

Advocating for Early Childhood Education and Networks of Support

Principals take the lead in promoting quality preschool and kindergarten experiences as well as other developmental services to enhance school readiness.

Vision 2021 Foresight Brief

It is commonly accepted that children's learning is enhanced by their early childhood experiences, and parents will demand more and improved Pre-K opportunities for their children. Elementary school principals will be at the forefront of discussions and activities that reach beyond the elementary campus, including early childhood education. These principals understand how many children start school unprepared, and are in a key position to define school readiness.¹

Scientific research will expand our knowledge of critical learning periods in child development. Case studies of neglected children showed a link between early childhood experience and the development of fine motor skills, speech and other skills.² These studies showed a great deal about the environmental conditions that can cause danger to brain development and subsequent learning, but reveal very little about how to optimize or accelerate learning.³ However, researchers have used these and other observational studies of children to identify critical learning periods for key skills such as language development, second language acquisition, and learning a musical instrument, among other learning activities. Advances in molecular and brain imaging will transform this area of education research by linking critical learning periods to molecular and functional changes in the brain. It might also be possible in the future to identify individual variations in critical learning periods.

The rapidly growing number of immigrants in U.S. schools will make English proficiency an increasingly significant early education challenge. The language skills required in day-to-day social interactions can take as little as six months to two years to acquire. However, second language students need additional training to master the more cognitively demanding skills of comparison, synthesis, classification, evaluation and inference. To acquire this level of proficiency usually requires 5-7 years; however, in cases where a student has had no prior schooling or support in language

¹ NAESP, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, Executive Summary, http://web.naesp.org/misc/ECLC_ExecSum.pdf

² MacNaughton, G. (2004) The Politics of Logic in Early Childhood Research: A Case of the Brain, Hard Facts, Trees and Rhizomes. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 31 (3): 87-104.

³ Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academies Press. Retrieved 11/1/06 at <http://newton.nap.edu/books/0309069882/html>

development, it could take as long as 7-10 years for them to catch up to their peers.⁴ Elementary schools must be the leaders in ESL, because the earlier students can gain academic English proficiency the sooner they will benefit from their educational experience.

Provocative Questions for Board Leadership

- How can principals help ensure that all children – including those from very poor families – are able to access quality pre-K programs?
- Does the education workforce have the staff capacity and skills to deliver a meaningful experience for all 3- and 4-year olds?

Opportunities for Leadership

- ✓ Principals can take the lead in advocating for policies at the federal, state and local levels.⁵ Opportunities include full funding for Head Start, improved transition programs, full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds, after-school programs, low teacher-student ratios, and professional growth programs for principals.
- ✓ To facilitate learning before school, principals can act as a bridge between schools and community-based supports for young children and their families
- ✓ Principals can provide a leading voice in explaining that skilled teachers are the best judges of pre-K growth and performance. However, appropriate assessments used in classrooms by teachers and principals are a key ingredient in building high-quality pre-K programs and forging paths to students' intellectual growth.
- ✓ As leaders in education, principals are well-positioned to speak publicly on behalf of children; they can carry the message about the need for high-quality pre-K programs as a central focus of their advocacy.⁶
- ✓ NAESP should shape the public debate on early childhood education by pressing for good early intervention programs with certified teachers. The Association could assemble the research to persuade the public that early childhood education is effective.⁷

⁴ Thomas, W.P., & Collier, V.P. (1995). *Language minority student achievement and program effectiveness*. Quoted in Collier, V.P. (1995). *Acquiring a Second Language for School*. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education Vol. 1, No. 4, Fall 1995. Retrieved 11/14/06 at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/directions/04.htm>

⁵ NAESP, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Strategic Issues for NAESP 2021