

**Pre-Kindergarten through Grade Three Alignment  
The Role of the Elementary Principal in Building and Nurturing  
A Seamless Continuum of Learning  
Presented by Gail Connelly, Executive Director  
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My thanks go to Jacqueline and Joan for convening this panel to explore this critically important topic. As the executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals—the only national organization that serves all elementary and middle-level principals—I represent thousands of educators who profoundly appreciate the vital work early childhood educators do every day, who recognize their critically important partnerships with early childhood educators, and who are deeply committed to the journey we share on behalf of our nation’s youngest children. I’m pleased to be with you.

I would like to begin with a brief personal story. While I’ve spent nearly three decades of my professional life working with principals on behalf of young children, my personal life caught up to my career 18 months ago when my first grandchild, Lincoln Richey, was born. Lincoln is thriving in every way—emotionally, physically, socially, and intellectually—in part because he has a strong support system: two loving and devoted parents, attentive and nurturing grandparents, and a host of other doting family members. He’s also enrolled in an excellent early childhood learning center—an essential component of his support system. As a result, I have every confidence that Lincoln will be ready to contribute to and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Far too many of his peers won’t be so fortunate.

The fact that children who begin formal schooling behind their peers are likely to stay behind and are more at risk of dropping out of school is a tragedy of epic proportions – most of these children are destined to lead permanently damaged lives adversely affecting their families and our society. The enormous loss of human potential this represents for our country is staggering.

An unsettling reality of our education system is that the sectors are often separated by seams that can unravel, leaving unsupported children teetering between preschool and elementary grades; between elementary and middle school; between middle school and high school; or between high school and college or career.

These children are incredibly vulnerable to academic failure because the gaps are too wide for them to bridge themselves. They are counting on informed, educated, caring adults to help them fill the

gaps that will give them a fair chance to be on par educationally with their peers as they progress through a continuum of learning from preschool through grade three and beyond.

So today, I'm delighted—professionally and personally—to share some thoughts for how we can work together to weave that seamless continuum of learning so all children can grow, develop, and learn—not just children like my grandson who are lucky enough to be born with deep and broad support systems but all children.

There's no disagreement among practitioners or researchers about the need to improve our nation's lowest performing schools, but we must begin at the beginning. Early learning and elementary school partnerships must be at the heart of our improvement equations.

Elementary principals understand the importance of supporting the gains that children make in their earliest years, especially those who are nurtured in early childhood learning communities. Although the responsibilities of elementary and middle-level principals have changed dramatically over the past 10 years, they face challenges that promise equally-significant change in the coming decade and beyond. The pressure on principals has never been more intense:

- They are expected to ensure that schools perform at ever-higher levels with ever-shrinking budgets;
- They are committed to prepare students to succeed in a world adults can scarcely imagine;
- They must juggle and adhere to often conflicting state and federal guidelines; and
- They are required to operate—day in and day out—in a high-stakes pressure-cooker of hyper-accountability. All this doesn't even come close to conveying the complexities of the multi-faceted role of today's principal.

Still, elementary and middle-level principals are masters at preventing external pressures from disrupting the important work of schools. Their focus is unerring: They are the primary catalysts for driving school and student performance and for creating a lasting foundation for learning. As such they know that high-quality early childhood development and learning has a profound, lasting influence on student achievement and life outcomes.

A wealth of indisputable evidence supports the correlation between contextually rich early learning experiences and children who become productive and responsible adults. It also confirms the reverse: Children who don't have the support systems they need—whether at home or in a learning community—are at great risk of

- 1) falling behind their peers, of
- 2) needing special services, and of
- 3) requiring extensive—and expensive—intervention throughout school—if they stay in school.

The stark reality is that up to 50 percent of children in some high schools drop out entirely. If we, as a community of educators, are serious about reducing that shocking statistic, we must provide the steady support children need when they're toddlers—not suddenly when they're teenagers and in trouble. That some children are “predestined” to drop out is counter intuitive to all of us in this room—and to the principals NAESP represents. We wholeheartedly believe that all children can succeed.

More important, all children must achieve at their highest potential. As we enter the first decade of this new century, it is insufficient to present a narrow curriculum that is easily measured by standardized test scores. Applying a single measure like test scores to a complicated enterprise like educating children paints a one dimensional picture—a flat, shallow, and inaccurate snapshot when what we need is a three-dimensional portrait of the whole child. We can and should do a better job of capturing how students learn and grow: Socially, emotionally, and academically.

A recent report issued by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills states that our young people must have:

- higher order skills;
- the ability to think critically and analyze information;
- to solve complex, open-ended problems;
- to be creative and entrepreneurial;
- to communicate and collaborate across borders; and
- to use knowledge and information to create new opportunities.

I'm preaching to the choir. Anyone who has witnessed how toddlers often play with puzzles in a classroom knows that these skills are already being developed at an early age -- picking up a puzzle board, dumping out the pieces, gathering them up and rearranging their order and connecting by color, distinct shapes or sizes. And, in many cases, there are several children who work together to put the pieces back into place.

While the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills report doesn't mention the power of play specifically as a necessary component for helping children thrive, we know that learning begins well

before kindergarten and play is an integral part of the development. It is central to how children solve problems, develop relationships, learn the give and take of healthy interactions, develop language, and collaborate. NAESP recently teamed up with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Playworks, and the Gallup organization to study recess. Here's the opening statement from that report, titled *The State of Play*:

“Class size. Standardized testing. The three Rs. When most people talk about how to improve education, they tend to focus only on what happens in the classroom. But the most unexpected opportunity to boost learning lies outside the classroom: on the playground at recess.”

Exactly! Active children are more confident about their ability to learn and more creative in their problem-solving. Play helps children establish and nurture relationships, resolve conflict, think independently, express themselves creatively, and make good decisions—among many other benefits that bolster learning.

And yet play is a rapidly vanishing part of the school day. Up to 40 percent of U.S. school districts have reduced or eliminated recess to make more time for core academics. And one in four elementary schools—25 percent—no longer provides recess to all grades. Ironically, the evidence says that eliminating recess to strengthen learning is likely to yield exactly the opposite outcome.

Unfortunately, the situation is not much better in kindergarten, which once was the all-important “space” that integrated play and learning.

The vision of prekindergarten through grade three alignment must begin with the recognition that early learning does not stop at the kindergarten school door – and play is the perfect example of how we must bring back developmentally-appropriate learning experiences and carry them well into the third grade – or provide a seamless continuum of learning as children build upon the skills that they learn at an early age.

The fact of the matter is that together, we can build a foundation for children so they are:

- ready to master 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and core academic subjects;
- So they have a thirst for learning and a reservoir of knowledge.
- So they become successful students and lifelong learners.

To create this future, early childhood educators and elementary educators must acknowledge our shared ideals. Elementary and middle-level principals and early childhood educators believe the same precept: Whole-child development in the prekindergarten years forms the bedrock of learning in

the primary grades. Children who are nurtured socially, creatively, emotionally, and physically are better prepared to learn.

Ours is not an either/or agenda, but a shared roadmap for principals, early childcare practitioners, teachers, and families to collaborate and to combine our resources to advance learning.

The path forward to realizing our shared agenda, however, is neither straightforward nor easy. This era of high-stakes testing and accountability must not disrupt the successful alignment of early development to primary learning or sidetrack a child's successful developmental journey. Let me be clear: NAESP believes that there is no room for developmentally inappropriate testing in a preschool or kindergarten classroom. We do support age-appropriate, formative assessments that help educators determine if a child is on the right trajectory. As elementary school principals, our job is to support and enrich a child's experience and take steps to help them get ready for formal learning.

NAESP endorses accreditation criteria for early childhood programs developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the professional standards developed by Head Start. We encourage principals to use these guidelines as jumping off points to engage in conversations with a wide range of educators.

Effective elementary principals lead their schools with vision and courage, provide instructional guidance to teachers, and motivate all stakeholders to sustain comprehensive learning communities. They are ideally positioned to collaborate, to effectively knit together the seamless continuum we're exploring today. But to do that, they need to build on their existing knowledge and expertise.

To accomplish this goal, we are working to strengthen federal policy to provide much-needed professional development for elementary principals specifically related to early childhood education to understand and learn how to provide a seamless continuum of learning and developmentally-appropriate practice.

Principals must have more support given the enormous responsibilities they shoulder and the growing complexities of the job ahead. They must take into account the many factors that influence a child's ability to learn and help teachers develop instructional practices that acknowledge those factors but still help children learn.

- They must help familiarize children and their families with new surroundings, rules, structure, expectations, and faces.
- They must work with educators to help ease the physical and emotional transition for children as they move to more formal teaching and learning.

- They must keep a close eye on learning needs, set high expectations for teachers and student performance, and facilitate the full and active engagement of children and their parents in the learning process.
- They must develop on-going transition plans that involve teachers, parents, and early care providers, and organize or lead joint professional development for early childhood educators and primary grade teachers.
- They must ensure that prekindergarten and the primary grades are aligned “horizontally” within grade levels and “vertically” from grade level to grade level.

Let me share a brief story of how one elementary principal is working with a variety of partners—including early childhood centers—to support children developmentally and academically.

Dr. Theresa Mattison is the principal of a pre-kindergarten through grade 5 school in Detroit. Her school is ranked one of Michigan’s Top Five Title 1 schools. In keeping with best practice for excellent principals, Dr. Mattison has set a culture of high expectations for all students—so she expects all students to achieve to their highest potential, but she pays very close attention to the factors that influence learning readiness, such as making sure children have access to dental care, clothing, and food — she knows that students and their families struggle with daunting circumstances they can’t control. That balancing act probably sounds very familiar to many of you.

And also like many of you, she’s an optimistic realist. She sees her school as “a beacon of light” for her students and their families. One way her school shines is through her work with a host of local partners, including some early childhood centers, to make sure her students get basic needs met—whether those needs are physical, emotional, and social—so their bodies and their minds are ready to learn.

Clearly, Theresa Mattison is immersed in the leadership strategies that help create a seamless transition from preschool to school. NAESP’s goal in this important area is to steep all elementary principals in those strategies and build productive partnerships with early childhood centers in their neighborhoods.

In this light, NAESP issued a landmark publication, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*, which provides a framework of effective principal competencies: what principals must know and be able to do to design, implement, and sustain the learning continuum from early childhood education through grade three. The standards focus on helping principals rethink the connection

between early childhood, school operations and programs so they better meet the needs of early learners. We've identified six indicators of effective practice:

- Support an expanded continuum of learning for children as they move from early learning settings into the primary grades or, as the case may be, support children who move from a home environment into a school setting.
- Engage families with the entire school learning community to better understand early learning development.
- Promote school environments that are developmentally age-appropriate, safe, adequately staffed, and equipped to accommodate the many needs of children.
- Provide high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that support early learning and the social and emotional development of children.
- Use multiple methods of assessment that are developmentally appropriate to accurately gauge the quality of learning experiences and use data to inform how instruction can be strengthened or improved; and
- Employ a balanced approach to school management and instructional leadership that places an emphasis on early learning experiences as part of the school culture.

These standards have been highly effective guideposts for principals who work with early childhood educators. But there's more to do.

Our next step is to move our six standards to the next level. To do so, we're establishing an early childhood task force of researchers, field experts, specialists, and practitioners who are charged with one central imperative: Identify, update, and clarify best practices to help all educators meet the developmental and learning needs of our youngest children and to influence the development of early learning policies that clearly call for the alignment of resources and structures to accomplish our goals. I look forward to your input and support.

And finally, I'd like to close by reiterating NAESP's commitment to collaborating with you in support of all children. Our Association is organized around a few powerful, forward-looking strategic goals, which we sum up with the phrase Leading Learning Communities. Two of those vision goals are especially appropriate to share:

Our leading goal says that NAESP nurtures and supports all principals to demonstrate the vision, courage, and expertise to lead and advocate for effective learning communities in which all children reach their highest potential.

Our learning goal says that NAESP develops and supports all principals by providing on-demand learning opportunities that ensure access to the knowledge, skills, networks, and tools necessary to equip all students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The unshakable precept underlying these two goals is simple: Every boy and girl in America can and must learn to his or her highest potential, and every elementary and middle-level principal can and must provide the leadership and the heart to help them.

With your partnership—and your heart—we can work together to weave a seamless continuum of learning for all children when it matters most—at the very start of their learning journey.

Thank you.