

# Starting Small: A Descriptive Case Study of Principal Competencies That Support the PreK-K-3 Continuum

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## Abstract

Research and theory suggests that children and families are best served by a preschool to third grade approach (PreK–3) to early childhood education that is aligned, integrated, and based on developmentally appropriate practice. Because of the recent expansion of publicly funded preschool programs, principals are becoming increasingly responsible for overseeing these programs, and, as instructional leaders, play a critical role in establishing working conditions and creating organizational capacity to support teachers' professional growth. Unfortunately, however, early childhood education is rarely addressed in principal preparation programs and principals are often unfamiliar with the science of child development. Using a qualitative case study design, the current study describes how one school principal began to lead a PreK–3 community at her school by examining data collected across a two-year period as the principal led a professional learning community with preschool, transitional kindergarten, and kindergarten teachers. The PreK–3 Learning Communities Competencies for Effective Principals developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals were used to identify the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of one principal as she engaged in this work. Results from this study further discourse in the field as to what this approach looks like in practice and call attention to the need for structural changes in preschool and elementary settings.

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Since the early 2000s, researchers, policymakers, and early childhood experts have called for a preschool to third grade approach (PreK–3) to early childhood education, recognizing that this is a unique developmental period and that children and families are best served by an approach that is aligned, integrated, and based on developmentally appropriate practice. An aligned PreK–3 program ensures that standards, curricula, instructional practices, environments, student assessment, and teacher professional development are purposefully coordinated from the preschool years through the early elementary school years. Although there is limited research evidence on the effects of such alignment, early childhood experts have proposed that explicitly linking curricula and instructional strategies from preschool through third grade may sustain the effects of preschool and other investments in early childhood education (Howard, 2008; Kauerz, 2019; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013; Takanishi, 2016). An aligned PreK–3 program may also provide more continuity and better organization of services for students, as well as enhanced school–family partnerships (Kauerz & Coffman, 2019; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013; Takanishi, 2016). Importantly, a PreK–3 approach may help to close achievement gaps for children from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and children experiencing challenging behavior (Demanchick et al., 2009; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013; Severns, 2012). More recently, the Children’s Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center (2020) have noted that focusing on learning systems in the early years is essential if we are to close opportunity gaps and ensure that all children, regardless of demographic characteristics, are provided with equitable opportunities and experiences.

Key to the successful implementation of this approach is the school principal (Manship et al., 2016; Mead, 2011). Because of the recent expansion of publicly funded preschool programs, principals are becoming increasingly responsible for overseeing these programs, as they are often located on elementary school campuses. Loewenberg (2016) contends that successful school principals establish a culture within their schools that values the PreK–3 continuum, develops relationships with families and other early education providers, and ensures developmentally appropriate and effective teaching and assessment. Moreover, because early elementary teachers often lack preparation in child development and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies (Bornfreund, 2011), it is essential that principals ensure PreK–3 teachers have opportunities to increase their understanding of how young children learn (Loewenberg, 2016). As instructional leaders, principals play a critical role in establishing work conditions and creating organizational capacity to support teachers’ professional growth (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Knapp et al., 2014). Our state’s recently released Master Plan for Early Learning and Care (2020) cites the importance of supportive and knowledgeable leaders, including principals, who are able to oversee early

childhood programs and support and empower early educators while aligning practices across the birth to eight continuum.

Unfortunately, however, early childhood education is rarely addressed in principal preparation programs (Mead, 2011), and a survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP; 2015) found that only 20% of elementary school principals felt they were well trained in instructional methods and developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood programs as those serving children from birth to age eight, and this developmental period is unique in that it is a time of rapid development during which children learn many of the skills needed to be successful in school, the workplace, and life. The development of self-regulation, the use of increasingly complex language, and the ability to think critically to both ask and solve problems are all hallmarks of this developmental period (California Department of Education, 2008). The recent report, *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce from Birth to Eight* published by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015) noted that principals are often unfamiliar with the science of child development and how it informs what learning should look like in the early years. Complicating this issue further is the mixed delivery system of early care and education (ECE) in the United States, which Kagan et al. (2007) have referred to as a “nonsystem” because it lacks the overarching governance, funding, and accountability mechanisms present in the K–12 environment. ECE programs represent a variety of programs (for profit, nonprofit, faith-based, Head Start, state preschool, co-ops, and family child care homes), many of which have disparate and oftentimes “comingled,” “braided,” or “layered” funding streams and programmatic requirements. In addition, elementary schools often serve infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families via funding from Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act or through programs such as Early Head Start or state-funded infant toddler programs. Recently, transitional kindergarten (TK) has been implemented in some states to serve as a bridge between preschool and kindergarten, adding to the complexity of early childhood settings.

In order to address these issues and provide support to principals, the NAESP recently published *Leading Pre-K–3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice* (2019). The purpose of the NAESP (2019) guide is to synthesize research and best practice recommendations and provide structure and guidance to principals as they develop and support the connections needed to create a successful PreK–3 continuum in their school. The new NAESP guide (2019) describes six competencies that characterize leadership in high quality PreK–3 learning communities and were identified via a review of the research on early childhood development and input from principals who have successfully led PreK–3 efforts. In addition to describing each of these competencies, the NAESP report provides examples of strategies/indicators describing what each competency looks like in practice and the behaviors essential to each competency. The competencies described in this report are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Six Competencies That Characterize Leadership in High-quality PreK-K-3 Learning Communities.

Competency	
1	<i>Embracing the Pre-K-3 early learning continuum</i>
2	<i>Ensuring developmentally-appropriate teaching</i>
3	<i>Providing personalized, blended learning environments</i>
4	<i>Using multiple measures to guide student learning growth</i>
5	<i>Building professional capacity across the learning community</i>
6	<i>Making school the hub of Pre-K-3 learning for families and the community</i>

## Purpose of the Study

While there are many recommendations for what school principals should do to align curriculum and instruction across the PreK-3 continuum, as described in the NAESP (2019) report, there is little empirical evidence as to what this looks like in practice. Using a qualitative case study design, the purpose of this study was to address this gap in the literature by describing how one school leader worked towards creating a PreK-3 continuum in her school.

We do this by examining data collected across a two-year period as the principal led a professional learning community (PLC) committed to aligning language and literacy instruction across preschool, transitional kindergarten, and kindergarten. Interactive read alouds were selected as the focus of the PLC for several reasons, including the goals of a community partner engaged in this work, observations of classroom practices, and the recognition that storybook reading is a common practice across Pre-K, TK, and kindergarten classrooms. Data analysis identified that four of the six competencies were implemented during the PLC, and each of these competencies is described in the following section.

## Competencies for Leading PreK-3 Learning Communities

*Embrace the Pre-K-3 early learning continuum.* As an instructional leader, the principal's most important role is in the culture he or she creates and sustains within their school (Bryk et al., 2010; Loewenberg, 2016). According to the NAESP report (2019), effective principals view high-quality early learning as fundamental to children's growth and development, and this view is grounded in their understanding that investments in high quality early learning are efficient and result in greater benefits than investments made in the later grades (Camilli et al., 2010; Cunha & Heckman, 2010; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Effective leaders also know that that young children living at or below the poverty level and most at risk of educational failure benefit the most from high-quality ECE programs (Barnett, 1995; Gormley et al., 2005; Karoly et al., 2005). Principals committed to investing in early childhood are able to lead their learning community to envision a PreK-3 continuum "that transcends the boundaries of

preschool and elementary school” (NAESP, 2019, p. 11) and delivers a seamless learning experience for children and families. In order to do this, principals must to bring together programs that have traditionally been siloed by communicating to internal and external stakeholders the value of this continuum and why it is fundamental to their school’s mission. Effective principals also provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration around lesson planning, data analysis, and joint problem-solving (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013), as well as professional development opportunities both across and within grade levels (Manship et al., 2016; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013). It is also essential that principals send clear messages that preschool and kindergarten teachers and students are equal to those in the later grades and engage in practices that integrate them into the school community (Mead, 2011). Ensuring that funding, resources, and governance structures are aligned and support the early learning continuum is also essential to this competency (Manship et al., 2016; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2013).

*Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching.* Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is central to high quality early education and reflects both research and theory about how young children develop and learn. Research has shown that when teachers provide activities and interactions that engage and motivate children they make greater academic gains than their less engaged peers (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; La Paro et al., 2004). It is thus essential that principals committed to creating a PreK–3 culture in their school have a solid understanding of developmentally appropriate instruction and learning along the early childhood continuum (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Mead, 2011). The implementation of strategies that encourage teachers to work together as professional communities of practice to develop an early learning curriculum that is engaging, relevant, and interactive, all hallmarks of DAP, is a key feature of this competency. Importantly, Raudenbush (2009) notes that high quality instruction for all children cannot occur behind closed doors, but rather takes place when schools move toward public and shared practice by ensuring “shared aims, shared assessment tools, shared instructional strategies, active collaboration, routine public inspection of practice, and accountability to peers” (p. 172).

Aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments is also central to this competency and supports a consistent and articulated PreK–3 framework. Vertical alignment results in cross-system continuity and the purposeful continuation of learnings standards, curriculum, expectations and instructional approaches from on grade level to the next (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Manship et al., 2016; Seung Lam & Pollard, 2006).

Alignment also supports the notion that both sending and receiving learning systems are responsible for ensuring school readiness, seamless transitions, and a continuum of strong learning practices (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Shore, 1998).

*Build professional capacity across the learning community.* This competency centers adult learning by recognizing that effective principals value and support professional growth by building collaborative working environments that create knowledge about what is developmentally, and age appropriate across the PreK–3 continuum by focusing on authentic work. DuFour et al. (2009) note that PLCs provide opportunities

for educators to engage in a repeated process of gathering evidence around student learning, developing ideas to build on that learning, implementing new ideas, analyzing practiced ideas, and applying new knowledge to future practices. Central to this competency is the notion that principals are part of this learning community and use their knowledge of child development to support effective teaching and learning in the early years (Goffin, 2013).

*Make your school a hub of Pre-K–3 learning for families and communities.* The final competency in the NAESP report (2019) focuses on the need for the principal to engage families, preschool programs, and community based organizations to build strong linkages across the PreK–3 continuum. The concept of schools as community hubs is based on the recognition that children and families can benefit from the provision of non-academic supports such as health care, nutrition, and social services in the school setting (Shore, 1998). Kauerz and Coffman (2019) cite the importance of making family engagement a core priority of any PreK–3 effort by employing strategies that ensure two-way communication and shared leadership and decision-making. The strategies/indicators of this competency include fostering a welcoming environment that cultivates a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for PreK–3 learning and a meaningful transition between preschool and elementary school. Developing summer learning opportunities for children along this continuum is another indicator of this competency, as is braiding/blending funding to maximize resources.

## Methods

### Research Context

Central to the recommendations provided in the NAESP guide (2019, p. 5) is the recognition that “success in Pre-K–K–3 is not a one size fits all approach” and that “each school and each community is different.” In this section, we provide an in-depth overview of the research context, followed by a description of the measures and procedures used.

*Canyon Crest Elementary School.* Canyon Crest (pseudonym) is an urban, 100% Title I elementary school located in a large city in the southwestern United States. Canyon Crest serves children from ages 0–11 years via diversified programming which includes a Part C infant toddler program, Head Start and state preschool programs, and transitional kindergarten to fifth grade classrooms. Approximately 75% of the students are English Learners, with the majority being Hispanic/Latino. There are also a large number of students with disabilities ranging from mild to severe. Close to 100 three- and four-year old students are enrolled in the two full day Head Start and two half-day state preschool classrooms located at Canyon Crest. Every fall, a large portion of the Pre-K students transition into transitional kindergarten or kindergarten and continue their school experience at Canyon Crest for the remainder of their elementary schooling. The principal has a master’s degree in organizational leadership and had 12 years focusing on school improvement as a school administrator. At the time the study began, she had been the principal at Canyon Crest for five years.

In 2014, because of budget cuts and leadership changes at the school district, principals became responsible for administration of the preschool programs located on their campus. The principal at Canyon Crest viewed this change as an opportunity to consider how she might use her knowledge and expertise to inspire and lead the preschool program in a new direction and close the existing opportunity gap often found within large urban schools with diverse demographics, such as Canyon Crest Elementary. She concluded that closing the opportunity gap would be easier if the school system did not let one begin, and she began to consider how to fully integrate the preschool classrooms into the instructional climate at Canyon Crest. She spent more time in preschool classrooms, with the specific goal of uncovering bright spots in each of the rooms. She observed at different times of the day and observed whole group, small group, and instruction in content areas such as literacy and math. She observed play and listened closely to the language being used by teachers and students. Throughout her listening and learning walks, the principal was able to observe that students were supported in a positive and nurturing way. For example, students were greeted with smiles and welcoming words, and during transitions, students were recognized for jobs done well and when they demonstrated a close approximation of the teacher requested activity. Students were engaged in play inside and out, with both teachers and assistants praising student behavior often. She noticed that students listened to stories daily and that the rooms were full of joy and smiles.

The principal shared her thoughts with the schools' speech and language pathologist (SLP), who was responsible for the school's preschool language group, a specialized program serving children with individual education plans who were not yet enrolled in a public school setting. The SLP's experience transitioning these children into the preschool classrooms at Canyon Crest further informed the principal's desire to integrate preschool into the larger school setting, as the SLP shared that, based on her observations of the preschool classrooms and discussions with preschool teachers, there were many opportunities for professional development and alignment of practices across the PreK-TK-K continuum.

*Community Education Alliance (CEA)*. Running parallel to this inquiry and dialog was Canyon Crest's partnership with the Community Education Alliance (pseudonym), a non-profit community-based collaborative serving a cluster of low-income neighborhoods. Public schools are at the center of CEA's work, which seeks to mobilize community partners around a coherent, research-guided theory of change focused on three strategic priorities: (a) preparing children for kindergarten by building the capacity of caregivers, (b) supporting reading by third grade, and (c) providing activities that expand learning beyond the classroom. For CEA, a child's seamless educational experience begins at birth, and CEA's theory of change involves thoughtful investments in children ages zero-five and their families. For several years, the principal was a member of CEA's zero-five workgroup and collaborated with others on the team to develop and refine this theory of action. Importantly, she was the only principal from the cluster of schools served by CEA that elected to become a part of this workgroup. Because of her involvement with CEA, the principal had already begun to



think about the importance of the early years and ways to prepare children for kindergarten through investments in early childhood programming. She also had a strong network of support as she honed her leadership capacity to support a strong PreK–3 learning community at her school.

*Research–practice partnership.* The first author, a faculty member in the department of child and family development at a local university whose research focuses on early childhood workforce development and language and literacy, was also a member of CEA’s zero–five workgroup. In the spring of 2016, the principal, the executive director of CEA, and the first author collaborated on a grant application that would provide funding to support a PLC for Pre-K, TK, and kindergarten teachers. The purpose of this PLC was to support alignment of instructional learning across all developmental domains, ensure consistency of practices, and provide a smooth transition for children and families from preschool to kindergarten. An additional goal of this grant was to eventually extend this work to include teachers in first through third grade in order to support strong alignment of practices across the PreK–3 continuum. Although this grant did not get funded, the team decided to do the work anyway, and created the PreK-TK-K Target Team, described further.

### *PreK-TK-K Target Team*

*Participants.* Members of the Target Team (TT) included the principal, the university researcher, the SLP, a preschool teacher, a transitional-kindergarten teacher, three kindergarten teachers, and Canyon Crest’s literacy resource teacher. Each member was purposefully selected to participate in the group by the principal based on several factors, including (a) consideration of the other work duties they were currently assigned, (b) who would most benefit from participation, and (c) who would contribute and add social capital to the group. The principal, university researcher, SLP, school’s resource teacher, and transitional kindergarten and preschool teachers participated in the TT meetings for both years, while the kindergarten teachers changed from year one to year two. All eight participants were female, and demographic information can be found in Table 2. During the second year of the project, the TT received a Learning and Leadership Grant from the National Education Association, and all participants, with the exception of the principal and university researcher, received a stipend in the amount of either \$816 (2 years of participation) or \$412 (1 year of participation).

*Procedure.* The TT met every month for two years, beginning in October 2016 and concluding in May 2018, for 12 meetings. All meetings, with the exception of the first two, were audiotaped. During the first meeting, the university researcher was introduced to the group, and a primary aim of the first two meetings was to build trust among the team before introducing the idea of audiotaping meetings and videotaping in the classroom. Minutes from these meetings were helpful during data analysis, however, they unfortunately did not provide the richness that audiotaped data could have provided.



**Table 2.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Title	Years Teaching	Degree	Ethnicity	Languages Spoken
Principal	20	M.A.	White	English
Speech-Language Pathologist	19	Ed.D	White	English/Spanish
Resource Teacher	2	M.A.	White	English
Preschool Teacher	12	B.A.	Latina	English/Spanish
TK Teacher	29	B.A.	White	English
Kindergarten Teacher (year 1)	14	M.A.	Latina	English/Spanish
Kindergarten Teacher (year 2)	9	M. A.	White	English
University Professor	19	Ed.D	White	English

Meetings lasted approximately 45 minutes, from 8:00–8:45am. Given CEA’s focus on supporting the attainment of reading proficiency by third grade, the principal and university researcher decided to focus the TT meetings on exploring interactive read alouds as a tool to support alignment of the curriculum and highlight best practices across grade levels. Because interactive read alouds take place regularly in preschool and kindergarten classrooms and support the attainment of key language and literacy skills, including oral language development, comprehension, and vocabulary development, they were an appropriate activity for the TT to focus on. Moreover, when done well, interactive read alouds also build on children’s background knowledge, create a sense of classroom community, and motivate children to love reading. During the first year, the group focused on one book, *Stephanie’s Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996). During the second year, the principal asked the group to select a new book every month, and the group selected *The Night I Followed the Dog* (Laden, 1994), *Miss Nelson is Missing* (Allard & Marshall, 1977), *Not Norman* (Bennett, 2005), and *Memoirs of a Goldfish* (Scillian, 2010).

TT meetings were guided by a recursive cycle of reflection, questioning, planning, and acting. Central to this process was the collection of video tapes of interactive read alouds, which were viewed and during the TT meetings. Teachers were encouraged to do repeated readings of the selected text, and the principal and university researcher visited participating classrooms during a prearranged time to video tape the read aloud. During the first year, the preschool teacher and one of the kindergarten teachers were videotaped three times, one of the kindergarten teachers was videotaped twice, and the transitional kindergarten teacher was videotaped once. The principal considered the teachers’ comfort level and videotaped only when teachers were selected and gave their permission. During the first year, the transitional kindergarten teacher accompanied the principal and university researcher when they videotaped in another classroom in order to build her comfort with this process. During the second year, all

teachers and the speech language pathologist were videotaped once, and the principal and university researcher observed two interactive read alouds in each classroom but did not videotape. The decrease in videotaping was due in part to new members joining the team and scheduling difficulties.

*Interviews.* At the end of the first year, a member of the research team interviewed the principal and the CEA's executive director to learn more about the overall operation of Canyon Crest, including funding, staffing, and instructional approaches, as well as the enrichment and family engagement programs being implemented as part of the collaboration with CEA.

## **Data Analysis**

TT meetings were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by research assistants, and the first author checked transcripts against the audiotapes to ensure accuracy. Data were analyzed using an apriori coding scheme in which codes represented the competencies described in the NAESP (2019) report. Results from this initial round of coding indicated that four of the competencies (italicized in Table 1) were reflected by the data: (a) embracing the PreK–3 early learning continuum, (b) ensuring developmentally-appropriate teaching, (c) building professional capacity across the learning community, and (d) making school the hub of PreK–3 learning for families and the community. Each member of the research team read the transcripts again and identified significant statements (Miller & Salkind, 2002) that best represented these competencies, highlighting the strategies/indicators described in the NAESP report that described what these competencies look like in practice. These statements were then entered into a table, using data display techniques described by Miles and Huberman (1994). This allowed the researchers to determine the extent to which significant statements were distributed across the two years and represented each of the competencies. Once researchers created their individual tables, they were then compared in order to reconcile any differences in coding, providing the opportunity to think through differences and critically examine the nuances of each competency. The first author then select quotes that best represented each competency and entered them into a summary table to further reduce the data and identify statements that best represented each of the competencies. Interview data was used to provide context to the study and describe operational processes and linkages between CEA and Canyon Crest.

## **Results**

Results are organized according to the four competencies reflected by the data, and direct quotes from the TT meetings are presented to support and illustrate our findings. Data that describe the strategies/indicators for what each competency looks like in practice are also presented. It is important to note that these strategies/indicators often overlapped as participants discussed how to create an “aligned, cohesive, and robust Pre-K–3 system” (NAESP, 2019, p. 5). As such, the quotes selected represent

exemplars of what each competency looked like in practice and often include evidence of the ways in which the competencies interacted and complemented one another.

### *Embrace the PreK–3 Early Learning Continuum*

This competency is described in the NAESP report (2019) as occurring when principals embrace a concept of high quality early learning from age three to grade three as the foundation for all children’s development and growth. The purpose of the TT meetings was written on the top of every agenda across the two years: Increased and Improved PreK/TK & K Articulation... via Common Understandings and Goals, and the principal began meetings by reminding participants of this goal. For example, at the first meeting of year two, the principal stated, “the purpose of this Target Team is something that we initiated last year, and it was really to start that bridge and that articulation from PreK to TK into Kindergarten, so that we could better support kids.” This quote also underscores a key feature of this competency, which is that principals understand and articulate that a PreK–3 approach is what is best for children.

Data indicated that the principal viewed this continuum as foundational to children’s development and growth and central to the mission of Canyon Crest, as evidenced by her statement, “So, we’re just going to get really good this year, from now until June, on this idea of interactive read aloud. Because it’s so powerful for three, four-, five-, and six-year olds.” The focus on building teacher understanding of the early learning continuum and the transitions along it is further demonstrated by the following quote from the principal when the TT watched and discussed a video of an interactive read aloud in preschool:

I always say the best part of my job is getting to spend time in your classrooms. I’m happiest when I’m in classrooms with your students. So we’re going to step into a preschool classroom, and remember one of our outcomes was how do we build that continuum, and how do we better bridge that vertical articulation of, “this is what it might look like in preschool, here’s where it looks like in TK, here’s what it might look like in K,” so that we can have a better, concrete idea of what those best practices are. As you view, I’d like to you jot down what you notice and appreciate- what she’s doing in terms best practices.

The aforementioned quote reflects not only the principal’s expectations for alignment across grade levels, but also her commitment to making teaching and learning visible by providing the opportunity for teachers to observe one another’s practices. It should be noted that by asking the group to appreciate the work of the preschool teacher, the principal sends a clear message that preschool teaching is just as important as teaching in the later grades and situates the preschool teacher as an expert from whom the other teachers can learn.

An additional strategy/indicator to support this competency is expanding the concept of learning community to include collaboration among external and internal stakeholders. As noted earlier, internal stakeholders included the school’s SLP and

literacy resource teacher, both of whom provided valuable insight during TT discussions. The SLP provided information on key language and literacy skills such as oral language development and comprehension as well as instructional strategies she used to make read alouds hands on, concrete, and meaningful to her young students with disabilities. In addition, observing videos of read alouds with her children extended the team's understanding of how to differentiate instruction based on children's developmental level. For example, the group watched a video of the preschool language group reading *Miss Nelson is Missing*, which is quite sophisticated for young children with language delays. The SLP described how she made the book accessible to the children by breaking the story down into four simple parts "the kids were misbehaving, Miss Nelson had an idea, she put on a wicked costume, and the kids were happy when Miss Nelson returned". She further described how the children acted out this simpler version of the story using dolls and other concrete objects, which allowed her to ensure the book was "simplified to their level because, again, my kids are using three and four, maybe six word sentences at most." Similarly, the literacy resource teacher had a broad view of literacy development that spanned the Pre-K fifth grade continuum and was thus able to help the group examine how the foundational skills developed in preschool were related to learning and instruction in the later grades. For example, when the group reviewed each other's lesson plans, the resource teacher noted that when the preschool teacher asked her students to consider how the characters changed over time, she was preparing them for a fourth grade standard and "really getting them ready for that curriculum."

The principal's participation with CEA and collaboration with a local university brought external stakeholders with ECE and family engagement expertise to the group. The first author's focus on ECE and the principal's experience in elementary education allowed them to learn from one other and bridge the gap between early childhood and elementary settings. For example, when discussing an observation they had done in the preschool classroom, the first author explained that when she used the term individualized to describe instruction it meant the same thing as when elementary educators discussed differentiation. She was also able to draw attention to how instruction in preschool was foundational to instruction in the later grades. For example,

when reviewing their experiences reading the book *Not Norman*, the team discussed how the concrete, hands-on activity provided in preschool would prepare the children for the more abstract thinking required in kindergarten. The university researcher commented that:

Carla [preschool teacher] did this wonderful thing where she actually made a fishbowl. She laminated it, she put it on the floor, and the kids got up and actually moved into the fishbowl. So, that really prepares them for talking about setting when they get to kindergarten.

The principal's work with CEA also reflected another strategy/indicator associated with this competency, which is to articulate the long-term value of early learning to

parents and to all stakeholders. This involvement with CEA reflected her commitment to early learning and will be described in more detail when presenting data on competency 6, Make Your School a Hub of Pre-K–3 Learning for Families and Communities.

Another key indicator of this competency in practice is the ability of the principal to align funding, resources and governance to support the Pre-K–3 framework. Rather than thinking of her school as two separate systems (PreK and K–5) with two (or more) disparate funding streams, the principal allocated funds based on a whole school system of improvement model. One important way in which she did this was to extend the practice of using Title 1 funds to hire substitutes to allow for teacher release time for her preschool program. This allowed preschool teachers to have 45 minutes out of the classroom three days a month to participate in PLCs just as their K–5 counterparts did. Because of the adult to child ratio requirements of preschool, the preschool teacher would not have been able to participate in the TT without the principal's strategic use of substitutes.

### *Ensure Developmentally Appropriate Teaching*

A focus on quality teaching and ensuring that standards were met within a developmentally appropriate, relevant, and engaging curriculum was evident throughout the two years. The principal demonstrated this when she stated:

We want to see what it is expected in kindergarten so that kids are better prepared, but also make it developmentally appropriate because we are not asking three and four-year-olds to be sitting at a table for 45 minutes and be independently reading, that it is not appropriate.

The principal's focus on the importance of an interactive and engaging curriculum was evident when she introduced *Stephanie's Ponytail* to the group and explained:

Here's our anchor text. We're going to get really good at this text and this is what's going to ground us every time we meet. We're going to think, "What can we do with this text as it relates to what we know is good about interactive read-aloud? What can we teach based on what our kids need?" We can look at standards, I get that. But I want us to love this book, I want us to eat it up, chew it up, and think "What can we do with it for kids so everyone reads?" There's that joy when we work together and we learn something, there's joy in the work that we do for kids, there's joy in how we do things with kids, and there's joy in kids. We want to bring joy and talk and read and think with kids.

The principal's goal was to create an "I love reading culture at Canyon Crest" and she frequently used the words "joy" and "fun" to describe goals for children's learning. This focus on the importance of an engaging early learning curriculum was also evident in year two when the group was discussing which book to read next, and read *The Night I Followed the Dog* to see if it was a good fit. The principal stated:

I just wanted to open up for discussion, what kind of things did you pull out that as a reader, as a teacher of children of four, five, and six-year olds, what would they really

enjoy? What would you really want to highlight to make this experience fun for kids and fun for you? It is fun to read books to kids!

Importantly, the fun and joy of reading were always grounded in learning standards. For example, the principal began a meeting at the end of year one by stating:

We selected the idea of interactive read-alouds because we needed to work toward something concrete and alive and well in preschool, TK, and kindergarten classrooms, and build concrete understandings of what might be in each of those settings, still related to foundational skills or DRDP measures, which are like the standards in preschool, as well as the TK or kindergarten standards. But even more broadly, or CEALy, we wanted to build best practices, so that we can replicate what those could look like and really learn from each other because those of you around the table bring such incredible strength.

In the quote, the principal draws explicit attention to learning standards across the grade levels and demonstrates her knowledge of ECE programs when she explains that the DRDP (Desired Results Developmental Profile) measures are the preschool standards. This quote also illustrates another behavioral indicator of this competency, which is to support a professional community of practice that empowers teachers to learn from each other and to improve instruction. Across the two years, the principal highlighted the strengths and knowledge of the teachers and positioned them as experts, which is key to the PLC approach. Although discussed in more detail in competency four further, this quote also exemplifies how learning was grounded in authentic work and the everyday life of the classroom.

### ***Build Professional Capacity Across the Learning Community***

As described earlier, the principal's partnership with the first author as well as her involvement with CEA's zero-five work group enabled her to increase her understanding of developmentally appropriate teaching and best practices in ECE. This understanding CEALened across the two years, beginning with her initial observations of preschool classrooms described earlier and her more formal observations as part of the TT. In addition, her ongoing conversations with the university researcher and SLP helped to increase her understanding of early language and literacy development and the developmental milestones of early childhood.

The other two strategies/indicators for this competency are the need to (a) build ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers all along the continuum and (b) support professional learning communities that focus on authentic work. The use of a common anchor text in each classroom and the videotaping of read alouds helped to ensure that the professional learning activity provided by the TT meetings was embedded in the actual work of the teachers and focused on authentic, meaningful activities. When introducing what this project would look like to the team, the principal explained:

It's been a while since we've met and because this is new for us as leaders, we've been really trying to rack our brains to make sure that it's meaningful. Yes, part of that work is getting together and talking, but one of the things that Sarah and I have continued to think about is yes talk is good, but your time is valuable. How do we make it purposeful, and how do we make it so that there's some meaningful learning?

A primary goal of the TT was that the teachers would come away with concrete strategies they could use in their classroom to support early literacy development. Evidence of this comes from the following quote from the principal:

I want you to reflect on three concrete skills you could actually teach in interactive read-alouds. Not that it builds vocabulary, not that it supports social-emotional development, but what would be some concrete, tangible skills you could teach and measure as a result of using interactive read-aloud as your practice?

The principal's focus on job-embedded professional learning opportunities was further demonstrated by the use of videos to allow teachers to observe one another's teaching. The principal noted, "One of our goals is to take snapshots from each of your rooms to see this is what this could like in your classroom because just talking about it is very different than seeing it, isn't it?" The principal also sought to build professional capacity across the learning community when she stated:

So one of our outcomes is to build an established practices, right? So that when Luisa [kindergarten teacher] picks up the book, when Megan [TK teacher] picks up the book, we all have some common idea about what interactive read-alouds are with kids, in order to develop all the things you know you want to develop.

### ***Make Your School a Hub of Pre-K–3 Learning for Families and Communities***

This competency describes the need for principals to work with families, preschool programs and community organizations in order to build strong linkages between PreK–3. Canyon Crest had an existing partnership with the local Head Start program, with two of the preschool classrooms receiving braided Head Start and state preschool funding. The principal embraced this partnership by attending the monthly preschool parent meetings and working closely with Head Start family services staff in order to become more familiar with preschool policies and procedures so she could better engage with the preschool community at Canyon Crest.

The principal's partnership with CEA was also key to this competency. CEA's emphasis on the early learning continuum and the principal's experience with others on zero-five work group deepened her understanding the importance of supporting early learning and the value of smooth transitions and continuity of practice between ECE and elementary school. CEA partners effectively became an extended learning community for the principal, and through her relationship with CEA, she was able to



bring a variety of programming to Canyon Crest, including music classes provided by the local children's choir; on-campus parenting classes for families with children zero-five, and the "1,000 Books Before Kindergarten" program offered through the local library. At the beginning of each school year, CEA also hosted a community breakfast for families with children ages zero-five at Canyon Crest. The purpose of this gathering was to emphasize the important role that parents played in their children's early brain development and introduce them to the programming that CEA brought to their campus to support parent engagement.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to describe how one school leader worked toward creating a PreK–3 continuum in her school. Data collected over a two year period indicated that the competencies of embracing the PreK–3 early learning continuum, ensuring developmentally-appropriate teaching, building professional capacity across the learning community; and making school the hub of PreK–3 learning for families and the community were reflected in this work. Researchers have found that effective elementary school principals respond to the unique contextual factors present in their schools and are able to shape these factors in ways that positively affect teaching and learning (Klar et al., 2020). In order to understand how and why the principal at Canyon Crest was able to lead a PreK–3 learning community at her school, it is first important contextualize our findings within the mixed delivery system of ECE and the large, urban school district in which Canyon Crest was located. We then use Fullan's (2003) concept of the moral imperative of school leadership to elucidate specific leadership practices foregrounded by our data.

Canyon Crest is located in a large, ethnically and linguistically diverse urban school system situated within a complex and rapidly changing educational environment. Canyon Crest is also complex, serving children from birth to fifth grade with a combination of funding sources and programmatic requirements and serving primarily low income, Spanish speaking children and families. As evidenced by the data, the principal at Canyon Crest embraced this complexity and viewed every program, child, and family as her responsibility. While it can be easy for principals to lose sight of their purpose when faced with a context of overload and complexity (Fullan, 2003), the principal at Canyon Crest viewed this complexity as a reason to commit to the early learning continuum in order to better serve teachers, students, families, and the community.

Fullan (2003) has described the moral imperative of school leadership as a social responsibility to others and the environment. Principals with a moral purpose seek to make a difference in the lives of students and are concerned with closing the gap between both high and low performing students and high and low performing schools (Fullan, 2003). Fullan (2003) positions principals as major agents of reform and has proposed that principals with moral purpose do not wait for the system to implement change, but rather make every effort to "get it right" at their schools. A driving force behind the principal's desire to address the PreK–3 continuum at Canyon Crest was

her realization that she could close the opportunity gap at Canyon Crest by focusing on the school's youngest children. It is critical to note that there was no PreK–3 focus at the district level, and the desire to implement this approach came from the principal herself, providing support to Fullan's (2003) contention that school system reform should grow from the bottom up, rather than the top down.

Fullan (2003) also positions principals with a moral imperative as learners, which is central to the competencies described in the NAESP (2019) report. Fullan (2003) proposed that principals must take charge of their own learning, and the principal at Canyon Crest did this in a variety of ways. By engaging with CEA and being part of the zero-five workgroup, she sought information about early childhood education and ultimately formed the research to practice partnership that led to the study described in this article. She also engaged in conversations with and asked questions of Canyon Crest's SLP when she first began considering how to address the PreK–3 continuum, and viewed the SLP as a valuable member of the TT. Pfeiffer et al. (2019) have noted that although federal law requires collaboration between general and special educators and although SLPs have specialized knowledge and skills that can support general education teachers, meaningful collaboration is rare. This was not the case at Canyon Crest, as the principal viewed the SLP's knowledge of early childhood development as an asset she could draw on to increase her understanding of early childhood, reflecting the NAESP report's (2019) assertion that effective principals are good listeners and seek information from preschool providers.

Another factor critical to the success of the TT was that the principal made the work of the teachers visible. While principals often reward effective teachers by leaving them alone, principals leading for change must rethink what professional development looks like by building communities of practice that focus less on autonomy and more on shared standards of practice collective inquiry (Mead, 2011; Shore, 2009), and teamwork (Kauerz & Coffman, 2019). Research indicates that principals can directly influence student learning when they enact practices that support teacher effectiveness (Heck & Hallinger, 2014) and use both instructional and transformational leadership practices that reflect the school context (Day et al., 2016). The principal at Canyon Crest used data collected from classroom observations, videos, and lesson plans to celebrate the expertise of participants and build a shared understanding of what high quality, developmentally appropriate teaching looks like at Canyon Crest, creating authentic opportunities for teachers to connect with one another and build professional capacity. She continually positioned the teachers as experts, and purposefully selected teachers to participate in the TT who could become teacher leaders, which is a characteristic of principals who lead the type of change needed to transform systems (Fullan, 2003). The principal viewed the preschool teacher as an essential member of the TT and valued her expertise, which was significant given that the education system does not recognize preschool as a legitimate part of the educational system (Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008). Whitebook et al. (2014) have described the entrenched disparities that exist between preschool and K–12 teachers in terms of educational requirements, compensation, and opportunities for professional development, and the importance of

the principal's strategic use of funds and resources to allow the preschool teacher to participate in the TT meetings cannot be overstated.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Elementary school principals play a critical role in determining the quality of care and education that young children receive and are responsible for ensuring appropriate and integrated instruction across grade levels. When considering implications for policy and practice, it is essential to consider that the move toward embracing the PreK–3 continuum at Canyon Crest resulted from the agency of the principal and her desire to address the opportunities she observed in her community. An important aspect of Fullan's (2006) approach to systems change is that while moral purpose can be a great motivator, is not enough to engender systems change in the absence of other conditions, including capacity, resources, and peer and leadership support. Resources and funding to support the TT came from Canyon Crest's budget, a NEA grant, a community based organization, and a local university. Findings serve to highlight the urgency of the seven of the eight recommendations for policy and practice described at the end of the NAESP (2019) report:

1. Allocation of federal and state resources to provide universal high quality PreK–3 programs for all children
2. States and school districts must recognize the authority of principals serving children PreK- elementary and recognize principals as critical to the PreK–3 system
3. States and districts must adopt standards of practice for principals working in this system
4. Federal, state, and local resources must be invested in principal preparation programs that support principals to create a seamless continuum of services for children and families in PreK–3 settings
5. Federal, state and local resources must be allocated to provide opportunities for principals to participate in job-embedded professional learning
6. Federal, state and local resources must be directed to provide opportunities for teachers for job-embedded professional learning along the K–3 continuum
7. Provide support for principals and teachers to build parent understanding to allow them to participate in their child's learning from PreK to grade three

Future research should include a larger number of principals, schools, and districts and examine how principals are using the six competencies described by NAESP (2019) to frame their work. An additional area of research is the investigation of how institutions of higher education are embedding these competencies into coursework and are thus preparing future principals with the competencies needed to lead effective

Pre-K–3 programs. While results from the current study provide evidence of how one school leader sought to enact change in her school by leading efforts to create a PreK–3 continuum, they also indicate that in order for these changes to be brought to scale, significant structural changes to both preschool and elementary settings are needed.

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