

# Research Notes

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## **The Role of Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum**

The American education system developed in separate sectors at different times (early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary), creating a disconnected chain of educational experiences for students. Recently, work has begun to integrate these sectors into a coherent whole and the concept of a learning continuum has emerged. A *learning continuum* aligns curriculum and instruction across developmental levels and grades, shares goals for student readiness and proficiency, and communicates and coordinates among caregivers, educators, and families to support student learning.<sup>1</sup>

To study the current status of learning continuum activities in Illinois, a panel of early childhood and K-12 representatives convened in 2008 to form a Leadership to Integrate the Learning Continuum (LINC) Advisory Group. The group recommended policies and practices to create a strong learning continuum based, in part, on a statewide survey of current early childhood/K-12 collaborations.

### **Methods**

The survey was completed by 205 early childhood directors and 403 elementary principals. Approximately 37% of directors led private nonprofit centers, 34% led public programs, and 20% led for-profit programs. Of the public programs, 81% were in a public school. Locations included small town/rural, large town, collar counties, and Chicago. Approximately 24% of directors reported that their centers were accredited by NAEYC. Their degrees ranged from associate through masters level. Only 13% of directors had earned the Illinois Director Credential (IDC); 23% held a Type 04 early childhood teaching certification.

Principals led predominately pre-K through 8th grade schools. Approximately 91% of their districts operated a pre-K program. Forty-one percent of these programs were located in the principal's school, 28% in another elementary school, 16% in a separate district-owned building, and 8% in another school (not elementary). Principals had taught various grade levels prior to becoming school leaders: pre-K, K-3, 4th-9th, and high school.

Respondents were asked about policies and practices at their centers and schools to create a seamless early childhood to K-12 learning continuum. Respondents were also asked to recommend ways that leadership preparation and professional development programs could foster knowledge and skills needed to develop a learning continuum. Finally, directors and principals were asked whether they were presently involved in cross-sector collaborations with other centers or schools to improve students' transitions from preschool to K-12.

### **Findings**

**Policies and Practices.** Program directors most often work with their teachers to improve their programs and practices. Approximately 75% of directors said their centers had policies recognizing that the care and education children receive in their center affect kindergarten readiness and their curriculum was aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards for kindergarten. However, program directors were less likely to engage with K-12 educators to align programs and curricula, observe classrooms, or participate in joint professional development. Among early childhood directors:

- 43% do not participate in joint professional development with local school districts
- 64% do not include elementary educators in planning
- 63% do not meet with principals to talk about aligning curriculum

Similarly, principals reported that teachers in their schools worked together to align curricula across grades, monitor classroom quality, assess student learning, and use data to inform improvements. Of the principals, 68% said they maintain a school culture that focuses on educating the whole child and 49% said the elementary curriculum is aligned with the Illinois Early Learning Standards. However, like the directors, this work primarily takes place within the school, without cross-sector collaboration. Among principals:

- 48% do not have school improvement plans that include working with early childhood programs and services
- 39% do not include pre-K teachers in planning time with elementary teachers
- 67% do not invite family child care providers to observe kindergarten classes to learn about curriculum and classroom expectations

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**Preparation and Professional Development Programs.** Many early childhood directors have received professional development in standards and curriculum alignment between early childhood and K-12 (86%), partnerships across educational sectors (47%), and using data to track students (35%). Directors had the following recommendations for preparation programs:

- teach aspiring directors how learning connects across the lifespan
- place more emphasis on partnerships and relationship building
- recognize philosophical differences between early childhood programs and elementary education

Directors offered the following recommendations for professional development programs:

- share philosophies, policies, and best practices from early childhood and K-12 education
- provide strategies for building partnerships and collaborating across sectors

Principals reported that in their preparation programs they learned about building coalitions across sectors (75%), standards and curriculum alignment (61%), child development theories (58%), and developmentally appropriate practices (48%). Their recommendations for incorporating learning continuum information into initial licensure preparation programs included:

- communicate that cross-sector collaboration is a priority
- prepare principals to focus on educating the whole child from birth through graduation
- hire instructors with early childhood experience
- work with early childhood providers during internship experiences
- provide options in which a principal candidate can specialize in pre-K-elementary, middle school, or high school strands

Principals reported that they had received in-service professional development in standards and curriculum alignment (81%), assessments for young children (73%), developmentally appropriate practices (72%), and child development theories and practices (55%). To help principals build a learning continuum, principals make the following recommendations:

- offer workshops on early childhood partnerships, building coalitions, assessments for young children, mental health resources, and screening instruments
- provide opportunities to observe schools and classrooms where cross-sector collaborations operate and
- provide cross-sector professional development for teachers and leaders in early childhood and K-12 education

**Cross-Sector Collaborations.** Of directors, only 26% say they were involved with any partnerships to improve children's transitions from pre-K to elementary school. These efforts included: 1) formal coalitions to increase resources for early childhood providers and improve transitions, 2) partnerships with local districts in which directors serve on school improvement teams, and 3) partnerships with individual schools to align standards and curriculum.

Of principals, approximately one-half said they were collaborating in three categories: 1) working with pre-K programs within their schools or districts to improve transition experiences for students entering kindergarten, 2) working with community preschool programs to improve transition experiences, and 3) improving services for students with special needs.

## Recommendations

The LINC Advisory Group formulated recommendations to support early childhood and elementary school leaders to build a learning continuum in Illinois. They encompass three goals:

1. Develop policies and mechanisms that strengthen the learning continuum through cross-sector communication among service agencies, early childhood and K-12 representatives.
2. Expand leadership preparation and professional development programs to support the learning continuum.
3. Create a statewide data infrastructure that supports data collection and analysis of student development across the continuum from preschool through higher education.

## References

1. Kauerz, K. (2008). P-3: *What it is, why it's important, and policy approaches*. Presentation to the LINC Advisory Group. September 10, 2008, Bloomington, IL.

*A full copy of the LINC report can be downloaded at the project Web site: [www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu](http://www.leadershiplinc.ilstu.edu). For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.*