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Crossing the Boundaries: The Need to Integrate School Leadership and Early Childhood Education

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Recent Illinois legislation requires school principals in the state to be qualified to provide school leadership for children from preschool to grade twelve instead of kindergarten to grade twelve. Illinois is the first state to make such a change and may well serve as a model for change in school leadership preparation on a national level. The inclusion of the requirement for school leaders to provide leadership to preschool children is a welcome one. However, this legislation leaves open how such leadership should be conducted and how it should be developed in principal preparation programs. The silence of the legislation on these issues is a cause for concern because leadership preparation faculty and their candidates often lack substantive training in early education. The legislation should be strengthened—in law, in practice, or both—by drawing on three principles of high-quality early childhood education that emerge from educational research: (1) Early education influences later success in life and should be integrated into the school setting with such consequences in mind, (2) Early education should involve a developmental approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and (3) Educational practice should account for children’s psychological and sociocultural contexts.

Introduction

Since 2005, Illinois has engaged in a statewide effort to strengthen principal preparation.¹ Recent Illinois legislation P.A. 96-0903 requires school principals in Illinois to be qualified to provide school leadership for children from preschool to grade twelve instead of kindergarten to grade twelve. This legislation specifically requires the state to create a P-12 certificate for principals and requires school leadership programs to offer curricula that address student learning and school improvement from preschool through grade twelve.² This legislative change follows previous efforts to strengthen preschool education in Illinois. In 2006, Illinois became the first “preschool for all” state, mandating state support for preschool education for all children whose parents want it.³ As a result of that legislation, growing numbers of elementary schools are offering preschool programs, which drives a growing need to prepare school leaders accordingly.

¹ Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities, *School Leader Preparation: A Blueprint for Change* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2006); Illinois School Leader Task Force, *Report to the Illinois General Assembly* (Springfield, IL: Illinois School Leader Task Force, 2008).

² Educ-Grow Your Own Teachers Act, P.A. 96-0903, 105 ILCS 5 § 21 (2010).

³ Preschool for All Act, P.A. 94-1054, 105 ILCS 5 § 2 (2006).

The inclusion of the new requirement for school leaders to be certified for preschool through grade twelve is certainly a welcome one. If principals are to lead schools that include preschools, they should understand both the unique and familiar issues that preschool involves in relation to the later grades. However, the new requirement involves significant challenges as well.

P.A. 96-0903 leaves open how school leadership for preschool should be conducted and how it should be developed in leadership preparation programs. The silence of the legislation on these issues is a cause for concern because leadership preparation faculty and their candidates often lack substantive training in early education. The legislation should be strengthened—in law, in practice, or both—by drawing on three principles of high-quality early childhood education that emerge from educational research: (1) Early education influences later success in life and should be integrated into the school setting with such consequences in mind, (2) Early education should involve a developmental approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and (3) Educational practice should account for children’s psychological and sociocultural contexts.

While P.A. 96-0903 has immediate ramifications for principal candidates and school leadership training programs, it likely has broader implications as well. Illinois is the first state to make such a change and may well serve as a model for change in school leadership preparation on a national level. In 2001, the Wallace Foundation included Illinois as one of fifteen states in its State Action for Education Leadership Project, a national initiative managed by a consortium consisting of the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National Governors Association.⁴ Indeed, philanthropic organizations, including the Wallace Foundation and McCormick Foundation, played key roles in the passage of the legislation. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of Illinois’ approach to school leadership preparation for preschool is therefore critical for more facilitating more effective policymaking throughout the country.

This brief examines the new school leadership requirements of P.A. 96-0903. First, the strengths and potential pitfalls raised by the new legislation are analyzed. Second, this brief presents three principles, grounded in educational research, for improving the legislation. Finally, this brief concludes with concrete recommendations for strengthening school leadership programs to facilitate the preparation of principals who can more effectively lead schools that include preschool classes.

Analysis of the Principal Preparation Requirements of P.A. 96-0903

P.A. 96-0903 makes welcome changes to the requirements for school principal preparation programs, but the legislation should be clarified in key ways. On one hand, the legislation has several important strengths. It broadly demonstrates a recognition that strong preschool programs can provide important experiences for developing a child’s academic, social, and cognitive capacities. Moreover, the legislation reflects an understanding that school principals are critical for ensuring that preschool programs are implemented well; without the support of qualified and effective school leaders, it is far less likely that preschool programs can live up to their potential. At the same time, P.A. 96-0903 provides additional opportunities for early childhood

⁴ Wallace Foundation, “Second Phase State Initiative Education Leadership,” last modified November 21, 2003, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/view-latest-news/PressRelease/Pages/SecondPhaseStateInitiativeEducationLeadership.aspx>

educators to more fully integrate into the school system and situate their classroom activities within ongoing curriculum, instruction, and assessment experiences in the later grades.

On the other hand, the legislation raises significant challenges that could ultimately hamper its effectiveness. At first glance, the extension of leadership preparation “downward” to preschool from kindergarten may seem simple to many school principals and academic faculty who participate in principal preparation because it only involves working with one more grade level. However, going down to preschool from kindergarten is more complicated than just adding one more grade level to the workload of principals. Inclusion of preschool means learning about completely different developmental periods of childhood, working with teachers who hold different types of certificates, and learning about instructional approaches, curricula, and assessment practices that infrequently exist in upper grades.

Enacting and supporting school practices and policies across preschool and the other grades are accordingly difficult and present a challenge for school leaders who do not fully understand how to optimally connect early learning and later schooling experiences. When overseeing such policies and practices, school leaders may tend to take an approach grounded in an overly accountability-centered K-12 perspective or in a naively child-centered early education perspective. Because there are developmental differences across the grade levels, taking an approach grounded in a purely K-12 perspective would be inappropriate. Given national and state high-stakes testing requirements, principals particularly may take an approach narrowly tailored toward helping students perform well on these tests. However, educational research reveals that in the preschool years students instead should take an exploratory approach to the environment and have experiences fostering positive social-emotional and cognitive development.⁵ In contrast, if school leaders take an approach grounded in a naively child centered perspective across the entire curriculum, their approach may not involve sufficient attention to academics as appropriate for later grades. Yet, the law is silent on how principals should enact and support policies and practices across grades.⁶

Given the history of principal education, ongoing practices, and the lack of direction to principals and principal preparation programs in this law, it is in fact likely that the initial reaction will involve implementation of practices common in higher grades in preschool. This is the case for three reasons. First, the members of school leadership programs are often not familiar with the principles and practices of early childhood and may default to their experiences as professionals in elementary and/or secondary contexts when interpreting and implementing the changes in the new legislation. Second, national (and local) attention on high-stakes standardized testing pushes principals to adopt approaches commonly suited for later grades. Finally and most importantly from a policy perspective, the new leadership legislation is too vague to assist in the effective implementation of this change in leadership preparation. The law offers very few references to early childhood education and may lead to programs’ cursory, incomplete, and/or uninformed

⁵Artin Göncü, Barbara Abel, and Melissa Boshans, “The Role of Attachment and Play in Young Children’s Learning and Development,” in *International Handbook of Psychology in Education*, eds. Karen Littleton, Clare Wood, and Judith Klein Staarman (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010), 35-74; see also Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, eds., *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (3rd ed.) (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

⁶Educ-Grow Your Own Teachers Act, P.A. 96-0903, 105 ILCS 5 § 21 (2010).

efforts to design programs that honor what constitutes highly effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the early years.

A more complete articulation of the principal preparation requirements could come in the form of additional legislative text or rules implementing the legislation. Given the likelihood that principals will simply import practices common in higher grades into preschool, this clarification should not merely “add on” preschool but instead call for preparation programs to demonstrate that they are providing robust discussions and examples of theory, research, and practice in early childhood as part of their programs—in academic coursework and in early-childhood field experiences. While there may be many ideas of what constitutes robust discussion and examples of quality early childhood education, we present three critical principles grounded in high-quality educational research.⁷ These principles should serve not only to inform possible ways in which lessons from early education can be applied to primary and upper grades, but also as guidelines for the effective inclusion of fieldwork and coursework content for leadership preparation programs.⁸ In the following section, we present each principle as it is manifested in early childhood education research, followed by its expression in the current iteration of the legislation, and then its possibilities for inclusion in leadership programs and for all children at all levels in schools.

Recommended Early Childhood Principles

1. Quality early childhood education matters for subsequent academic and social success, and it must be fully integrated into the school setting with its consequences in mind.

Human development is a continuous process: early cognitive and social-emotional development relate to later development and success in life. Three decades of scholarship into the influence of early education on children’s later cognitive growth have shown that well implemented preschool programs have positive effects on children’s cognitive development, academic achievement, language growth, and problem-solving skills.⁹ Moreover, research on the influence of early education programs on children’s later social-emotional growth and adjustment has also reported pronounced results. For example, children who attend preschool programs that follow

⁷ The three principles are a condensed version of the original eight principals identified in a grant proposal supported by the McCormick Foundation in 2008 and later presented in: Lisa Hood, Erika Hunt, Steve Tozer, and Anthony Perone, “Leading for Learning: Preparing School Leaders to Align Early Childhood and K-12 Education Systems” (paper presented at UCEA Annual Convention, Pittsburgh, P.A.). Available: <http://leadershiplinc.illinoisstate.edu/LINC-principal/>

⁸ Hood, et al., “Leading for Learning: Preparing School Leaders to Align Early Childhood and K-12 Education Systems”.

⁹ Merle B. Karnes, A. M. Schwedel, and M. B. Williams. “A Comparison of Five Approaches for Education Young Children from Low-Income Homes,” in *As the Twig is Bent...Lasting Effects of Preschool Programs*, (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1983); Barbara T. Bowman, M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, eds., *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000); Douglas Powell, “Comparing Preschool Curricula and Practices: The State of Research,” in *Early Schooling: The National Debate*, eds. Sharon Kagan and Edward Zigler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Child Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000); Judy A. Temple and Arthur J. Reynolds, “Benefits and Costs of Investments in Preschool Education: Evidence from the Child-Parent Centers and Related Programs,” *Economics of Education Review* 26, no. 1 (2007): 126.

“cognitive developmental” approaches are less likely to participate in delinquent acts and more likely to graduate from high school.¹⁰

The principle of the significance of early experiences on later development and academic success should be used to interpret the section of the Illinois Administrative Code that requires principal “candidates [to] demonstrate the ability to understand and manage personnel, resources and systems on a school-wide basis to ensure adequacy and equity...”¹¹ Evidence of this competency should be demonstrated through investigation of the learning community, school budget, and mission. If principals understand the impact of quality early childhood programs on student outcomes as they make decisions regarding personnel, resources, and systems, they will be strongly prepared to lead and administer exemplary early childhood programs in their schools. Indeed, familiarity with early childhood funding sources, curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and professional development as determined by the School Board is paramount.

In addition, understanding the significance of preschool greatly increases the likelihood that principals will fully integrate early childhood programs into the life and culture of the school. A deep understanding of the consequences of preschool education is particularly important because fully supporting preschool requires the adoption and integration of major aspects of the early childhood program throughout the school, while being prepared to negotiate settlements on the points that are contrasting.¹² If principals cannot successfully facilitate the successful integration of preschool into the rest of the school in a way that is best suited to the community served by the school and reflects the school’s mission, the effectiveness of the preschool program and even the school more broadly may be in jeopardy. Not to address this range of issues in principal preparation, but to wait for “on the job” learning, will not serve children well in preschool or any subsequent grade.

2. A developmental approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment is imperative.

Acknowledging the continuity in human development implies that educational experiences should be provided to accord with children’s developing abilities. A close look at many preschool classrooms will quickly reveal this principle in practice: development in the preschool years is rapid, sporadic, and uneven. Development in the preschool years is also heavily influenced by children’s immediate environments and experiences. As a result, curriculum and instructional strategies in early childhood classrooms are often distinct from such strategies in other grade levels.¹³ In preschool classrooms, children are often exposed to an integrated curriculum that is not scripted. What is taught depends on children’s readiness, interests, and needs. In addition, educational assessment during preschool years is not separated from developmental assessment. Educational assessment is affected by a range of children’s

¹⁰ Lawrence L. Schweinhart, David P. Weikart, and Mary B. Lerner, “Consequences of Three Preschool Curriculum Models through Age 1,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 1, no. 1 (1986):15; Lawrence L. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart, “The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through Age 23,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, no. 2 (1997): 117.

¹¹ Illinois Administrative Code, Title 23 § 30.45, (2012).

¹² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (2nd Ed.), (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000).

¹³ Copple and Bredekamp, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*.

developmental abilities, such as language, perspective-taking, separation from the attachment figure, ability to relate to peers, and cognitive growth. Consideration of educational assessment in conjunction with developmental assessment requires a focus on describing children's changing capacity rather than a focus only on the outcomes of educational practice, such as test scores. As a result, great care should be taken with regard to the selection and use of assessment tools and the interpretation of the outcomes.¹⁴

A developmental approach to educational practice is generally reflected in the revised requirements for principal certification. However, integration of a developmental approach is limited to teaching and assessing students with special needs and English Language Learners. For example, specific reference is made to “modify[ing] curriculum and instructional strategies to meet the needs of each student” and with regard to assessment “identify[ing] and select[ing] assessment strategies and devices that are nondiscriminatory...and take into consideration the impact of disabilities, methods of communication, cultural background, and primary language on measuring knowledge and performance of students.”¹⁵

We applaud this attention to appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment for students with special needs and English Language Learners, but we believe it should be expanded in at least two major ways: First, principals should be knowledgeable about the experiences English Language Learners and children with special needs should have if they are to participate fully in the classroom. For example, principals need to know about how children receiving early intervention services transition into the school-system IEP. Without such knowledge and appropriate timing of services, as well as familiarity with state and federal laws, developmental continuity will be difficult to establish.¹⁶

Second, curriculum, instruction, and assessment should be viewed through a developmental lens not only for children with special needs and English Language Learners, but also for all children. Limiting the need for developmental practice to English Language Learners and children with special needs may lead to the marginalization of these children, as it may also result in the overlooking of typically developing children. While the literature in developmental and cultural psychology provides a wealth of information about the development of children from infancy to adolescence, we do not have a clear sense of how much principals know about developmental patterns and their relevance to curriculum and instruction. A developmental approach to education should guide principals to be familiar with development in preschool and all subsequent grades as well.

3. Educational practice should account for children's psychological and sociocultural contexts.

Early childhood professionals consider children's developmental contexts both in relation to their existing psychological capacities and the sociocultural institutions in which their

¹⁴ Bowman, Donovan, and Burns, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*.

¹⁵ Illinois Administrative Code, Title 23 § 30.45, (2012).

¹⁶ Ann Turnbull et al., *Families, Professionals and Exceptionality: Positive Outcomes through Partnerships and Trust*, 5th Ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2005); Marylin D. Friend and Lynn Cook, *Interactions: Collaborative Skills for School Professionals*, 5th Ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon., 2007).

development is embedded. Learning is a social and affective process as well as a cognitive process. As discussed above, early childhood programs incorporate an understanding of the social-emotional lives of young children (issues of attachment, separation, peer relations, home culture vs. school culture) into instructional strategies and classroom management, as well as into assessment.¹⁷ Incorporation of a focus on social-emotional development into elementary and high school will quickly reveal that older children's needs are, despite obvious differences, strikingly similar to preschoolers'. High school students also deal with phenomenon such as fear of failure or separation due to divorce, death, and incarceration. Unfortunately, however, social emotional issues of older children are often dealt with in a decontextualized manner either in the office of the school counselor or the principal.

Section 30.50 of the Illinois Administrative Code lists the coursework required by the candidates of principal preparation programs. It is striking to note that the only socio-emotional area that is listed as one that principals need to understand is bullying. While the attention to bullying and its deleterious effects is strongly needed, this very specific reference to one aspect of student socioemotional development is not enough. Principals should broadly account for students' socioemotional lives both in preschool and throughout later grades. School leaders must particularly be able to identify and address all types of socio-emotional phenomena that may potentially influence children's progress in the school, such as teenage peer relationships and sexual orientation.

Principal preparation programs similarly need greater attention to children's sociocultural contexts. Early childhood professionals understand children in relation to their home, family, and community, in addition to their school. The acclaimed *Organizing Schools for Improvement* study, culminating twenty years of educational research, identifies the school's relationships with family and community as one of five "essential supports" for learning in low income urban schools.¹⁸ It benefits teachers and administrators to understand how to assess community and family needs as well as how to partner with community agencies to provide needed care and services for young children and their families.¹⁹ Such work enhances a family's involvement in the education of their children.²⁰ Family involvement in education is particularly important because it is correlated with children's positive play interactions, persistence in learning, and increased vocabularies. Family involvement is also instrumental in transitioning children from home to school and from classroom to classroom in their early school years, and in leveraging fewer grade retentions, less school mobility, increased reading achievement, and a lower rate of special education placement.

The early childhood field's emphasis on family involvement should be used to expand the revised rules for principal preparation programs to include a focus on all students, including English Language Learners and those with special needs. The rules currently require principals

¹⁷ Göncü, et al., "The Role of Attachment and Play in Young Children's Learning and Development."

¹⁸ Anthony S. Bryk, et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Linda M. Fitzgerald and Artin Göncü, "Parent Involvement in Urban Early Childhood Education: A Vygotskian Approach," *Advances in Early Childhood Education and Day Care*, 5, 197-212.

²⁰ Angela Pons-Clifford and Artin Göncü, "Reexamining Family Involvement through the Family Perspective," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Denver, CO, April 2010).

to “proactively serve all students and their families with equity and honor and advocate on their behalf, ensuring an opportunity to learn and the wellbeing of each child in the classroom.”²¹ However, in order to work effectively with all children and their families, a principal needs to be familiar with the role families play in the education and educational outcomes of their children. The rules should accordingly be modified to reflect this expanded focus on all preschool students. This approach should also be extended upward through higher grades. Because family involvement and families’ perspectives on child development and education can strongly influence how students engage with academic work, students in higher grades would likely benefit from such an approach as well.²² When a principal works with families as partners, families and schools will mutually consider themselves as resources, engage in meaningful dialogue, and make decisions together.

Finally, the rules should be changed to ensure that principal preparation programs focus on peer relationships. Early childhood professionals generally acknowledge the significance of these relationships. Many early childhood programs accordingly provide opportunities for mixed-age and same-age peer interaction that promote cognitive, social-moral, and communicative development, and construction of peer culture in the classroom and in the school. Indeed, when older children are given the opportunity to be with preschool children in ways that can help them develop relationships, their interactions enhance the primary grade or middle school students’ learning about themselves, as well as help them to appreciate the ways in which their behaviors influence younger children.²³ Ultimately, these understandings can positively influence their own peer and teacher/student relationships.

Conclusion

Recent Illinois legislation requiring school principals in the state to be qualified to provide school leadership for children from preschool to grade twelve is an important step for improving schools and ultimately the lives of students. However, such legislation needs to be clarified and strengthened for it to be truly effective. In particular, this legislation and the rules interpreting it should reflect an understanding that incorporating preschool into the world of school leaders means more than including another grade level in the responsibilities of principals. Rather, this incorporation means rethinking the meaning of effective leadership. As the principles discussed in this brief indicate, leadership of schools that include preschools should account for more than specific academic expectations for each grade level as determined by common standards. Instead, school principals should flexibly consider children’s unique capacities to develop holistically within the world of schooling. Indeed, if school leaders thoughtfully apply such principles to preschool and later grades, the entire school may benefit.

²¹ Illinois Administrative Code, Title 23 § 30.45, (2012).

²² Charles M. Super and Sara Harkness, “The Developmental Niche: A Conceptualization at the Interface of Child and Culture,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 9, no. 4 (1986): 545; Norma Gonzalez, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practice in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005).

²³ Michael J. Karcher, “The Effects of Developmental Mentoring and High School Mentors’ Attendance on Their Younger Mentees’ Self-Esteem, Social Skills and Connectedness,” *Psychology in Schools* 42, no. 1 (2005): 65; Jean E. Rhodes, Jean B. Grossman, and Nancy L. Resch, “Agents of Change: Pathways through which Mentoring Relationships Influence Adolescents’ Academic Adjustment,” *Child Development* 71, no. 6 (2000): 1662-1671.

There are pitfalls, of course, in trying to be too explicit in legislating university curriculum. While states have a clear interest in regulating the quality of professional preparation for doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals, academic programs and course content are properly the province of academic faculty, who can respond quickly to, and contribute to, changes in the professional knowledge base without going to the legislature to do so. Illinois has taken a remarkable and important step in creating a new School Principal Certificate that acknowledges the centrality of early childhood education. The legislation presents considerable challenges to the leadership field if that field seeks to incorporate the knowledge base of Early Childhood Education effectively into the preparation of school leaders. While legislation can clarify some dimensions of what is needed in principal preparation programs, it is also true that such legislation may be neither necessary nor sufficient. What is also needed is for those who provide leadership preparation to engage one another in rising to the professional challenges that we have outlined in this brief. Strengthening the practice of leadership preparation is the “bottom line,” whether or not the legislation is adequate to guide it.

One important role new legislation can play, of course, is providing additional funding to help make excellent P-12 principals a reality and not just an ideal. Even modest funding could be quite effective if targeted at high leverage areas. First, such funding should be used to support leadership preparation programs in the work of creating more effective sequences of course work and internship structures that honor an inclusive P-12 focus on student learning and development to facilitate the needed program changes. Second, targeted funding should be used to actively recruit more early childhood educators into leadership roles so that early childhood teachers and teacher-leaders can bring their experiences as educators into their emerging roles as school leaders who see the value, possibilities, and potential of pushing up practices that have been delineated in this brief.

Third, infrastructure and tangible supports should be developed to effect the design and redesign of school leadership programs. In particular, state and/or philanthropic funding should be directed at developing the various resources needed for high-quality principal preparation programs, including literature on quality early childhood programs, professional development with and from early childhood educators and researchers, and opportunities for collaboration with other programs within the district, state, and/or nation. Such collaboration is crucial for helping programs share best practices and developing networks of high-quality principal programs. In fact, the McCormick funded principal preparation program redesign at Illinois State University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University Chicago are all existing examples of this kind of support. Universities and funding sources (including the Illinois State Board of Education) should be encouraged to do more of this kind of ground-breaking support work. Fourth, funding should be devoted to supporting research on the intersections of early childhood education and leadership. Moreover, funding should be devoted to supporting research on the outcomes of a P-12 learning continuum on children’s learning and development across multiple developmental domains and content areas. Knowledge generated by such research could be directly used to support and enhance the new legislation.

If the “new normal” in leadership preparation is to take early childhood education seriously, well-crafted legislation is only the first step. Ensuring that such legislation is implemented well

to transform P-12 and higher education institutions is critical for providing children with the learning opportunities they deserve.

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