

Building Early Learning Leaders: New Jersey's PreK-3rd Leadership Training A Case Study

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Introduction

Young children's educational gains are more likely to last when quality preschool programs are linked with the elementary years. This instructional link between preschool and kindergarten through 3rd grade has become more important as high-stakes testing and measuring academic achievement are now a big part of children's educational experiences.



This is particularly true for children entering 4th grade, when academic standards become more difficult and student expectations become higher. The early learning years from preschool through 3rd grade lay the foundation for children's educational success in school and in life.

The group in the best position to successfully develop a strong early learning platform that builds upon children's educational experiences from year to year is school district administrators. Whether it is the district superintendent, the program supervisor or the building principal, each of these leaders plays a critical role in schools providing children with a consistent set of experiences from their first days in preschool through their completion of 3rd grade.

This is often easier said than done. "The will" to develop and provide the supports for successful district PreK-3rd systems is not at issue. Budget shortfalls, multiple preschool delivery systems and a continued disconnect between preschool and

the other early learning years from kindergarten through 3rd grade all impact a district's success in attaining a cohesive and rigorous system of early learning.ⁱ

Moreover, few professional development opportunities currently exist for district leaders to acquire the "know how" in leading their staffs toward this goal. This is true, even though many are now finding themselves responsible for supervising and evaluating an ever-increasing number of early learning programs and classrooms.

While this dilemma is national in scope, New Jersey school administrators are finding themselves in need of the supports necessary to build on the state's existing model preschools toward a broader vision of early learning, including making strong connections to the early learning system. Clearly, changing the educational mindset and building the related capacity of front-line leaders is paramount for bringing about early learning reform at the district level.

Giving Every Child A Chance

In an attempt to address this issue, representatives from Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) came together in the summer of 2009 to plan for a comprehensive early learning professional development program for school district administrators. The goal was to provide these administrators with research, strategies and techniques to effectively implement high-quality preschool through 3rd grade programs and to assist them in evaluating those programs, as they successfully lead their instructional staff. In the fall of 2009, New Jersey's *PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series* began, with approximately 200 district administrators participating from across the state.

This case study describes the development and content of the series, a description of the participants and the findings from surveys that participants completed at the beginning and end of the series. Also discussed are the facilitators' impressions of the challenges and opportunities and corresponding recommendations for next steps in this work.

Coming Together: Collaboration for a Common Purpose

“Early childhood is where it all begins. We have been charged with the most difficult challenge: teaching our students to read and love learning.”

—Northern New Jersey School Principal

For more than 10 years, New Jersey has provided high-quality preschool to thousands of low-income 3- and 4- year olds throughout the state. By linking high standards and appropriate assessments with adequate funding, young learners are given a solid foundation for educational success. However, how those successful preschool programs were linked with the remaining early learning years — kindergarten through 3rd grade — remained in question when the series was designed and developed. New Jersey currently invests wisely in its state-supported, high-quality preschools. To maximize this investment, this quality must carry through to the early elementary grades.

During the last four years, the New Jersey Department of Education, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association and ACNJ have all recognized the importance of this early learning continuum. It became clear to all three groups that while policy reform was important, strong district leadership was key in successfully developing PreK-3rd systems. A 2007 ACNJ report found that school districts furthest along in developing their PreK-3rd systems had administrators who understood developmentally-appropriate practices and had a broad vision for early learning.ⁱⁱ Therefore, intensive PreK-3rd professional development for district administrators would be necessary.

While such training was fertile ground, the three groups recognized the importance of working collaboratively towards the goal. The groups had successfully worked together in the past and there was a high level of credibility and respect among the parties.

It was clear to the groups that partnering was key as each brought a different “capacity” to the table. The Division of Early Childhood Education was very committed to providing leadership training to school administrators, but lacked funding to support the goal. The New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association acknowledged the need for membership training, but its previous work had not focused on the early learning years. ACNJ had researched and written about PreK-3rd state policy and had foundation funding to support the initiative, but lacked a strong grassroots network with school districts throughout the state.

DECE could not provide financial support, but nevertheless played a central unifying role in the effort by drawing in reluctant administrators, many of whom viewed early learning as “preschool only.” The team knew that if they could get them to the sessions, they could engage them in the broader vision of early learning.

DECE assigned a staff member to work on the project and also agreed to make the series part of its “Leadership Training,” which meant participating administrators received professional development hours, and a letter of commendation from the Department of Education upon course completion.

DECE also distributed notices of the series to the districts and was responsible for registration. Lastly, the DECE staff member partnered with the lead facilitators to provide the trainings. Together, these steps maximized administrator participation.

Similarly, the New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association, a statewide organization representing school administrators, publicized the series to its significant number of members. As noted, ACNJ provided the funding and facilitated the development, planning and implementation of the series.

Overall, this partnership presented “a united front” of PreK-3rd experts and provided a level of credibility that would not have existed without this collaboration.



In addition, the team agreed that part of the training must focus on developing participants as PreK-3rd advocates. While New Jersey remains a leader in early learning, kindergarten is not mandatory and state-supported preschool is only accessible to one-quarter of the state’s 3- and 4- year old children. Because these two important PreK-3rd components remain

vulnerable, particularly during difficult economic times, it seemed crucial to have strong district leadership to advocate on behalf of these programs both within their own districts and at the state level. This, however, is a “hat” that most administrators are not comfortable wearing, and, therefore, would need significant attention in the course.

The specific sessions would be based on the nine components of a PreK-3rd system, developed by Dr. Kristie Kauerz, of the Harvard Graduate School of Educationⁱⁱⁱ These components include:

- ✦ Access to programs
- ✦ Teacher/teaching quality
- ✦ Program quality
- ✦ Leader quality
- ✦ Whole child learning standards
- ✦ Child-based assessments
- ✦ Transitions
- ✦ Infrastructure and
- ✦ Family and community engagement

With these nine components in mind, the team first developed a program overview, a training syllabus that addressed all the benchmarks of the PreK-3rd continuum and the course content.

Planning the Series: “Rolling Up the Collective Sleeves”

“What happens during this early learning stage influences what happens (or doesn’t happen) in future years.”

—Southern New Jersey Elementary Curriculum Supervisor

In early 2009, the three groups developed a plan of action on how best to provide PreK-3rd professional development to school administrators. The team’s experts, including two DECE staff members and two early childhood and special education professionals, were responsible for developing the content of the trainings.

The group agreed the purpose of the course, beyond the rationale and benefits of PreK-3rd, would be to provide research-based strategies and techniques that would enable administrators to identify and implement high-quality preschool through 3rd grade programs. The course would assist administrators in evaluating their early childhood programs and obtaining the skills to successfully lead their instructional staff.

The team developed the following specific course objectives:

- ✦ Develop a comprehensive understanding of the PreK-3rd continuum reflective of research and early childhood best practice
- ✦ Increase knowledge about early development, high-quality inclusive environment specific best practices for content learning and strategies for supporting teaching staff in these areas
- ✦ Utilize tools to assess and refine classroom practices in collaboration with teaching staff
- ✦ Focus on instructional improvement through effective professional development, purposeful supervision
- ✦ Recognize how to use data- driven decision-making to promote student achievement and family engagement
- ✦ Understand the importance of collaboration and partnerships and
- ✦ Prioritize next steps for developing and advocating for PreK-3rd systems in their own schools and communities.

The team's consensus was that the program would be both meaningful and comprehensive and decided that the course content would include:

- ✦ Broadening and Articulating our PreK-3rd Vision: The Nine Essential Components
- ✦ Leader Quality, Infrastructure, Access to Programs
- ✦ Defining your Role as an Early Childhood Leader
- ✦ Program Quality, Teacher/ Teaching Quality
- ✦ Program Assessment: Using Structured Observation Instruments
- ✦ Responsive Program/ Professional Development
- ✦ Reflective Cycle
- ✦ Whole Child Learning Standards, Child-Based Assessments
- ✦ Integrated Curriculum
- ✦ Child Screening and Assessments
- ✦ Family and Community Engagement, Transition
- ✦ Responding to Diversity
- ✦ Inclusion/Special Education
- ✦ Dual Language Learners

Course Format

Because there was so much information to address and because sporadic professional development initiatives are largely ineffective in bringing about change, a typical

“one-shot” professional development program was deemed inadequate. Consistent with best practices, the team knew that bringing the same participants together multiple times would be beneficial.

Administrators have too few opportunities to discuss educational issues with their colleagues and the group felt that this training could be a way to cultivate and promote camaraderie among the participants.

Therefore, the group planned and developed a 4-day series of sessions entitled, “PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series.” Recognizing the busy schedules of district administrators, four sessions were spread over a 5-month period so attendees had adequate time to plan for being away from their districts on the specified dates.

In order to maximize the number of participants, four locations were chosen to offer all four sessions; one in northern New Jersey, one in central New Jersey and two locations in the southern part of the state.

Each of the session days were developed to include individual presentations, activities with group participation and sharing and a work session consisting of nine small groups, each armed with resources on the nine components of a PreK-3rd system.

Participant Intake and Enrollment

The team also recognized the importance of ascertaining information about the participants, their educational beliefs and their knowledge of PreK-3rd issues before the sessions began. Having this information early on would be important to the presenters so that they would have a better understanding of the groups' varied levels of PreK-3rd knowledge, their early learning background, current educational responsibilities, their personal views on PreK-3rd and the existing Prek-3rd practices in their districts.

This knowledge, plus a prepared syllabus that was flexible, would allow the presenters to modify their presentations to address the specific needs and knowledge-base of the individual groups.

As the session dates drew near, more than 200 district administrators enrolled in the series and a significant number of administrators were placed on a waiting list. The sessions began in October 2009.

The Training Gets Underway

“The fact that our administrators are involved in this leadership series is a crucial step my district is taking to ensure that experienced personnel are making the important decisions that will be made concerning PreK-3rd education.”

—Southern New Jersey School Principal

Who Participated?

At the beginning of the first session, each participant was asked to complete a PreK-3rd pre-survey about themselves, their districts and their communities. Approximately two-thirds of participants completed the survey.

The following provides a snapshot of the information collected from those surveys.

Ultimately, 180 school district leaders from across the state participated. They came from districts that either did not have preschool programs, had relatively new programs or were providing preschool to a small percentage of their preschool population. Of the participants, 35 percent were building principals, 26 percent were program supervisors and 18 percent were program directors. The remaining 21 percent held other positions ranging from assistant superintendents and assistant principals to coordinators, coaches and education specialists.

Seventy-five percent had experience teaching in the grades preschool through 3rd. Of these, 38 percent had 10 years or less experience, while 2.5 percent had more than 25 years experience teaching these grade levels.

Ninety-three percent indicated that their districts had preschool programs and 85 percent stated they were responsible for the preschool program in their district.

Participants’ Relationships with Community Programs

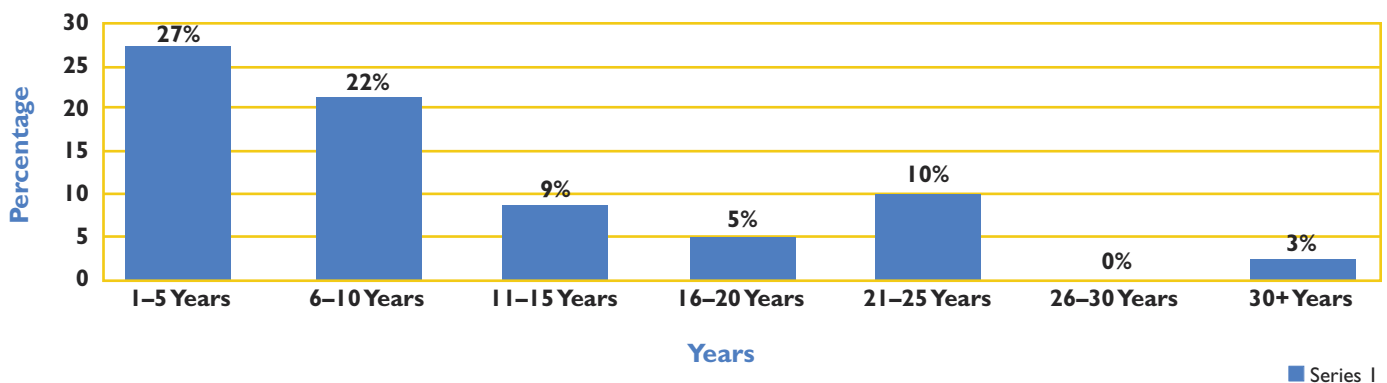
Community early childhood programs, such as Head Start and other private providers, can play an important role in strengthening the beginning piece of the early learning continuum. Even when districts do not have preschool programs, knowing about and collaborating with these programs can improve the overall continuum and benefit children.

The series’ pre-survey attempted to elicit the status of the relationship between school districts and the preschool programs in their communities.

Seventy-eight percent said their districts had community programs, Head Start and/or other community-based or private child care provider programs.

Of those districts with community programs, 70 percent of respondents indicated they knew “something” or “a lot” about these programs. However, 30 percent stated they knew “nothing” or “very little” about these programs.

Teaching Experience, PreK-3rd

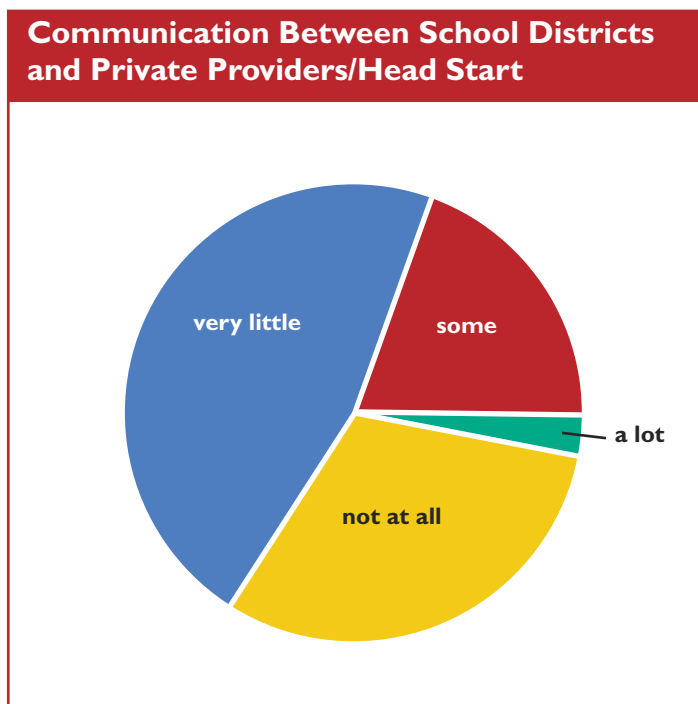


Further, even though 70 percent indicated they knew “something” or “a lot” about their community programs, only 24 percent stated they communicated “a lot” with these programs, while nearly half, 48 percent, said they communicated “very little” or “not at all.”

These results confirmed a clear disconnect between district administrators and the community preschool programs that are preparing young children for kindergarten.

When asked to describe the connections their districts have made with private providers and Head Start programs in their communities, the responses varied. The administrators from the districts with state-funded preschools have been collaborating with community programs for more than a decade and appeared, for the most part, to be thinking about and often addressing, issues on alignment across one grade level. For those districts that did not have state-supported preschool, their “connections” with community programs were often minimal.

The disconnect was even more apparent in school districts with no public preschool programs. A few of the responses indicated that because their district had no preschool, they felt that they did not need to communicate with the community programs.



When it did occur, the nature of the communications between the districts and the community programs varied, and included:

- ★ 51 percent communicated about students and transition
- ★ 39 percent communicated about curricula
- ★ 30 percent communicated about family involvement
- ★ 25 percent communicated about shared professional development opportunities.

Finally, this section of the survey also asked the attendees about their school’s approach to connecting standards and curriculum with local preschool programs. Approximately 79 percent of respondents answered this question. Nearly half of these — 49 percent — indicated that their schools have already started making these connections and another 36 percent said they would like to begin working on this in their schools. Another 13 percent supported the idea, but indicated that it was not a high priority at the time. Only 2 percent did not support strengthening a connection with local preschools.

Finding out about their own PreK-3rd programs

Eighty-three percent of respondents also answered a question regarding their district’s approach to connecting standards and curriculum between kindergarten and 3rd grade. Of these, 39 percent of schools have already made these connections and another 44 percent are starting to make these connections.

The pre-survey asked the participants to describe the steps that they or their districts were taking to implement the PreK-3rd elements. Many of the responses identified professional development, shared planning time and small learning communities as being integral pieces in implementing the continuum. Some of the “steps” included:

- ★ Implementing bi-monthly meetings between PreK and kindergarten staff
- ★ Implementing meetings with administration
- ★ Improving/empowering PTO
- ★ Implementing full-day kindergarten
- ★ Implementing a preschool curriculum
- ★ Offering supports to preschool students and their families
- ★ Building a preschool program and
- ★ Strengthening transitions between PreK and kindergarten

Administrators' Issues in PreK-3rd: Facilitator Impressions

“I think the word “continuum” is a good descriptor. All grades should be part of the same vision for what we hope to accomplish during these most important years. All grades can learn from each other for the benefit of the children.”

—Northern New Jersey Elementary Supervisor

In each of the sessions, the facilitators were in a unique position to observe and listen to the questions and responses of the participants. While the early learning knowledge level varied from person to person, several common themes became apparent, regardless of session location. The following outlines the facilitators' most significant impressions of the participants on Prek-3rd issues.

Assessment

Types of assessments vary depending on the assessment purpose.^{iv} The team agreed that the sessions should focus on the three main purposes of early learning. These are:

Assessments that support learning. The primary purpose of child assessments is to inform teaching practices. These performance-based assessments assist teachers in answering such questions as, *How is the child learning? How can I support the child's learning and development?* Ideally, child assessments would include multiple forms of measure.

Assessments for identification of special needs. These assessments aim to identify children for health and special services and help teachers in answering the question, *Is there a potential challenge to the child's learning and development?*

Assessments for program evaluation and monitoring trends. As continuous evaluation and assessment is an essential aspect of maintaining high quality PreK-3rd programs, program assessments help administrators and teachers answer such questions as, *How is the program working? For whom is the program working? How can the program be modified?* Classroom observation instruments, such as the *Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms* (APEEC)^v and *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS),^{vi} provide a clearer understanding of classroom practices.

It was clear that most administrators needed additional support on a number of fronts:

1. Understanding the differences among the types of assessment
2. Using the findings to inform teaching practices and
3. Ensuring that there were no “holes” in the Prek-3rd assessment landscape.

Lack of Key Assessment Data

Although the administrators wanted all their PreK-3rd teachers to focus on how a child is learning and how teachers can support the child's learning and development, performance-based assessments were not widely used to answer these questions beyond preschool. Moreover, when they were being used, the assessment data were often not effectively utilized to drive instruction.

Considering the lack of effective use of performance-based assessments, K-3 teachers often did not have data that depict children's development over time and did not use multiple sources of evidence. This scenario makes curricular planning more difficult for teachers and also fails to provide an accurate picture of a child's development.

Confusion between Screening and Assessment

Developmental screenings, aimed at identifying children for health and special services, were often confused with skill-based measures that identify both academic progress and the possible need for academic improvement. Clarifying the use of developmental screenings as intended to identify children in need of intervention or further evaluations assisted administrators in understanding the difference between these screenings and more skill-based measures.

Need for the Early Childhood Perspective

Many administrators based the strength of their K-3 programs solely on student performance, rather than using the broader lens afforded by the use of program assessment. Generally, the administrators were unfamiliar with program-based assessments available for K-3 programs. In fact, many administrators expressed uncertainty as to what “quality” should look like in these early learning classrooms.

By introducing them to program-based assessments, the team was able to provide the administrators with the early childhood lens they needed to better answer the questions, *How is the program working?* and *How can the program be*

modified? The administrators grew to understand the value of using both program-based assessments and student performance data to identify quality early childhood classrooms.

Determining Assessment Landscapes

Participating administrators were asked to complete an inventory of their districts' literacy assessments given at each grade level and what each assessment was measuring. This exercise and the conversation that ensued underscored the need for school administrators and support staff to look closer at their assessment landscapes within the PreK-3rd continuum to avoid over-assessing in some areas and under-assessing in others.



Supporting/Designing Effective Transitions Between and Across Grades

“The continuum should show a seamless transition, enabling the children to grow in areas—academic, social, physical and emotional development.”

—Central New Jersey Supervisor of Early Childhood Education

Meaningful transition practices should be inclusive of ongoing processes that promote and maintain alignment throughout the PreK-3rd program. Designing comprehensive transition plans is a collaborative process best accomplished by a team that includes teachers, support staff, administrators, families and community members, and each member must consider how children are experiencing their school program when developing comprehensive transition practices.

When asked to describe how their districts planned for early learning transitions, the administrators often exclusively described transition “events” for children. Rarely did those descriptions include opportunities that would provide families and teachers with the information and supports to assist children successfully move throughout the PreK-3rd continuum.

For instance, the typical transition event consisted of preschoolers attending an in-district program, visiting a kindergarten classroom, where the event usually took place toward the end of the school year. While this is an important example of a broader transition continuum, the focus of transition must include more than the shift of young students from preschool to kindergarten. Any form of systematic planning of transition activities beyond kindergarten appeared to be rare.

Some district administrators actually did systematically plan for meetings among teachers across grades that addressed specific children and curricular goals. However, these examples were not based on thoughtful PreK-3rd transition planning, but rather were the result of “accidental associations.” For example, some participants described how their preschool and kindergarten teachers informally met to discuss assessment data and literacy practices.

Generally speaking, however, most of the teachers' conversations occurred because of proximity (building location), common schedules and/or collegial interest, not from thoughtful, systemic planning. Districts that did not have in-district preschool often did not document where children attended preschool prior to entering the school district's kindergarten program and had minimal contact with community programs regarding any type of programming.

Other Impressions

“I previously did not see a real connection between the grades, especially between preschool and kindergarten and grades one through three.”

—Central New Jersey School Principal

While facilitators’ impressions suggested that issues around “early childhood assessments” and “transitions” were the most critical, others warrant mentioning, including:

- ✦ The phrase “early childhood” was commonly perceived as including only “preschool.” Initially, participants rarely viewed “PreK-3rd” as the full continuum of early learning.
- ✦ The “language” of early childhood was not familiar to all participants, including such phrases as “structured observation tools,” “integrated related services” and even “PreK-3rd.”
- ✦ There was a lack of familiarity with early childhood research and/or early childhood resources, such as *the National Association for the Education of Young Children*, the content of the New Jersey Department of Education’s, Early Childhood section of the website and federal/state laws, guidelines and regulations.
- ✦ Observation tools were novel to most administrators and were generally not used beyond preschool programs.
- ✦ Administrators found inclusion more difficult at the K-3 level. Because of New Jersey’s preschool program standards and the implementation of research-based preschool curricula, inclusion appeared to be easier at the preschool level.
- ✦ Participants articulated an increase in the inappropriate behaviors in young children and acknowledged the possible link to lacking social and emotional development. However, they stated that the social-emotional domain received very little attention due to an extraordinary emphasis on academics in the early years.



Post-Survey Results

“I never concentrated on thinking of them together. At our school, it was PreK and then K-6.”

—Central New Jersey School Principal

After completing the four sessions the team wanted to determine how the series had affected participants’ knowledge and practice, the types of existing PreK-3rd supports at the district and state level and to identify the series’ strengths and weaknesses. The participants were asked to complete an online post-survey, which was required for them to receive professional development hours from the Department of Education. Eighty-three participants completed the survey, with 64 percent having attended all four sessions.

Respondents were asked to identify which of the 16 PreK-3rd topics they believed were adequately covered and which required additional time. While the respondents believed that such topics as best practices in PreK-3rd program standards and broadening and articulating the PreK-3rd vision were adequately covered, more than 40 percent said additional time was necessary to cover such topics as positive behavioral supports/addressing challenging behaviors and conducting walk-through observations.

The post-survey also included several questions on how the series influenced their practice. Sixty percent of respondents indicated that they or their staff had increased communications with child care and/or Head Start programs in their community since they participated in the training series. Moreover, 52 percent said they planned to implement PreK-3rd components that were not currently available in their school. Forty-seven percent of respondents reported that these plans were a direct result of their participation in the series.

Questions about district infrastructure were included in the post-survey, since the participants now had a better understanding of the types of PreK-3rd supports district policies could provide. Sixty-four percent indicated that their district did not have any policies that supported the implementation of a PreK-3rd continuum. Those who indicated their district had supportive policies described them to include:

- ✦ All grades having transition plans that support student movement from grade to grade
- ✦ A facilities reconfiguration to a PreK-3rd school structure;
- ✦ Articulation meetings
- ✦ Vertical grade meetings and
- ✦ Portfolio assessments that follow students from grade to grade.
- ✦ Stronger state policies were identified by 37 respondents as important to strong PreK-3rd programs. A number of suggestions were provided including:
 - Requiring universal preschool programs
 - Mandating kindergarten
 - Mandating full-day kindergarten
 - Requiring program assessment tools to be used to determine quality not standardized tests for children
 - Requiring existing K-3 teachers to secure P-3 certifications and
 - Requiring ongoing professional development for K-3 teachers in developmentally- appropriate practices.

Because developing their role as a “PreK-3rd advocate” was interwoven through each of the four sessions, the respondents were asked to describe the role they were taking or planned to take in advocating for the implementation of a PreK-3rd continuum in their district. Their responses varied and included:

- ✦ Speaking at district administrative meetings to inform colleagues about PreK-3rd and what was presented at the Series
- ✦ Meeting with district principals, preschool directors and kindergarten teachers
- ✦ Developing transition activities
- ✦ Visiting successful programs in other districts
- ✦ Developing professional learning communities comprised of PreK-3rd teachers
- ✦ Using assessment tools in kindergarten classrooms and
- ✦ Continuing to advocate for a preschool program.

Recommendations

“Prior to the series, I may not have mentioned articulation, thinking that it was presumed— however, this has not been the case.”

—Northern New Jersey Early Childhood Supervisor

The participants were not the only group that learned a great deal about PreK-3rd and why it is so important to implement aligned and coordinated systems of early learning. After working closely with about 200 administrators for nearly a year, the “team” learned a great deal from their impressions and experiences. From this information, broader PreK-3rd policy issues became apparent. The following are recommendations stemming from the implementation of the series. While some have a New Jersey focus, most of the recommendations can be applied in other states.

Use New Jersey’s preschool success story as the model for improving K-3rd. There are innumerable lessons that K-3rd administrators can learn from the experiences of New Jersey school districts that have been implementing high-quality preschool programs. Such proven areas of success include screening, assessment, coaching, inclusion and the use of classroom instruments. Learning how these successful examples were implemented and expanding those practices to include K-3rd will strengthen the overall early learning system.

Clarify early childhood definitions through state guidelines and code. Because many of the key PreK-3rd words/phrases are not defined in code or guidelines, participants brought their own interpretations to those words and phrases, leading to different definitions from person to person. Because of the importance of the early learning continuum, state guidance is critical in ensuring that everyone is speaking “the same language.”

Ensure that the components of a PreK-3rd system are supported in code. Similarly, developing strong code language on the components that are integral to a PreK-3rd system will minimize the chronic disconnect between preschool and the K-3rd years. Such a change would also indicate a stronger state commitment to such a reform effort.

Require administrator certificate programs to incorporate child development into their existing classes in order to support learning and achievement in young children. Few administrators enter the profession with this knowledge. If included as part of their certificate program, administrators will become more effective instructional leaders at every grade within the PreK-3rd continuum.

Require state code to include classroom observations from preschool through 3rd grade. Because preschool classroom observations have been a driving force in improving program quality, requiring similar observations in classrooms throughout the PreK-3rd continuum will enhance the overall quality of all classrooms within the continuum.

Provide districts with additional guidance, particularly in the area of kindergarten practices. All states should provide guidance to help both teachers and administrators understand both the state's expectations and what an effective kindergarten program should look like. Providing meaningful supports to kindergarten will benefit overall classroom quality.

Improve administrators' abilities to identify assessment purposes and mapping out how districts address those purposes. While the participants were able to identify the similarities between screenings (a brief procedure to determine whether additional assessment is necessary), formative assessment (improving instructional methods throughout the teaching and learning process) and summative assessment (making a judgment of student competency after an instructional phase is complete), they were challenged in mapping out how screenings and the two forms of assessments were used across grade levels. It is critical that administrators understand the importance of a complete assessment landscape in order to avoid either over- or under-assessing of young children. Increased professional development in this area will maximize the understanding and use of the early learning assessment landscape.

Provide supports for better alignment of curriculum assessment and practices. All young children can succeed when whole-child learning standards drive curriculum, best practices are implemented in classrooms and effective assessments are implemented. Given the ever changing demographics across our nation, with steady growth in the number of immigrant families and children with special needs, it is essential to examine the linkages between curriculum, best practices for early learners and the assessment landscape.

Provide additional PreK-3rd professional development opportunities for district leaders. While the series is being implemented for the second year, many more administrators either were not able to attend or did not know about the program. Providing opportunities for early learning professional development will maximize the chances that the implementation of systemic PreK-3rd systems is indeed taking place.

Encourage administrators to embrace social and emotional development as a necessary curricular component in all PreK-3rd classrooms. While social-emotional development is foundational to children's overall educational success, it is generally overshadowed by districts' emphasis on cognitive and academic preparedness. Finding a more even balance between social emotional development and academic preparedness is key for the long-term success of young learners.

Next Steps for PreK-3rd

With the participant surveys and instructor observations in mind, the team has developed a Track II of the Early Childhood Leadership Series, available to the participants of the 2009-2010 Leadership Series, which will focus on child assessment and the administrators' role in supporting teachers in the social/emotional development of young children. Similar to last year's series, Track II is offered regionally throughout the state with four sessions per location. Furthermore, as a way to address the policy recommendations above, the aim of Track II is to:

- ✦ Improve administrators' abilities to identify the different types and purposes of assessment and to map how each district is addressing those purposes;
- ✦ Provide supports for better alignment of curriculum assessment and practices; and
- ✦ Assist administrators to incorporate social and emotional development into all PreK-3rd classrooms.

**For more information about this issue,
please visit www.acnj.org**

Conclusion

“The door has been opened to school administration to begin the process. Before, each grade level was its own island.”

—Central New Jersey School Principal

New Jersey’s PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series provided nearly 200 district administrators with an opportunity to become more effective early learning supervisors, mentors, advocates and leaders. Yet, this is just the beginning. As more data are compiled supporting the importance of aligned and coordinated PreK-3rd systems, the need to ensure that administrators both understand and embrace this reform becomes critical. Effective state guidance and additional professional development opportunities will maximize the chances that all young learners will be afforded a quality early learning education.

“Light Bulb Moments”

In all of the sessions, the following were “PreK-3rd revelations” experienced by the participants:

- ✦ Some participants never envisioned the need for early childhood collaboration beyond their own school buildings. Working collaboratively with community programs and Head Start was a new concept. If districts did not have preschools programs, they had not considered or did not feel the need to collaborate with private provider and/or Head Start programs.
- ✦ Program evaluation that was not on “the backs of children” was a new concept. It was novel for the participants to think about classroom observation instruments in the context of K-3.
- ✦ Specific assessment instruments were new to many administrators (i.e. APEEC, CLASS).
- ✦ Eliciting parent feedback on transition activities was novel.

ⁱ Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment Strong Alignment Better Results. (2006) National Association of Elementary School Principals and Foundation for Child Development.

ⁱⁱ Rice, C. (2007). Building Strong Rungs to Build Sturdy Ladders: The Status of Preschool-3rd Grade Systems in New Jersey. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

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