

# PATHWAY ONE: LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

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Principal leadership is critical to a successful Pre K-3 initiative. The general skills and knowledge of principals should enhance the development of a seamless continuum of learning from early childhood through grade 3 or higher. To do this, principals must:

- ▶ Have a strong understanding of PreK-3;
- ▶ Develop, support, and sustain a strong vision based on the principles and research that support PreK– 3rd grade education;
- ▶ Promote appropriate learning environments and quality teaching practices for PreK-3 based on an understanding of child development;
- ▶ Foster the creation of a school community focused on educating young children;
- ▶ Lead school efforts to engage families in their children's learning and transitions through school;
- ▶ Encourage family involvement and community participation in children's learning;
- ▶ Establish and sustain supportive connections between the superintendent, central office, and school board;
- ▶ Understand the change process, including the structure and process of teams working on Ready Schools/PreK-3; and
- ▶ Develop a team that shares similar philosophies and approaches.

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**I**n the absence of serious and sustained leadership, efforts to bring about change will not take hold...Reform can be a lonely undertaking, and the feeling that one is engaged in a solitary uphill fight can be discouraging, even devastating.

Progress is more likely to occur within schools, or across networks of schools, and scaling up is more likely to become a reality, if the players feel that they belong to something important and if they secure the emotional rewards that come from engagement with a cause.

– Gardner, 2000

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## Key Understandings

### *Quality Early Education Impacts School Success*

Despite decades of educational reform, we are still facing persistent achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students and between poor and non-poor students. In the past two decades, research has shown that learning begins early, that brains are impacted most in the earliest years, and that early learning experiences are critical for the long-term success of children.

Quality early learning experiences provide a good start to formal learning. However, while benefits do not disappear, they may begin to "fade" by third or fourth grade without sustained enhancements and quality instruction through the primary grades (Shore, 2009).



### ***Principal Leadership is Key***

Building a Ready School and a PreK-3 continuum of learning is a process, not a final destination. As with all school improvement efforts, this requires a leader with a vision for the future; a realistic assessment of the present conditions; the capacity to develop and implement goals and plans in collaboration with others; an understanding of how to measure progress; and the ability to reflect upon and refine the pathway.

Principals must support teacher leaders through quality professional development, professional learning communities, reflective learning, and ongoing assessment of child progress to be successful in leading PreK-3 change efforts. In addition, being an effective Ready Schools leader requires facilitating conversations with many stakeholders, maintaining engagement over time, and helping others navigate the change and transition necessary for Ready Schools transformation.

It is important to note that change and transition are not identical. Change is the "thing" that is going to be different. Transition is the internal psychological process that people go through to come to terms with the new situation. "Change management" (the plan for innovation) helps people understand the destination and how to get there. "Transition management" is designed to convince people to leave home in the first place (Bridges, 2003).

### ***Rethinking Approaches to PreK-3 Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments is Essential***

- ▶ Effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment are appropriate for young children's developmental stages, responsive to individual interests and needs, and sensitive to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- ▶ Aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment both horizontally and vertically creates a learning continuum that supports instructional practices based on individual needs and children's developmental stages. This provides an atmosphere where ALL young children can develop and learn at their own pace.
- ▶ The continuing achievement gap requires in-depth analysis of instructional practices and environments for poor and minority children.
- ▶ Using appropriate formative assessment to refine instruction and provide individualized support helps ensure that young children make continuous academic progress and develop in all domains.



## Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look

Self-reflection and honest critique are not easy. The High/Scope Ready Schools Assessment "Dimension on Leaders and Leadership" provides a framework for principals to self-assess their skills and abilities to become a Ready School leader.

Ready Schools leaders need to engage their team in the Ready Schools process by helping them examine school policies and practices, address difficult issues in working with families, develop responsive professional development, and ask hard questions about what works, what does not, who it works for, and who is left out. This requires a leader with a mindset that schools must take the responsibility of meeting the needs of every child who walks in the door. Additionally, Ready Schools leaders need to become skillful in using evidence and data as a source for dialogue and professional development.

Dialogue is a vital factor of any genuine effort to look deeply into school practices and policies. Real change will be sustained by a regular and honest exchange of ideas amongst a collaborative team. A leader may wish to reflect on the following questions to engage schools, families, and communities in the Ready Schools Assessment Process.

- ▶ What is the school's or district's mission statement?
- ▶ What is the school philosophy of effective teaching and learning?
- ▶ Do our practices reflect what we say we believe?
- ▶ What are the district, state, and federal rules and mandates that support or constrain what we do?
- ▶ What conditions do schools control?
- ▶ Where do we place our instructional focus? Do we prioritize time for planning and the use of data to inform practice?



### **Ready Schools in Action: Leaders Setting the Vision**

#### **Sample Mission Statements:**

**Iredell/Statesville Schools** will rigorously challenge all students to achieve their academic potential and to lead productive and rewarding lives. We will achieve this mission with the support of parents, staff, and the community.

**Wake County Public Schools:** Educate each student to be a responsible and productive citizen who can effectively manage future challenges.

**Superintendent's Mission:** To create and maintain systems with sufficient resources for establishing a collaborative, inclusive, and trusting environment for all stakeholders and for providing high quality learning experiences for each student to ensure success in the 21st century.



## Taking Action

### ***Reframing: A Different Way of Thinking***

To begin to get people to think differently, a leader should pose the question: "How is a Ready School different from any other elementary school?" A team leader might discuss the following questions with the School-Based Team to help everyone better understand why it is important to approach change systematically, rather than through isolated efforts:

- ▶ How do beliefs, professional expertise, and research impact what happens in our school on a daily basis?
- ▶ What policies support how students learn best?
- ▶ How effectively do we link our work to parents and the community?
- ▶ How do we all work together as learning communities to support each other and further student learning?
- ▶ What does the research say about best instructional practices for developing language, reading, mathematics, science, and social/emotional skills?

### ***What Can Principals Do?***

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2005) identifies several ways that principals can build early childhood learning communities:

1. *Embrace early childhood learning.* Effective principals embrace high-quality early childhood programs, principles, and practices as the foundation for education throughout the school community.
2. *Engage families and communities.* Effective principals work with families and community organizations to support children at home, in the community, and in pre-K (including below age 4) programs, as well as kindergarten and other primary grades.



3. *Promote appropriate learning environments for young children.* Effective principals promote environments that are developmentally, age, and content appropriate for children's learning. They understand the balance of child-initiated learning and teacher-led instruction.