

A child's hands are shown playing with wooden blocks on a light-colored surface. The child is wearing a white t-shirt with a cartoon animal and the word 'TRONG' visible. The blocks are scattered around, some stacked and some lying flat. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

Building Blocks That Matter

**A Field Guide for Early
Learning Leadership**
*A practical companion for
leaders shaping meaningful
learning experiences in PreK–3
— before, during, and after the
work gets hard.*

Jessica Cabeen Ed.D.

Why the Early Years Deserve Our Best Leadership

Early learning leadership is often underestimated.

It's treated as simpler, softer, or somehow less demanding than leadership at later grade levels. In reality, it may be the most consequential leadership work in a school system. The decisions made in PreK–3 quietly shape everything that follows—how students see themselves as learners, how safe they feel taking risks, and whether school becomes a place of curiosity or compliance.

Building Blocks That Matter is not about doing more.

It's about doing what matters.

This short field guide is designed to support early learning leaders who want clarity without overload and steadiness without shortcuts. Inside, you'll find grounded reflections, practical leadership moves, and questions that help you pause, realign, and move forward with intention.

Use it as:

- a pre-read or takeaway connected to a workshop
- a conversation starter for leadership teams or PLCs
- a personal field guide you return to when leadership feels noisy or heavy

You don't need to read it all at once.

Start where you are.

Try one move.

Then another.

That's how lasting impact is built.



The Mindsets That Shape Everything

Dream Big for Our Littlest Learners

The Challenge: In many schools, early learning has been pulled in two opposing directions. On one side, rising academic pressure pushes kindergarten toward becoming the new first grade.

On the other hand, outdated assumptions underestimate what young learners are capable of doing.

Leaders are often caught in the middle—trying to raise expectations while protecting developmentally appropriate practice.

The Strategy:

Dreaming big for our littlest learners means rejecting false binaries.

Rigor and joy can coexist.

High expectations and play are not opposites.

Belief is the starting point. When leaders truly believe that all young learners can grow, learn, and thrive—with the right supports—systems begin to align around that belief.

Try This Tomorrow

- Spend one full morning observing learning through a student's eyes.
- Ask your team: *What does success really look like for a five-year-old?*
- Identify one practice that reflects compliance more than learning—and reexamine it.

In Practice

In schools where leaders anchor decisions to belief rather than fear, classrooms feel purposeful and calm. Teachers are empowered to design learning experiences that stretch students without rushing them.

Reflect and Refine

- Where might your expectations be unintentionally capped?
- What belief about early learners needs to be named—and challenged?



Lead From Your Feet, Not Your Seat

The Challenge:

Early learning leaders are often pulled toward paperwork, meetings, and compliance tasks. Visibility becomes optional rather than essential.

But young learners—and their teachers—need presence more than perfection.

The Strategy:

Leadership in early learning is relational work. Being visible, accessible, and grounded in the school's daily rhythm builds trust and credibility faster than any memo ever could.

Leading from your feet means being where learning is happening.

Try This Tomorrow

- Schedule daily classroom walk-throughs focused on connection, not evaluation.
- Greet students and families at arrival—even briefly.
- Step into a classroom to teach, model, or support when needed.

In Practice

When leaders are present in classrooms and hallways, they develop shared language with staff and students. Leadership becomes something people experience, not just observe.

Reflect and Refine

- Where do you spend most of your leadership time?
- What message does that send?



Jessica Cabeen

PRINCIPAL IN BALANCE

The Systems That Sustain Learning

Align Learning Without Killing Joy

The Challenge:

Early learning environments can drift toward either over-structure or under-alignment. Both undermine student growth.

Without shared outcomes, students experience inconsistency.

Without joy, engagement fades.

The Strategy:

Alignment doesn't mean sameness. It means clarity.

Clear learning targets allow teachers to design playful, engaging experiences that still move students forward together.

Try This Tomorrow

- Review one learning target across grade levels for clarity and consistency.
- Ask teachers how they assess learning during play.
- Identify one unnecessary practice you can remove.

Reflect and Refine

- Where might alignment be confused with control?

More Heart, Less Hammer

The Challenge: Behavior systems in early learning are often reactive rather than instructional.

The Strategy: Social-emotional learning is not an add-on. It is the curriculum.

Try This Tomorrow

- Audit how often adults model regulation.
- Replace punitive responses with teaching moments.



The Relationships That Make It Work

Families as Partners, Not Problems

The Challenge:

Family engagement often centers on fixing issues rather than building trust.

The Strategy: Partnership begins with curiosity.

Try This Tomorrow

- Share learning stories, not just updates.
- Invite families to understand the why behind practices.

Adults Learn the Way Students Do

The Challenge:

Professional learning often contradicts how we expect students to learn.

The Strategy: If we want risk-taking, creativity, and reflection from students, adults need the same conditions.

Try This Tomorrow

- Redesign one staff meeting to mirror student-centered learning.



Loving the Sandbox

Early learning leadership is not about perfection.
It's about presence.

It's about choosing belief over fear, alignment over noise, and relationships over quick fixes.

The building blocks that matter are often quiet.
But over time, they create schools where students feel safe to learn—and adults feel grounded enough to lead.

Return to this guide when leadership feels heavy.
Try one move. Then another.

.....here if you need anything.

Jessica



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