

ARCHITECTS OF CHANGE

The Experiences and Impact of the CAYL Principal Fellows

The CAYL Principals Fellowship, established in 2006, creates a learning community for elementary school Principals to strengthen their individual and collective capacity to lead efforts to integrate pre-kindergarten (pre-K) children into their schools and to influence district and state level policies that affect the education of young children. The Fellowship provides an intensive year-long learning experience for promising leaders of elementary schools. To date, 29 Principals have participated in the year-long program that includes quarterly trainings and seminars, site visits, field trips, and distance learning activities.

This report summarizes the evaluation results of the Fellowship. Our data shows that as a result of the Fellowship, Principals learn how to become strong advocates for young children, establish high-quality pre-K learning environments in their schools and communities; promote family involvement and cultural competence as a key to successful early education in their schools; extend and develop a sustainable peer learning network with the CAYL Institute; and champion policy changes at the local, district, and state levels.

STRATEGY, POLICY & PERSPECTIVE

Creating a peer learning network

CAYL Principal Fellows have created a peer leadership network that sustains, supports, and challenges both new and veteran Principals in valuable ways.

Shared commitment to inquiry

*This Fellowship is an inquiry group; it's just a really good way to learn and it's around a topic that all of us have made a personal commitment to. We are a self-selected group. That means that everyone here is interested in talking about this, so it's a good group to be a part of for my own professional development.**

Peer conversation

I get so much more from talking to my colleagues than I would from reading a book.

I am a neophyte in my job, and what I like is having veteran Principals to talk with who know what is going to happen; they can help support me and I trust that.

New learning

*Although I like to think about myself as a veteran Principal, this has challenged my learning curve and I like that. Talking with other Principals helps me understand what is developmentally appropriate, what the resources are, what the regulations say, but also giving me a chance to say gosh I'm not sure this is okay and get some reassurance that it's okay when I go into my K-1** classroom, and the kids give me a hug before they talk to me. It makes me want to get to work, drinking in the sweetness. I really feel like I've discovered a gem at this stage in my professional life, I value that so much.*

*CAYL Principal Fellows have chosen to keep their identities anonymous in this report, to create a more honest and open learning environment.

** A K-1 classroom serves children 4 years old.

The value of site visits

During the (site visits) it's interesting to learn what my colleagues think are issues in their particular school. It raises for me whether I should be thinking about that as well. My last (site visit) happened to be looking at environments. I asked myself how much more could I do in my own building to improve the environment based on the materials and resources that I have available.

The site visits were wonderful for me to get ideas about how to do things. The first time I visited, the first thing I brought back was the idea that everything had to be at the level of the child.

Professional and personal support

It provides a group of people to lean on, to bounce questions off of. Since I'm in a single administrator building it's helpful to be able to call my colleagues and ask specific questions about early childhood.

The richest part of the Fellowship is knowing that I can visit any of the other schools simply by calling up my colleagues. I get support from that.

Championing policy changes at the local, district, and state levels

CAYL Principal Fellows increase their awareness about preschool funding streams, and the need to lobby district, local and state officials to develop policies that improve the quality of education and care for preschool children. They are speaking out about ensuring continuity of care and alignment between primary grades, kindergarten and preschool, the need for more authentic assessment tools, and for clear policies consistent with research on what is developmentally appropriate practice with young children.

Increased confidence

The Fellowship has helped me look inside and know that I know what's right. I'm going to stand up and voice my opinion and express what I know is right for young children

Finding a policy voice

The Fellowship allows us to have connection with national level and state level policy and politics and get our voices heard. We had a meeting with the (school district) superintendent around early childhood that was an important forum for us to speak just on that topic. I wouldn't have had those opportunities on my own.

Expanded leadership network

There is a power in numbers! The more I integrate the importance of my programs with others the more I can affect advocacy at a higher level.

Raising awareness among school officials

I don't think (my school district) understands what young children need. All I hear is, "How are you going to bring your MCAS scores up?" That's the only conversation we ever hear when we go to meetings. I think we really need the evidence to show the value of this type of work. We can make small changes within our community but if teachers go for training and they hear that same message then in the back of their heads they are going to be saying, "Man, I got to make sure that these kids start to read." I don't think that message has really reached the people who make decisions. The people who make educational decisions are not educators to begin with they are politicians.

PRACTICE & SUPERVISION

Establishing high quality pre-K learning environments within school systems

Some of the knowledge and skills that Principals learn through the Fellowship include:

The value of play

What the Fellowship taught me is that it is developmentally appropriate for kids to have plenty of time to play and how to set up the classrooms so that that can happen to its fullest. I'm learning what that looks like, what it means, and the value of doing it. It builds fluency socially, emotionally, mathematical thinking, moving from a knowledge base to a higher cognition. It's amazing.

How to respond to the individual developmental needs of children

I'm now appreciating that tiered development and overlap are okay. I don't feel scared if they don't get it all in one grade.

How to plan and organize the classroom environment

I now look at the flow of each room, in particular what's next to each area. I'm looking at how space affects feelings of safety. I also check what materials are present and if they are located where they are accessible. When materials are accessible to the children, they feel in control. This is a new understanding

How to promote independent learning

Now I know how to make sure that zones are in the classroom and they are in the right place. The teachers are thinking through how they set up the classrooms to promote independent learning.

What to look for when recruiting early childhood teachers

Now I am seeing so much more than ever the importance of recruiting high caliber early childhood people. The more a teacher's depth of knowledge in early childhood, the greater is their responsiveness to children.

A 2006 CAYL Principal Fellow entered into the Fellowship to learn. He did not know much about early childhood education, as his training had been primarily focused on the middle and upper grades of elementary school. The CAYL Principals Fellowship was a turning point for this Principal, as he began to see the foundational importance of early childhood. Dramatic changes have occurred in his school and entire community as a result of the lessons learned and advocacy skills gained from the Fellowship. Improvements include several pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms; reconfiguration of the elementary school building to create an early childhood "wing"; working toward NAEYC accreditation; the creation of wrap-around child care and extended-day programs that serve all employees. This impressive and visionary leader remains an active Fellow, attends and participates in all CAYL Institute events, and was recently featured in a section of the *CAYL Principals Toolkit* (to be premiered at the CAYL Institute's *Young Learners in America's Schools: What's in Your Toolkit?* National Conference for Elementary School Principals in July 2009).

Another CAYL Principal Fellow describes the change that occurred at her school due to lessons learned through the Fellowship experience. She now works closely with and coaches teachers in order to help them create physical environments that are more appropriate for young children, and she has requested from the district and now hosts a playgroup in her building for babies, toddlers and their caregivers. In addition, this Principal is leading her school towards becoming more developmentally appropriate beginning with the prekindergarten and kindergarten programs.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Promoting family involvement and cultural competence as a key to successful early education in the schools

CAYL Principal Fellows increased their contact with pre-school parents and created more welcoming environments in their schools. They did this by establishing parent learning and support groups at their schools, communicating with parents regularly, inviting families to school events, offering parent education classes, gathering feedback, asking families to volunteer at school, providing incentives for participating in school activities, and conducting community and home visits.

Creating a family-friendly school

I see my school in a different way now [since becoming a Fellow]. We now have drop-in meeting time with our child life specialist. Our new 'family restroom' has diaper changing tables and we offer childcare during parent conferences and Parent Council meetings. We have hosted two family fun evening events.

Engaging parents as learning allies

Within my programs we have increased the amount of information sent home to parents about the curriculum content and the intended learning outcomes. We have shared examples and suggestions of activities to do at home as a means of extending the continuum of learning. We have created a School-to Home literacy program that consists of a lending library of books and props.

CAYL Principal Fellows increase cultural and linguistic competence in their schools. They do this by using the languages of the children and their families in written documents and interpersonal communication; by extending multi-cultural curriculum and materials provided by the district; by paying close attention to and supporting children's identity development; by providing professional development and peer learning opportunities for their staff; and by engaging in community-building activities such as connecting with local organizations and resources that serve the young children and families in their neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

The CAYL Principals' Fellowship works because the Fellowship:

- Creates a local community among Principals as advocates for early education and care;
- Listens to and values Principals' front line information about what is happening in their schools;
- Focuses explicitly on learning and practicing the tools of leadership and public policy to identify and develop solutions to educational issues in their own local communities;
- Builds in diversity as a means of demonstrating and promoting the democratic principles which must be the foundation of change;
- Fully integrates the pre-kindergarten program into the life of the school;
- Infuses attention to cultural competence;
- Builds respectful relationships with families and communities;
- Expands the networks of CAYL Principal Fellows;
- Builds on the skills and competencies Principals already have;
- Involves superintendents, and staff from the Principal Fellows districts;
- Provides an interactive and reflective program; and
- Identifies where CAYL Principal Fellows' efforts can empower change and make a difference.

Perhaps the value to the Fellows is best illustrated by a quote from one Principal who commented,

"There's a need for professional learning community among Principals; the only time I can do this now is at (the CAYL Institute). It's how to bring talented people together in a very professional way. Having access to experts is an amazing opportunity. At (the CAYL Institute) I can go to experts and bounce ideas. I can't do that with the district; those people are my bosses. I can't put a price on [my Fellowship experience]."

The CAYL Principals Fellowship has increased the awareness, knowledge, skills and confidence of elementary school Principals to lead their schools and school districts to develop more appropriate learning environments for young children that starts them on a proven path towards educational success.

For more information on the CAYL Institute, please visit <http://www.cayl.org> or contact (617) 873-0678, info@cayl.org