

A Guide for Those Who Care About Creating and Supporting **Quality in Schools**

Leading
Early Childhood
Learning Communities

What
Principals
Should **Know**
and Be Able
To Do

Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities was co-created by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Collaborative Communications Group.

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The mission of NAESP is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary- and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children

The 30,000 members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals provide administrative and instructional leadership for public and private elementary and middle schools throughout the United States, Canada and overseas. Founded in 1921, NAESP is an independent professional association with its own headquarters building in Alexandria, Virginia. Through national and regional meetings, award-winning publications and joint efforts with its 50 state affiliates, NAESP is a strong advocate for both its members and for the 35 million American children enrolled in preschool, kindergarten and grades 1 through 8.

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Graphic Design: DG Design Partners, Kensington, MD

ISBN 0-939327-22-8

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Foreword by **Dr. Vincent Ferrandino**

**High-quality early
childhood education is
not just an ideal; it's an
essential investment.**

Thirty percent of all American children begin school unable to maximally profit from the educational experience they will encounter. The percentage is higher for poor children. School readiness is extremely important; nearly every educational benchmark—from being on grade level to staying in school—is related to school readiness.

Given the critical nature of learning in the first five years of a child's life, it is imperative that school leaders are actively involved in their communities' early learning programs before students arrive for kindergarten or first grade. Missed opportunities from birth to school entry can put children behind when they start school and create barriers to achievement that can last through high school. Strong early learning leads to better educated and more employable individuals, as well as less remediation throughout the education system, benefiting all of society.

The bar for principal performance continues to rise. No Child Left Behind, the Bush administration's education reform act, has increased principals' accountability for student learning. Over the past 15 years, the National Association of Elementary School Principals has partnered with schools, education organizations and policymakers to study, discuss and address new ways to support principals in improving education practice. In the coming years, NAESP will continue to work with innovative individuals and organizations to upgrade practice and culture in schools to reflect what we know about how children learn and develop.

NAESP also calls on policymakers to support principals' efforts in improving early learning opportunities. In this guide's Call to Action, we identify eight ways principals can work with policymakers and community leaders to create and lead early childhood learning communities.

High-quality early childhood education is more than an admirable goal; it is fundamental to making sure all children have the opportunity to succeed. We are committed to helping school leaders ensure that every child can reach academic proficiency and achieve intellectual, social and emotional success—starting with pre-kindergarten.

Dr. Vincent Ferrandino is the executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

A photograph of two young children, a girl on the left and a boy on the right, both laughing joyfully. They are holding small, round objects, likely apples, in their hands. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text 'The Challenge: Expand the Continuum of Learning' is positioned at the top left of the image.

The Challenge: Expand the Continuum of Learning

Recent brain research makes it clear that children’s learning is enhanced by their early childhood experiences. Therefore, educators are shifting their approach to support children’s learning well before they arrive at elementary school.

Research shows that children who finish pre-K programs are half as likely to need special education services in later grades. Other studies have found that children from low-income families who attend high-quality pre-K programs are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college and less likely to go to jail, become teen parents or qualify for welfare.

Many elementary schools are familiar with the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which provides \$1 billion for after-school programs for children of elementary school age. The same opportunity should be offered to all preschoolers.

As schools work to ensure that all children develop as proficient students, they need to include three- and four-year-olds in pre-kindergarten experiences, provide rich full-day kindergarten programs and build new connections to the many early childhood educators across communities.

Early childhood education does not need to be based in a school but should be connected to local schools. Elementary school principals understand how many children start school unprepared, and they are in a key position to define school readiness.

That’s why NAESP believes that elementary school principals should be at the forefront of discussions and activities that reach beyond the elementary campus. Everyone involved in pre-K programs should understand what it takes for students to be ready to succeed on the first day of school.

Principles of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs

NAESP endorses accreditation criteria for early childhood programs developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and professional standards developed by Head Start. The following indicators are not meant to replace or replicate that work. Instead, they are meant to be a jumping-off point for principals to begin to define quality in early childhood programs and to engage in conversations about the quality of early childhood programs where they live.

Supportive interactions between teachers and children

The most important indicator of quality is likely to be the nature of the interaction between teacher and child. Indeed, how teachers relate to and interact with children appears to matter more than curriculum in early childhood education. Teachers facilitate interactions among children to provide opportunities for development of self-esteem, social competence and intellectual growth.

Safe, supportive and engaging learning environments

Young children learn best in environments that are physically and emotionally safe. High-quality programs recognize the role of play in children's learning and provide environments that encourage play as an important opportunity for children to learn through their own experimentation and exploration. The health, safety and nutritional needs of participants are met to promote all phases of development.

Focus on the whole child

A program's approach should include a variety of areas of a child's learning and development, such as the eight factors identified by Head Start, which include: language development, literacy, mathematics, science, creative arts, approaches toward learning, physical health and development, and social and emotional development.

Meaningful learning for the individual child

High-quality programs provide learning experiences that are grounded in children's interests and that are developed around learning in several disciplines. High-quality teaching reflects the knowledge that young children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their understanding of the world around them.

A culture of authentic assessment and continuous learning

Young children learn and develop at different rates, and their learning cannot be defined by any single assessment. High-quality programs pay attention to all aspects of children's development: physical, social, emotional and cognitive. In addition, systematic assessment of the programs themselves helps ensure that the programs are continually improved.

Connections to families and community organizations

Strong connections to families stimulate a child's development. They include parents' classroom participation, two-way communication with families and opportunities to incorporate ideas and languages from a child's home and culture into the school environment.

Effective administration

Efficient and effective administration focuses on the needs and desires of children, families and staff. High-quality programs are sufficiently staffed to address and promote children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.





A Call To Action:

Here are eight policies for which principals can advocate at the federal, state and local levels to ensure that every child in the United States has an opportunity to start school ready to learn:

- 1. Provide universal opportunity for children to attend high-quality early childhood education programs.** All states should provide free universal preschool programs, staffed with qualified, certified and well-paid early childhood teachers and specialists.
- 2. Fully fund Head Start to include all eligible children and maintain it as a federal government program.** Federal policymakers need to increase funding for Head Start by adding \$1 billion for the next fiscal year and additional amounts in the subsequent years until it reaches full funding. NAESP also calls for improvement or at least maintenance of Head Start's comprehensive and quality performance standards and an expansion of Early Head Start.
- 3. Create transition programs that ensure close contact among Head Start programs, preschools, daycare programs and public schools.** State and local policies must focus on school readiness as a comprehensive concept, including early learning, social development, nutrition, health and family support. We must support the transition of children from home to preschool, from preschool to kindergarten and from third to fourth grade.
- 4. Provide full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds and after-school programs for children from kindergarten through middle school.** Research backs up the concept of full-day kindergarten that supports five-year-olds academically, socially and emotionally. We must also commit to after-school programs that provide wraparound services for children from kindergarten through middle school.
- 5. Ensure that early childhood programs meet the needs of the whole child.** Programs must be well-designed and developmentally appropriate. All developmentally appropriate classrooms have one thing in common: The focus will be on the development of the whole child. Such programs will encourage the growth of children's self-esteem, their cultural identities, their independence and their individual strengths.
- 6. Keep a teacher-student ratio of not more than 15-to-1 in early childhood programs, kindergarten and grades one through three.** Reducing class size can increase educational effectiveness. All states should set research-based standards that jointly address class size, adult-to-child ratios, teacher qualifications and teaching practices.
- 7. Provide professional growth programs for principals in all areas of early childhood instruction.** Federal, state and local education agencies should promote efforts to build the capacity of principals to ensure an understanding of the important linkages between preschool and K-12 education and provide resources and flexibility to help them connect these integral elements of learning.
- 8. Train parents to be stronger participants in their child's early learning.** All preschool programs should include parent education. Parents must be empowered to be their child's most important teacher, and schools can help them to foster parent leadership skills, self-esteem and support their connection to community resources.

Standard One: Embrace Early Childhood Learning

Effective principals embrace high-quality early childhood programs, principles and practices as the foundation for education throughout the school community.

Principals should support an expanded continuum of learning that includes children from age three through the primary grades and a strong transition to the start of fourth grade.

By bringing pre-K expectations in line with those in kindergarten and the early school years, principals provide a coherent, related set of experiences for children in the first critical years of schooling.

In schools that cultivate this continuum of learning, early childhood educators are respected for what they can offer their peers in later grades, and teachers in later elementary grades work with pre-K teachers on connecting learning goals and expectations across all levels.

When principals expand the idea of schooling to include the learning experiences of three- and four-year-olds, we see principals who:

- **Consider conception through the start of fourth grade a continuum for early learning**
- **Engage the school community in understanding children’s early development and use that combined knowledge to strengthen learning throughout the school**
- **Balance leadership and management roles to incorporate early childhood programs into the school’s culture and organizational structure**
- **Articulate the value of early intervention to prevent later difficulties**



FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Using Pre-K To Start Work on Standards

McFerran Elementary School, Louisville, Kentucky

The 14 pre-K teachers at McFerran Elementary School get a close look at what their students need to know: They spend the first week of every school year helping teach kindergarten.

Kindergarten teachers mentor new pre-K teachers in the building where 350 three- and four-year-olds attend a pre-K center while 600 K-5 students study in an adjacent wing.

Kentucky’s education standards spell out what students should know for testing that starts in fourth grade. Many schools have designed their curriculum to trace those skills to kindergarten. The pre-K center at McFerran uses a pre-K curriculum created by the district and connected to state standards.

“There was a time when preschool was focused on socialization—they’d come in, talk about cooperation, take a break, color, rest, and that was it. It’s not like that anymore,” principal Carol Miller said. “The expectations are higher. Our kids in kindergarten are reading, which means we want to get our four-year-olds ready for that.”

For children still behind after pre-K, Miller encourages parents to sign up for the Pee-Wee Camp that McFerran offers over three weeks in the summer.

Although Miller runs a large school, she spends a good deal of time visiting pre-K classes and sitting in on conferences between pre-K teachers and parents.

“When we started at kindergarten, we’d say if we could get them at four, we could do a better job,” she said. “That worked. Now we say we want them at three.”

Standard Two: Engage Families and Communities

Effective principals work with families and community organizations to support children at home, in the community and in pre-K and kindergarten programs.

Principals know that children begin learning long before they start school. They recognize the important role that parents play in their child's development and understand that much of a young child's learning takes place outside of school.

Principals who create a seamless support system help parents with their children's learning at home and in early education programs. Principals should encourage teachers to support parents' efforts to help their children by:

- **Visiting children's homes before the beginning of the school year to meet the children and families**
- **Creating opportunities for families to visit the pre-K classroom before school begins**
- **Encouraging parents as pre-K children make their first transition into a school**
- **Establishing and maintaining ongoing communication with all families**
- **Reporting to parents on children's experiences on a regular basis**

Families can also benefit from coordinated community resources to learn more about health, nutrition and fitness programs; how to best support a child with special needs; understand child development or even locate medical, dental and mental health services.

When principals engage families and communities, we see principals who:

- **Acknowledge and support families as children's first and most influential teachers**
- **Provide early education experiences that are informed by young children's cultural and community experience**
- **Act as a bridge between schools and community-based supports for young children and their families**
- **Build coalitions with community organizations to strengthen learning for children from birth to the start of fourth grade**

FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Providing a Strong Start To Ensure Quality Results

Endeavour Primary Learning Center, Lauderhill, Florida

Vera Groover, principal of the Endeavour Primary Learning Center thinks long-term: "The object is for our youngsters to go to college," she says. "If we can get it right in preschool, things are going to start working out the way we want them to."

The 70 children enrolled in a special-needs pre-K, Head Start and a state- and county-funded pre-K program get special attention as they start the long path of schooling.

In addition to efforts the school makes to be inviting and informative to parents—from community events to G.E.D. classes—pre-K teachers make two home visits each year to make a positive first impression on parents, discuss students' accomplishments and needs and talk about any relevant health issues.

"We have children who come to our preschool to catch up and get ready for kindergarten. We've realized that work isn't just with the children, it's with their families, too," Groover said.

Teachers might talk to parents about the importance of reading with their children and helping them build their vocabulary—even suggesting that on trips to the grocery, they point out how corn is grown or ways potatoes are different from strawberries.

Florida's accountability program casts a spotlight on third grade teaching, the first year of statewide testing, as a key point in the elementary grades. Focused on primary and pre-K, Groover sees the key to third-grade success in the experiences of four-year-olds.

"We know that in preschool, what we do impacts everything else," she said.

Standard Three: Promote Appropriate Learning Environments for Young Children

Effective principals provide appropriate learning environments for young children.

Beyond gaining from new experiences, children in the pre-K years also are constantly building knowledge from the physical and social world swirling around them.

When the interpersonal and physical learning environments are stimulating and supportive, children are able to develop in many ways. Effective principals recognize the key role of rich learning environments for young children and provide the leadership to create them.

Principals should be knowledgeable about the key elements of an appropriate learning environment for young children. They should use their leadership and management skills to ensure appropriate environments when they observe and analyze interactions in the classroom and provide feedback as well as tailor materials, schedules and space to pre-K learning.

Principals should pay attention to structural elements, such as class size and teacher-to-student ratios, and process elements, such as the nature and quality of interactions between the child and the teacher.

When principals support and promote appropriate learning environments for young children, we see principals who:

- **Promote environments that are developmentally and age appropriate and address individual ways of learning**
- **Create relationships that provide the foundation for children's learning**
- **Develop children's social skills**
- **Provide facilities and learning opportunities that promote children's health and safety**



FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Tailoring Teaching to Student Needs

Greenridge Elementary School, Comstock Park, Michigan

Principal Stacy Stoll takes pride as she explains that Greenridge Elementary School is a work in progress: Teachers are always thinking about what works and reinventing their approach to adapt to the shifting needs of students at the pre-K-kindergarten school.

"Creating a nurturing, safe, engaging environment is at the heart of everything we do," Stoll said, "but we're always looking for new things that explain young ones and how we can help them learn at increased rates."

To create a positive learning environment for students, the principal focuses on making sure teachers keep learning, too—in faculty meetings, book study groups and daily conversations.

Teachers have studied multiple intelligences and brain research findings and used what they learned to update their curriculum and teaching.

"We spent a lot of time as a staff finding out about ways boys learn differently than girls," Stoll recalled. "We let the kids stand up and move around more during lessons and switched to a phonics program with more movement."

Meetings about new concepts like giving students more choice in what they learn quickly lead to very practical questions: "Our professional discussions involve asking whether what we learn means we're going to do something different to engage our kids," Stoll said.

Standard Four: Ensure High-Quality Teaching

Effective principals ensure high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children’s learning and development.

In a developmentally appropriate classroom, the curriculum strives to help children become lifelong learners, think critically and imaginatively, ask meaningful questions, formulate alternative solutions, appreciate diversity and work collaboratively. Perhaps most important, high-quality teaching can help build a child’s capacity to form meaningful relationships with others.

People learn by making connections. Ultimately, the objective of high-quality teaching is to make learning meaningful for the individual child, using practices that reflect both the age and the needs of a student.

Author Bob Sornson writes in *Preventing Early Learning Failure* that three basic ideas govern teaching children so that they can be successful in school:

- **Not all children are ready for instruction at the same level when they come to school**
- **All important basic skills should be learned completely, until the concepts seem simple and easy to use**
- **If we want a child to use a skill throughout life, it must be associated with joy**

When principals work to ensure high-quality teaching in the pre-K classroom, we see principals who:

- **Foster young children’s eagerness to learn**
- **Develop early literacy and early numeracy skills to provide a foundation for later learning**
- **Provide ongoing professional development for the school community to build an eagerness to learn**

FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Laying the Groundwork for Reading Success

All Ready Preschool, Paradise Valley Elementary School, Casper, Wyoming

The All Ready Preschool at Paradise Valley Elementary School, started 10 years ago by two teachers who wanted to see if early interventions could enhance students’ readiness for kindergarten, focuses on at-risk children ready for pre-K.

Small literacy groups meet every day for three to 12 minutes. Some three-year-olds may sit on a teacher’s lap turning pages of a book and discussing pictures. Another group might work with a volunteer parent or aide identifying letters in their names, while another works through a rhyming activity.

Targeting students who are not eligible for Head Start, the half-day sessions at the pre-K-6 school combine play with other learning experiences that build early literacy skills.

“There are sand and water tables, dramatic play centers, art and science centers, but every day we do things with our preschoolers that we’d teach or show our own children to help them learn,” principal Christine Frude said. “We try to find out what each child already knows or has an understanding of and link their learning to it.”

Frude closely monitors the program’s effects at the 430-student school, where 46 percent of the students qualify for free- or reduced-price meals. Most important, she said, the children don’t start kindergarten behind. An unexpected benefit: The rate of students identified with learning disabilities has dropped by 50 percent.

Standard Five: Use Multiple Assessments To Strengthen Learning

Effective principals use multiple assessments to create experiences that strengthen student learning.

Assessing young children's learning—what they know and are able to do—is challenging. Standards-based education and accompanying assessments are taking hold in elementary and upper grades. Some state and local policymakers are recommending similar guidelines for pre-K classes as well.

Such guidelines can clarify expectations for school readiness. When they are extended, however, to standardized testing, principals need to provide a leading voice in explaining that skilled teachers are the best judges of pre-K growth and performance. Attempting to measure pre-K learning on a standardized exam for accountability purposes is not likely to yield useful information.

However, appropriate assessments used in classrooms by teachers and principals are a key ingredient in building high-quality pre-K programs and forging paths to students' intellectual growth. Assessments built around teachers' observations and analysis of students' work can help create a true continuum of early childhood learning that allows children to steadily build new skills and knowledge.

When principals with a strong understanding of early childhood development help teachers assess and make sense of children's learning on an ongoing basis, we see principals who:

- **Support teachers in using observation, records and portfolios of student work to guide students' growth**
- **Use data from assessments to identify learning barriers, design strategies to overcome them, plan new learning experiences and initiate discussions across grade levels**
- **Share information about program effectiveness between school systems and other providers**
- **Educate parents and report to them about their children's development and individual progress**



FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Spreading the Word on What Students Need

Columbia Elementary School, Rochester, Indiana

At Columbia Elementary School, principal Cheryl Downs starts working on preschoolers' education months before their first day of kindergarten.

"There are developmental windows that are closing before we can get our hands on our students," she said. "If we can get literacy awareness started before they get here, we have a better chance for a successful, happy learner."

For five years, Downs has informed area pre-K, Head Start and child care providers about the strengths and weaknesses revealed in spring assessments of the next fall's incoming kindergarten classes. The information on visual and motor skills, speech needs, vocabulary development, letter and sound awareness and language concepts is also used in the pre-K class the school operates.

After reviewing the results, Downs may urge local programs to beef up skills like the difference between being over, on or under an object or exposure to concepts like quantity or time.

Downs said sharing data from the spring assessments with parents and pre-K providers has been a big hit.

Sharing the wisdom gained from assessments drives teachers' work inside the school, too. Teachers study student work and test results to guide their work in removing barriers to learning.

"Our collective kindergarten data for five years indicates we are having more success and fewer failures in the primary grades. Our community is happy with that," Downs said. "We have seen results, and that has helped us raise our expectations."



Standard Six: Advocate for High-Quality, Universal Early Childhood Education

Effective principals advocate for universal opportunity for children to attend high-quality early childhood education programs.

Schools focused on building a strong continuum across the community to better educate young children, form strong connections to families, community organizations and individuals, and groups serving children and families. This web of connections expands the principal's role: Principals become community leaders, not just school leaders.

Principals who know the needs of young children in their communities can play a pivotal role in making the case for expanding high-quality pre-K programs. As leaders in education, principals are well-positioned to speak publicly on behalf of children; they can carry the message about the need for high-quality pre-K programs as a central focus of their advocacy.

In most school districts, schools that provide pre-K programs use a variety of federal, state and local funding. Many school districts use a portion of their federal Title I funds for pre-K programs or allow principals to allocate Title I funds at the site level for that purpose. Principals should become familiar with early childhood funding streams and policy issues to more effectively advocate for high-quality early childhood programs.

At the same time, principals should not underestimate the value of keeping local, state and federal officials abreast of children's needs and school successes. Government leaders are more likely to back programs when they know of ways they are achieving their goals and making a positive difference in communities.

When principals are effectively engaged in advocating for universal, high-quality early childhood education, we see leaders who:

- **Use the trusted voice of the principal to advocate for the needs of young children in their communities**
- **Become familiar with early childhood funding streams and policy issues**
- **Keep the public and policymakers focused on the need for full-day kindergarten for all children and the importance of high-quality pre-K in a continuum of learning that helps children and schools succeed**

FOCUS ON PRACTICE:

Pushing for Pre-K in Every Arena

Clays Mill Elementary, Scottsburg, Virginia

Sherman LaPrade has found many avenues to work toward high-quality pre-K programs during his 12 years as a principal in Virginia. He's helped elevate the issue as a priority in the state elementary principals association, he advocates for the issue in his district, and he's taken a keen interest in the pre-K programs in schools where he's worked.

"I'd love to see the day when [pre-K] programs are mandatory in every elementary school," he said.

That means that, while not every preschooler has access to pre-K in a public school, LaPrade believes that principals should be reaching out to pre-K programs in their neighborhood and community.

While he was principal at Bacon District Elementary School in Charlotte County, Virginia, LaPrade worked to connect the school's Head Start program, pre-K and kindergarten so that the three-year-olds who came to the school would be working toward consistent goals from the beginning.

As a board member for the Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, LaPrade has worked to expand interest and increase funding for high-quality early childhood programs.

Beyond advocacy and building quality in the programs that now exist, LaPrade encourages principals to open lines of communication with private child care providers and pre-K programs at churches and other venues to boost awareness of kindergarten expectations. "We need to improve children's readiness for school any way we can," he said.

The 112-page *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do* is a guidebook for those who care about getting all children off to the right start with high-quality early childhood education. Key elements of the guide include:

- **Principals' Voices.** No one speaks with more authority about school leadership than principals themselves. Principals are honest, compelling spokespeople about the challenges and opportunities in their profession. The comments throughout the guide come from a learning community of principals organized for the creation of the book.
- **Focus on Practice.** The guide shows that theories and concepts really work. Each chapter includes stories of real people in real schools that exemplify the ideas outlined in the guide. There are vignettes reflecting a wide geographic and demographic spectrum.
- **Questions for Further Reflection.** Each standards section contains a list of practical guiding questions principals can ask themselves or a small group, at faculty meetings or with grade- or subject-level teams. Self-assessments are included at the end of each section to help principals think about strengths and areas that need additional attention.
- **Tools and Resources.** There are a variety of tools to help principals improve and deepen their practice. Tools include definitions, Web pages and other useful tips. Each standards section concludes with a brief bibliography of key research and resources from NAESP. The book ends with a comprehensive bibliography.

To order *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, call 800-386-2377 or visit www.naesp.org.

State Associations

The National Association of Elementary School Principals is pleased to work in collaboration with our state affiliates in creating and supporting quality in schools and the principalship.

Alabama Association of Elementary School Administrators/Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools

Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals

Arizona School Administrators

Arkansas Association of Elementary School Principals

Association of California School Administrators

Colorado Association of Elementary School Principals/Colorado Association of School Executives

Connecticut Association of Schools

Delaware Elementary School Principals Association/DASA

Florida Association of Elementary School Principals/Florida Association of School Administrators

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Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities identifies six standards that NAESP believes principals should know and be able to do as leaders of early childhood learning communities. They are:

- **Embrace Early Childhood Learning**
- **Engage Families and Communities**
- **Promote Appropriate Learning Environments for Young Children**
- **Ensure Quality Teaching**
- **Use Multiple Assessments To Strengthen Learning**
- **Advocate for High-Quality, Universal Early Childhood Education**

NAESP



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