

Elementary Principals Go to School to Learn About Pre-K Practices



Jeffrey Wolff, the principal of Clyde F. Brown Elementary School in Millis, Mass., sits near children in the play area of a prekindergarten classroom at the school this month. In 2006-07, Mr. Wolff participated in an intensive, yearlong fellowship program designed to help elementary school leaders oversee and strengthen the preschool classes offered at their schools. —Erik Jacobs for Education Week

Fellowship aimed at leaders of combined programs.

By [Linda Jacobson](#)

The preschoolers at Clyde F. Brown Elementary School in Millis, Mass., used to be isolated at the end of a hallway in the 650-student school—a location that symbolized how much attention they received from principal Jeffrey Wolff.

“I just didn’t take a very active role in providing the best for them,” said Mr. Wolff, who taught 3rd and 4th grade early in his career and admits he wasn’t much of an expert on early-childhood education.

But that was before he participated in a fellowship for principals offered by Community Advocates for Young Learners, or [CAYL](#). The Cambridge, Mass.-based organization runs an intensive, yearlong program designed to help elementary school leaders oversee and strengthen the preschool classes offered at their schools.

With states continuing to expand public preschool programs—often inside existing schools—the fellowship is addressing what CAYL President Valora Washington says is a growing need.

“These principals need support. Very few principals have been trained in early childhood,” said Ms. Washington, whose nonprofit organization had long been providing a separate fellowship program, the Schott Fellowship, for mid-career professionals in the early-childhood field, such as Head Start or private preschool directors.

Growing Demand



Mr. Wolff paints with Chloe Verrochi, 5. Having children as young as age 3 in the building can be “fabulous,” he said. —Photo by Erik Jacobs for Education Week

The demand for such learning extends far beyond Massachusetts, says Fasaha Traylor, a senior program officer at the New York City-based Foundation for Child Development, which originally provided funding for the fellowship for principals, but is now focusing on state policy changes.

“I think that one of the unforeseen consequences of the tremendous support for early-childhood education is that there are now probably thousands of principals who are having to deal with this for the first time,” she said. “In almost any state that has a fairly good-sized pre-K program, the needs are pretty similar.”

Almost 40 states now operate public pre-K programs, and most of those house some of the classes in schools, while also contracting with community-based providers to supply classrooms.

In recent years, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, based in Alexandria, Va., has encouraged principals to play an active role in expanding and improving the quality of early-childhood-education programs in their communities, whether or not they are located in their buildings.

But acquiring expertise in educating young children “falls into the after-market category” of principal preparation, noted Fred Brown, a senior associate executive director of the NAESP. And with all the management and legal information that principals need to learn, he added, higher education institutions have “just recently been delving more into learning leadership.”

The principals in the CAYL fellowship participate in a summer “boot camp” in which they are immersed in early-childhood philosophy and discuss topics such as how to work with families, or the role of assessment with young children.

Then, when the school year starts, consultants work as coaches in the principals’ schools to improve the way the preschool classes are organized and to better connect the curriculum to what is being taught in the other grades in the school.

That’s when Mr. Wolff’s attitudes toward the youngest pupils in his building—and those who would eventually attend his school—began to change. In early 2007, he held a preschool fair after combing through U.S. Census data to find all of the 2- to 4-year-olds in his community, a suburb about 25 miles south of Boston.



Jeffrey Wolff, the principal of Clyde F. Brown Elementary School in Millis, Mass., visits a preschool program located in his school.—Photo by Erik Jacobs for Education Week

“I felt like they were just waiting until kindergarten,” he said. “I wanted to bring them in and say, ‘This is your school.’ ”

Then, he put the kindergarten classes and the preschool classes—which blend children with disabilities and those without—next to each other so the teachers would have more chances to interact.

He also began building a rapport with early-childhood advocates and directors of private preschools in the area. And he finds himself spending more time in those classrooms, even if it means playing and writing words in shaving cream on the table.

Suzanne Federspiel, the principal of the 250-student Kenny Elementary School in Boston, said the fellowship has exposed her to the “current thinking” about early-childhood education and inspired her to weave more play opportunities throughout the curriculum for all students.

“We talk a lot about the importance of coming from the bottom up, in contrast to the academic side of the higher grades,” she said. “There is tremendous pressure for our 1st graders and our kindergartners to be reading. You have to find a balance.”

More Than Sound Bites

Because of the length of the program, only principals from Boston and throughout Massachusetts have been able to participate in the full fellowship, now in its third year. Each year, between 10 and 15 principals participate.

But CAYL also provides a three-day summer institute for principals from across the country in conjunction with the annual naesp convention. And next summer, the organization will hold its own national conference in Cambridge so other principals can visit a community in which principals have been affected by the group's work.

"We didn't want it to be just another meeting in a hotel," Ms. Washington said.

CAYL is also working to be heard on other early-childhood issues. In October, the group released a policy paper on the lack of male teachers in the early-childhood field in Massachusetts.

And earlier this month, the institute sponsored a briefing for Massachusetts lawmakers on improving the state's early-childhood teacher-preparation programs.

Principals of public schools that only serve very young children have also sought out CAYL's training opportunities.

Ann Pedersen, the principal of Number 4 School, part of the 4,000-student Lawrence public schools on Long Island in New York, attended the group's summer institute in 2007. Her school serves just pre-K and kindergarten students, so increasing her focus on early childhood wasn't a concern.

But she said the institute provided practical advice beyond the presentations about the educational and economic benefits of preschool that most principals have already heard.

"People are just holding on to the sound bites from the research," she said, adding that principals in schools like hers are looking for ways "to maintain developmentally appropriate practices given the demand to produce an outcome."

Valerie Gumes, now in her second year as a fellow, runs a similar school in Boston serving 3- to 7-year-olds. She said the fellowship has helped her resist putting academic pressure on young children.

"I could easily be pushed into running just another elementary school with young children," she said. She added, however, that she and the other five principals who run early-childhood centers in the 55,800-student district are "purposeful" about not being excluded from elementary principal meetings just because their students aren't part of the state testing system yet.

At Clyde Brown Elementary, Mr. Wolff has added pre-K classes, but there is still a long waiting list for the program. He notes that some of his school's parents have been confused by his interest in expanding this part of his school.

“They think it’s a parent’s responsibility to go out and find a preschool, or you stay home with your kids,” he said. “But there are some absolutely fabulous things that having a 3-year-old in your building can provide.”

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