A tale of two pre-k leaders: How state policies for center directors and principals leading pre-k programs differ, and why they shouldn't [1]

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Introduction

Weekdays start early for Amy Lobo, a child care center director outside of Baton Rouge, LA. At around 5 a.m., Lobo starts rearranging staff schedules for the day as she receives text messages from employees who call in sick or say they will be late to work. Her center, which serves over 200 children ranging in age from six weeks to 12 years, is open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day. Once she arrives at the center, her morning is spent checking in with staff, greeting families, and observing classrooms. A new pre-K curriculum was donated to her center last year and she is teaching her staff how to implement it.

Lobo has been working in child care as a teacher, assistant director, and director for more than 20 years. Yet, to qualify for this job in Louisiana, she was only required to have six semester hours in early childhood education or 90 clock hours of training with three years of experience working in a child care center. She happens to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, however, because she used to teach pre-K in a state where it was a requirement. Between her higher education and extensive teaching experience, she feels that she "knew everything about children before becoming a center director but didn't know anything about management." Yet managing the business is how she spends a significant portion of her time. Much of her day is spent in her office dealing with scheduling, incident reports, and "lots and lots of paperwork." Lobo takes great pride in her work and wishes people understood that "early childhood is just such an important part of children's lives." She says, "sometimes I think people just think it's a daycare. But they're learning."

About 1,200 miles north, just outside of Minneapolis, MN, Joey Page starts his day in a similar way. He arrives at Richfield STEM Elementary, where he is principal, by 6:30 a.m. so that he has plenty of time to figure out any changes in staffing for the day, check in with teachers, and deal with last minute problems before his 780 students arrive. Throughout the day, Page tries to spend as much time in classrooms as possible, both doing formal teacher evaluations and just popping in to read stories with the students. He says, "outside of safety and security of the building, instructional leadership is my number one priority." With an assistant principal who helps to cultivate a positive school climate and an instructional coach who works to implement standards and curriculum, Page has the supports he needs to spend a good portion of his day connecting with students.

Page has been a principal for 13 years and has been at Richfield STEM Elementary for seven. He started as a third and fourth grade teacher, and gradually took on leadership roles at his former schools, such as working as the school's media director, thus gaining informal experience. Formally, he earned his principal credential in Minnesota and then pursued a doctorate in educational school leadership. He says it is the "blending of formal preparation, the mentoring, [and] the opportunities from delegation" that prepared him well for his job.

Both Lobo and Page are responsible for overseeing pre-K classrooms. She has 41 pre-K students and he has 75. Each day they work to ensure that the young children in their charge are provided highquality learning opportunities. But even for two children living in the same neighborhood, pre-K can look markedly different depending on where the classroom is. Some children attend pre-K in a child care center like Lobo's that they have been going to since they were infants, while others attend public pre-K in an elementary school building like Page's where they will be until they are 10 or 11. Both settings have the potential to provide threeand four-year-olds with the high-quality, strong foundation they need to succeed throughout their schooling. Well-prepared and highly competent staff make a big difference and this includes program leaders with the right expertise.

While workdays for Lobo and Page may look similar and their programs are serving some of the same kinds of students, the state policies and standards that establish requirements for their roles look very different.

In order to understand these differences, New America conducted a scan of state policies on leader preparation requirements, licensure, professional learning, and compensation to shed light on the current expectations for center directors and principals, identify areas for improvement in state policy, and highlight states that are leading on leaders. We found that requirements are not only inconsistent across states, but also that disparate requirements for center directors and principals lead to different challenges for each. Research shows that principals too often come into their jobs without a strong understanding of how young children learn, and center directors tend to have

limited training in instructional leadership.1 State policies are doing little to address this. Despite the similarities in their jobs, center directors are held to much lower standards and given less support than elementary school principals.

This report explains our methodology, discusses each of the indicators collected, reports findings, and provides recommendations for steps states can take to better support early childhood education leaders. In this report, we define pre-K as any early care and education program serving three- and four year-olds, whether publicly or privately funded, whether located in public schools or community based settings.

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