



Information Briefing

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The Role of the Board for Ensuring Quality Preschool

Historically, the focus for improving student achievement has centered on grades K-12, but with recent state legislation creating voluntary preschool for four-year-old children, more Iowa school districts are opting to provide preschool as part of a *PreK-12* system of education. With the increase in the number of Iowa districts offering quality preschool as an option for families, questions continue to surface about the role of the school board for ensuring quality early learning experiences for their youngest students.

- What are the roles of the board for ensuring quality preschool?
- What are key actions boards must take around those important roles?
- What do district leaders need to know about early childhood education to successfully support and monitor programs to the ensure preschools deliver on the promise of improved school readiness and success in school?

To help answer these questions, information from K-12 research on the important roles boards play for improving student achievement has been summarized with research from early childhood education. The following sections provide guidance for school leaders on the actions boards must take around the five key roles areas for ensuring quality preschool education.

Five Key Roles of the Board for Ensuring Quality Preschool

Local research on school governance reveals school boards play important roles for improving student achievement. Reports from the Iowa School Boards Foundation's *Lighthouse* studies (1998-2007) describe actions related to five key roles for school board members to ensure students in grades K-12 learn at high levels: setting clear expectations, creating conditions for success, holding the system accountable to the expectations, building collective will and learning together as a board team. These five areas have been applied to define the board's role in ensuring quality preschool.

Set Clear Expectations

Insist on a PreK-12 mindset that recognizes preschool as an integral part of the district's learning continuum - one that does not consider preschool as an "add-on" component to the K-12 system no matter where the program is housed.

Boards must:

- Focus on student learning PreK-12. Teaching and learning are a vital part of a quality preschool classroom, just as they are in any other grade level.
- Ensure the preschool program is included in the school's focus for improvement and the focus for improvement is based on student and program needs.

Set clear expectations for both the student learning outcomes and the learning environment. Boards must expect high-quality early childhood education is provided by preschools that meet national preschool *program* standards and hold themselves accountable to rigorous early childhood *learning* standards. Starting earlier by investing in preschool won't make a difference in children's learning if programs are not high-quality programs.

Boards must:

- Have a clear understanding of the current performance and needs of their youngest students.
- Believe more is possible and communicate high expectations that young children have a great capacity to learn.
- Hold themselves accountable to rigorous child learning standards such as the Iowa Early Learning Standards
- Ensure the preschool program meets national preschool program accreditation standards - such as the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) Early Childhood Program Standards.

Create Conditions for Success

Provide the support necessary for the implementation of a research-based high-quality preschool program.

Key areas where board support is needed:

Leadership:

- Provide the necessary support to ensure the preschool program administrator(s) are knowledgeable about early childhood education.
- Create and support a distributed system of leadership for PreK-12. Developing and supporting leadership at all levels of the system to guide and protect the work to improve student learning.

Quality Teaching and Learning:

- Provide adequate resources for highly-qualified preschool teachers with a degree in early childhood education.
- Provide for an amount of instructional time that is consistent with research-based best practices - 12.5 or more hours of instruction per week associated with short and long-term benefits for children.
- Approve and monitor a rigorous, evidence-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum for preschoolers aligned to the Iowa Early Learning Standards.
- Approve and monitor a rigorous, evidence-based and developmentally appropriate assessment of student performance, aligned to the Iowa Early Learning Standards.
- Provide the necessary support to ensure instructional practices are aligned with the curriculum and assessments being used.
- Provide the necessary support to ensure preschool teachers participate in quality, ongoing professional development aligned with the learning needs of preschool students, consistent with the Iowa Professional Development Model, and linked to the professional development of the K-3 teachers.
- Approve and monitor the implementation of quality preschool program standards that describe a rich learning environment appropriate for preschoolers.

Alignment and Transition:

- Provide the necessary support to ensure the alignment of curriculum, assessment and instruction between preschool and the K-3 grades in order to create a coherent continuum of learning.
- Provide the necessary support to ensure smooth transitions for children and their families as they move from preschool into kindergarten (academic/social/emotional adjustment of children, parent connection to the school, etc.).

Comprehensive Services:

- Collaborate with appropriate community partners to provide additional supports such as transportation, extended-day child care, health screenings (vision, hearing, etc.) and parent education services, etc.
- Collaborate with community partners to streamline efforts, maximize resources and reduce costs for preschool programming.

Funding:

- Collaborate with appropriate community partners to blend funding streams and increase resources for quality programming.
- Provide supports that allow children from different backgrounds, income levels, and ability levels to be served in the same classroom setting.

Hold the System Accountable to the Expectations

Monitor the impact of the preschool program, using both formative and summative assessment processes. Ongoing assessment of student learning and an appropriate evaluation process that focuses both on the child learning outcomes and implementation of the preschool program standards are critical aspects of quality preschool programming.

To hold the system accountable to the expectations boards must:

- Provide support for ongoing collection and use of appropriate assessments and data related to student progress.
- Establish policy for program evaluation that includes various methods to monitor program effectiveness - taking the burden off of the four-year-olds and making adults accountable for student learning.
- Review data regularly and reference data in decision-making and problem solving.
- Provide support to take corrective action when progress toward the outcomes is not sufficient.
- Make judgments about the costs and benefits for students overtime as part of the overall program evaluation.

Build Collective Will

Create the awareness of the importance of quality preschool. Achievement gaps begin early. The achievement gaps commonly seen in later years are obvious at kindergarten entry.

To create awareness of the need for quality preschool the board must:

- Value and communicate the importance of community stakeholders as partners in providing quality preschool programs for all interested families.
- Demonstrate their commitment to early childhood education consistently through their conversations at the board table and in the community, and through their decisions and actions as a board.
- Understand what's at stake for students and communicate a sense of urgency to staff and the community about the student, family and learning environment needs.
- Confront their own beliefs and the beliefs of others about what's possible to expect and what the school has the capacity to impact in terms of student learning.
- Communicate high expectations for all students and a belief that students who come to school with less can learn and achieve as well as most students.
- Talk about the current needs based on data and reliable information.

Learn Together as a Board Team

Establish learning time that encourages the board/superintendent team to study issues together and talk to one another through extensive board conversations.

To build the commitment for quality preschool through shared information and productive discussions the board must:

- Know the characteristics of a high-quality preschool program and recognize the similarities and the unique differences between preschool and K-12.
- Learn the needs of the children and families within the community
- Know who is providing early care and education for families with young children.
- Understand the community, identify needs and available services, note gaps and work with community partners to ensure all children have quality early childhood education experiences.
- Collaborate with other partners to provide quality preschool programs that meet the needs of children (quality programs) and families (transportation, extended-day child care, etc.).

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