming prevalence of principals fulfilling most of the instructional leadership roles suggests that systems may not be in place to distribute leadership functions for greater organizational breadth and expertise. It is important to bear in mind that this

study was based on self-report data from principals themselves and may be limited by their views about primary responsibility for various leadership functions. These data suggest that in addition to principals, early childhood directors may be the chief leaders in many school-based programs. They were most frequently responsible for ensuring professional development and appropriate child assessment in their schools. Additional analysis could reveal if there is a correlation of early childhood directors to schools that are primarily configured with early childhood classrooms. It raises the question, what is the relationship of a school administrator with the title early childhood director to the school principal and how is decision-making shared?

The Midwest Expansion of the Child-Parent Center Education Program has developed a distributed leadership structure that involves a team of school personnel to support preK-3rd grade instruction (Human Capital Research Collaborative, 2016). In addition to the principal and assistant principal, team members include: a curriculum liaison, a parent involvement liaison, a school-community representative, a parent resource teacher, and a head teacher. While many schools may not have the resources to support such a robust instructional leadership team, models such as those of the Midwest CPC Expansion project demonstrate greater leadership capacity to foster a constructivist leadership approach (Lambert, Zimmerman, & Gardner, 2016).

Two of the five roles that emerged as primary instructional leaders were district-level positions—early childhood coordinator and curriculum coordinator. Many of the same instructional leadership functions that were performed by early childhood directors were also more frequently assigned to district early childhood coordinators. This may suggest that these district leaders may be responsible for supporting a wide variety of instructional dimensions at multiple locations. District curriculum coordinators were identified as primary leaders in three instructional leadership functions that were the most distributed and where principals were less frequently responsible—aligning curriculum to the PreK-3 continuum, ensuring appropriate child assessment, and establishing data systems for teaching. These district-level positions may fulfill key linchpin roles for schools, connecting schools across districts and fostering vertical collaboration along the PreK-3 continuum.

Teacher leaders were also identified as meeting the leadership needs in preK classrooms in many schools. Second only to principals, teacher leaders were most often considered the responsible party for supporting family engagement. Assimilating families into children's educational support networks is especially relevant in light of dramatic shifts in school demographics. Teacher leaders are advantaged by being

so close to schools' pedagogy and having a grounded perspective regarding the needs of teachers, families, and community partners. They are able to provide leadership in ways that may be more difficult for principals due to perceptions associated with their highly-visible status. As peers, teacher leaders may be particularly effective in leading communities of practice.

This survey revealed that a majority of principals leading schools with preK classrooms had some formal education and professional development that included an early childhood focus, as well as early childhood or elementary teaching experience. However, the findings also highlight that 40% or more of principals leading preK programs have no specialized education or training in early childhood education. Few states have standards regarding early childhood certification and only one-fourth of the respondents in this study were certified in early childhood. These findings suggest that there is intentionality to place principals with some early childhood education and experience in schools in the United States, but standards requiring principals to have specialized training in early childhood education is nearly non-existent.

Principals' perceptions about the importance of developmentally appropriate classroom activities mirror the inconsistency in formal education and specialized training in early childhood education. For example, the sharp decrease in the perceived importance of *dramatic play centers* as a learning activity from preK to 1st grade indicates that many principals may not value play-based learning as children progress through primary education. Similarly, these data reflect a trend toward more academic pedagogy as principals rated *children work independently on seat work* and *whole group teacher-directed instruction* with a substantial direct increase through the grade levels. While some principals may not understand the benefits of learning through play, many may be conflicted by pressure to respond to increased academic expectations as recently reported by Lieberman and Cook (2016).

Results from this study supported findings from New America's investigation of elementary school principals—five focus groups involving 46 educators (Bornfreund, 2016). They found that schools' network relationships with external early childhood programs are typically informal; principals face capacity, time and resource challenges to build relationships; and "high touch" practices, such as content alignment and coordinating instructional strategies, may be especially beneficial for helping children transition across grade levels. The survey showed that most principals had knowledge of feeder programs to their schools and communicated with their leaders. However, specific strategies for supporting transitions (e.g., "high touch" practices) both with feeder programs and within the principals' schools were less frequently instituted.



Some limitations of this study should be considered in interpreting these results. As previously mentioned, these findings are based on self-reported information by principals and would need to be verified by other data sources. Other individuals—teachers, assistant principals, superintendents, parents, instructional coaches—in districts and schools were not surveyed to provide various perspectives about instructional leadership in preK classrooms. While the respondents represented nearly all regions of the United States, the sample size was not robust enough to consider the findings representative of all principals or schools. Only NAESP members were surveyed, which does not include all elementary school principals.

This exploratory study expands our understanding of instructional leadership in school-based early childhood programs. It helps to frame the role of the principal in impacting preK pedagogy and offers some insight into how programs are distributing leadership functions to various personnel. It also reflects changes in the grade-level configuration of schools and documents the prevalence of early childhood centers in school districts across the United States. It challenges existing norms for principal preparation to ensure that all instructional leaders of preK classrooms have a background that empowers them to support and influence pedagogical practice that best meets the needs of learners. It also raises questions for schools and policy leaders about systems development to support children through transitions.

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