

An abstract graphic consisting of several overlapping, flowing, leaf-like shapes in various colors including yellow, purple, orange, and light blue. The shapes are arranged in a way that suggests movement and transition, with some shapes appearing to flow from the top left towards the bottom right.

TRANSITION BEST PRACTICES

AUGUST 19 2013

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1 THE TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN: RESEARCH AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Young children's development is intricately linked and dependent upon their relationships and experiences in many different settings—with family, in preschool, school, and the broader community. When reliable connections are developed between these settings, children can journey to and from each environment buoyed by an effective system designed to meet their unique developmental needs. These connections are the essence of kindergarten transition planning and help to pave the way to kindergarten and sustained success in school and life.

Fairfax Futures, Paving the Way to Kindergarten

Introduction

Transitions matter—they are an important developmental milestone for young children and their families. When they are managed effectively, they alleviate conditions that could deter both social-emotional and academic progress. Given that early social performance and educational achievement are strong predictors of later school success, ensuring children make a strong start when they enter kindergarten is an important issue that should be a key element in any efforts to address school readiness and ongoing academic progress.

Yet, in spite of what is known about the importance of successful transitions, too many children still struggle as they make the move to kindergarten. In a study of kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's ability to transition successfully, teachers expressed a number of concerns that indicated a need for more effective approaches to preparing and supporting children's entrance to kindergarten. **On average, teachers reported only 50% of their new students were making a smooth transition, about a third were having some difficulty and nearly 20% were experiencing serious difficulties that impacted both children and teachers** (Rimm-Kaufmann et al, 1999).

Why is transition important?

Starting school provides many opportunities and challenges. As children and their families make the move to kindergarten they must negotiate numerous changes including new rules, new physical settings, new adults and peers, new routines and expectations, and new ways of learning (Dockett and Perry, 2005; Fabian, 2007; Kagan, 2008). The ease with which children make the move to kindergarten depends to some degree on the amount of discontinuity they have to negotiate (Margetts, 2002). When transitions adequately prepare children for change and effectively reduce disparities, the odds of making a successful adjustment increase. **Research and experience continue to show long-term positive outcomes that can be linked to the quality and effectiveness of children's transition experiences.** Most frequently cited outcomes include:

- + Better behavioral and social-emotional adjustment
- + Higher academic achievement
- + Increased family involvement

Transitions have the greatest impact on low-income children and families. Positive outcomes associated with effective transitions have been shown to be greater for low-income and other vulnerable populations. To that end, ensuring that low-income children and families have access to high-quality and effective transition practices is vitally important in helping to close persistent readiness and achievement gaps and ensuring ongoing school success (Ahtola et al, 2011; Cooper and Crosnoe, 2007; LoCasale et al, 2008; Schulting et al, 2005; Ramey and Ramey, 1994).

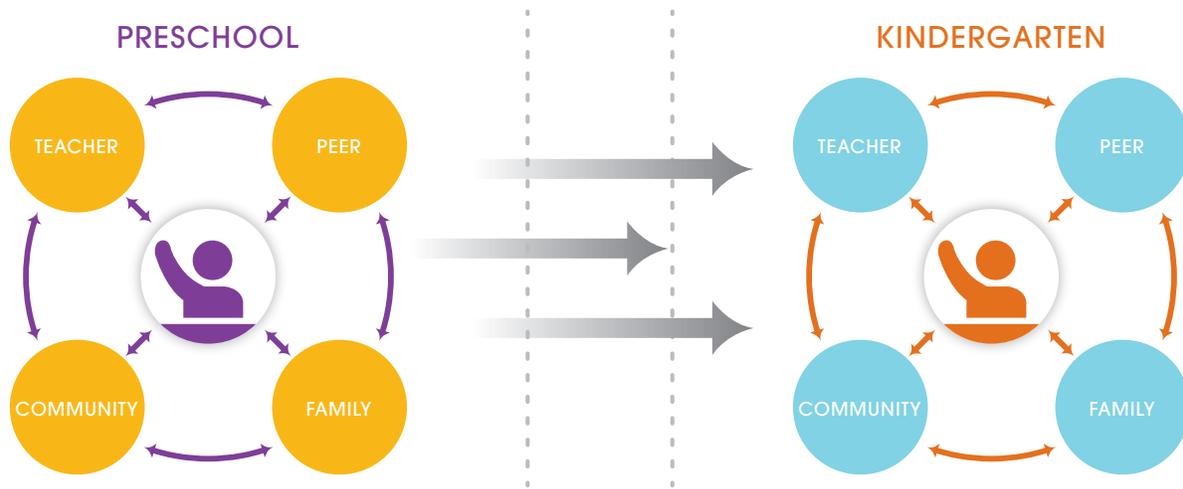
What is effective transition and what does it involve?

Understanding and consensus regarding what constitutes an effective transition has evolved over time. Early notions growing out of the work of the National Education Goals Panel defined transition narrowly—as an issue of kindergarten readiness—and focused almost exclusively on the child’s ability to meet new kindergarten expectations. This view assumed that the primary objective of any effort to improve the transition process was to ensure the child was ready to succeed in the new school setting. Recently, both researchers and practitioners have shifted away from that notion, adopting a broader view of transition as an issue of child, family, and school readiness where:

- + Preschool and elementary educators (teachers and administrators) are active and equal partners and participants.
- + Parents are fully engaged in the process.
- + Communities contribute needed supports and resources.
- + Transition activities take place over time spanning preschool and the early months of kindergarten (Pianta, 1999; Kraft-Sayre and Pianta, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000; Vogler et al, 2008).

This approach is best illustrated through the “developmental-ecological” model developed by Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta in 2000. In this model, which has been widely adopted today, **multiple learning environments and stakeholders are involved in ongoing and evolving interactions that include children, families, communities, schools, and classrooms.** In this way, transition becomes a process that is “shared and experienced simultaneously by all institutions and persons” (Geiser, Horwitz and Gerstein, 2013, p.2).

The ecological and dynamic model of transition



From Kraft-Sayre, M. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). *Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: Linking children, families, and schools*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development & Learning.

The ecological-developmental model is based on the premise that effective transition planning is ongoing and evolving, it is not a single point-in-time project comprised of one or two low-intensity activities for children when they start kindergarten. Nor is transition a one-size-fits-all experience (Kraft-Sayre and Pianta, 2000; Bohan-Baker and Little, 2004). Rather, activities and experiences must be varied, individualized, and offered frequently in order to meet the highly contextualized needs and characteristics of children and families; they take place in both preschool and kindergarten classrooms and are coordinated across time and learning settings.

Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2003) suggest five guiding principles that inform this developmental-ecological approach and create the basis for effective transition practices. These include:

1. BUILD NEW RELATIONSHIPS

Transitions will be most effective when they are aimed at enhancing linkages and cooperation between people and settings. To that end, successful transitions begin with building relationships among key stakeholders. This first step in developing effective transition approaches is important because positive relationships represent the foundation on which effective practices will be planned and implemented. It is important however,

to remember that relationships take time to develop and starting with a few small steps is often the key to long-lasting partnerships. In addition, these relationships when successfully established can be an important resource for children - helping them to build a bridge between their families, preschool, and school that leads to better adjustment when they start school (Dockett and Perry, 2001; Glazier, 2001; Kagan and Neuman, 1998; Pianta and Cox, 2002; Pianta, 1999).

2. PROMOTE CONTINUITY ACROSS PRESCHOOLS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Children are more likely to make a strong start and be successful in kindergarten when intentional efforts have been made to create more consistency in settings, experiences, and expectations across preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Indeed, the key to effective transitions may be less about bridging gaps and more about ensuring continuity in some basic elements that characterize all good approaches to teaching and learning for children in early learning programs and the early grades. Increasing continuity will require preschool and school administrators and teachers working together to explore ways to create better coordination across their two systems.

A growing body of research is calling for a new system of teaching and learning that spans the years from preschool through third grade (PK-3). While a discussion of this approach is beyond the scope of this report, it is important to note that transitions are considered to be one important element of a larger, intentional effort to create a more seamless and continuous set of experiences that includes the alignment of standards, curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments across the preschool to third grade continuum. A focus on creating effective transitions can often serve as a an important first step in creating fully aligned and coordinated PK-3 systems.

3. FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS

The role of families in supporting children’s transition is especially important. An equal exchange of information and an opportunity to share concerns and insights helps build a foundation for successful transitions for both families and children. When built on strengths and assets, these exchanges will be most useful to teachers and parents alike and will support families’ ongoing engagement in their children’s learning. Approaching families as resources with special knowledge of their children is the most effective way to engage parents and can be especially helpful in working with vulnerable children and families.

4. TAILOR PRACTICES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Transition planning must include an intentional and well-informed focus on identifying and

addressing the individual needs and strengths of the child, family, school, and community.

For this reason, any transition approach that is not designed to be flexibly applied across a wide variety of conditions will not successfully support children’s transition. Rigidly designed transition programs are likely to result in certain needs being neglected and other efforts being wasted by addressing needs that are not there.

TAILORING PRACTICES TO MEET INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

During the Transition Team meetings, parents strongly expressed that a “one size fits all” approach could not fully envelop the needs of their communities. After reviewing pages of nationally suggested transition activities—which included forums, tours, workshops, and other orientation activities that were deemed too impersonal—several parents pointed out that none of the items listed met their families’ needs, nor were they the types of activities they would enjoy. Per parent suggestions, the school organized a free haircut/hair braiding day before the start of the school year for new kindergarten students, which also offered teacher presence during the waiting time. This fostered a chance for families and teachers to meet in an informal setting. Additionally, a parent suggested including the lone pizza shop that delivered to an isolated public housing community in their advertising efforts for kindergarten registration. As enrollment numbers soared, parents responded that the advertisements on pizza boxes were the biggest reason they were aware of registration dates. It became clear that parent engagement in the school had begun (Ready Freddy Kindergarten Club).

5. ESTABLISH COLLABORATIVE CONNECTIONS

Transitions must engage a diverse set of stakeholders who are willing to establish common goals and share responsibility for outcomes. The nexus of these connections, as illustrated in the ecological-developmental model discussed above, are preschools and elementary schools, families, and community. Through these multiple connections, transitions can be more intentionally planned and focused on outcomes, and ultimately become embedded into ongoing program practice and school operations.

Creating connections across programs, people, and practices can be challenging, often requiring those with differing expectations and limited understanding of each other’s realities to come together to find solutions. However, when connections are successful and built on strong relationships and real collaborations, the result is more continuity in children’s lives, more effective teachers and administrators, and more families equipped with the information they need to help prepare their child for school.

Following is a discussion of four key connections that drive the development of an effective transition plan. Best practices for implementing and using these connections for successful planning are supported through research and experience.

Four key connections to consider when planning transitions

1. CHILD-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

The goal of establishing child-to-school connections is to familiarize children with the new school setting and the people in it. Children starting school bring with them a wide variety of experiences and understandings. To ensure each child makes a successful transition, activities must be tailored to address differences. Desired outcomes for children include increased abilities to make a quick adjustment, be actively engaged in learning, and to steadily continue their development and academic progress (Rous, et al, 2006).

In making the move to school, children need to:

- + Be actively engaged in preparing for transition
- + Participate in transition-focused activities during preschool and the early months of kindergarten
- + Be able to explore and try out their new environment before they start kindergarten
- + Practice some of the skills they will need in kindergarten
- + Meet their new teacher
- + Connect with peers and use peer interaction as a learning tool

Research supports the importance of providing multiple transition activities that occur both before and after children start kindergarten. LoCasale-Crouch et al (2008) found that increasing the number of transition activities children were involved in during preschool resulted in kindergarten teacher reports that those children were more school ready when they started kindergarten. Transition activities provided at the beginning of the kindergarten year—particularly kindergarten visits and other high-intensity opportunities designed to increase familiarity and comfort in the new setting—have been linked to higher achievement scores, decreased levels of anxiety, improved teacher-child relationships, and quicker adjustment to school over the kindergarten year (Schulting, et al, 2005; Ahttola, 2011; LoCasale-Crouch, et al 2008).

Research also demonstrates that providing **high intensity, high frequency activities has the greatest impact on children in low-income families**. It has been shown however, that these same practices are used less often in communities with higher poverty levels thus leaving a “potentially positive resource untapped” (Pianta et al, 1999; Schulting et al, 2005 as cited in LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2012).

These same studies have actually found that higher income children and families, whose levels of achievement and involvement are not significantly increased by transition practices, tend to receive the greatest number of experiences in contrast to their low-income peers who are most at risk and who stand to make the biggest gains.

The positive impact of transition practices on low-income children and families is striking, given that these practices are not tailored to this high-risk population. One can only imagine the impact of transition practices designed to address the multiple barriers to involvement and achievement faced by low-income children and families.

Schulting, 2008 in Evaluation Exchange

In a follow-up to their 2005 study, Schulting (2009) studied the impact of home visiting as a high-intensity transition strategy for use with low-income families and children. Findings indicate that when home visits were conducted by kindergarten teachers at the beginning of the year, children’s work habits and teacher child relationships were positively impacted. Findings for non-English speaking children and families were most significant. Children were reported to have higher academic motivation and engagement. For teachers, the experience had a positive effect on their beliefs and attitudes such as an increased understanding of the diverse needs and cultural differences, greater willingness to reach out to parents, and more positive connections with both parents and children (accessed online July 14, 2013 at <http://dukespace.lib.duke.edu>).

One important and hopefully self-evident aspect of planning effective transition activities for children is that **the more actively children are engaged, the more likely it is they will develop the skills, understanding, and attitudes they need to be successful**. As discussed above, activities and experiences during the preschool year provide children an opportunity to prepare for and try out their notions of what kindergarten will be. These can occur through special events such as visiting the kindergarten classroom, special activities such as reading books or singing songs about transition, or by integrating transition themes into routine classroom activities such as dramatic play and art. These “priming events” (Corsaro and Molinari, 2005) offer a way for children to construct bridges across different settings. Through

this “interpretive reproduction,” children shape their evolving sense of what comes next.

Through these and other preschool activities, teachers can gain a better sense of children’s feelings and ideas about starting kindergarten. Understanding children’s point of view or “listening” to children in this way will likely reveal they have a very different set of priorities and concerns than those of adults. Finding ways to understand children’s perspectives and providing them with an opportunity to communicate their feelings and ideas can be a powerful way to better understand and to meet the needs of children during transition. In *Listening to Children: The Mosaic Approach* (Clark and Moss, 2001) and in the *Starting School* research project (Dockett and Perry, 2005) authors used observations, listening, and dialogue to gain insights into the children’s concepts and interpretations and based on that information were able to develop programs that better met the needs of the children. In addition to providing a window for others into children’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions, “listening” to children is also a powerful tool for helping to build a child’s own sense of agency and self-reliance (Vogler, et al, 2008).

2. FAMILY-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

The transition period involves not only how children adjust to kindergarten but also how families and schools interact and cooperate. It is not just the child who makes the transition. Families are also involved in transition and to best use family resources for a child’s education requires attention to how schools and families can form partnerships during the transition period.

NCEDL, 2002, p.2

Engaging and supporting families as active partners in the transition process is at the heart of planning effective transitions. Successful transition into kindergarten will depend to some degree on how well families understand the culture of the school and on their own feelings about the school. Parents, like children, experience many changes when their children start kindergarten. Challenges families may face as they adjust to the public school environment include the following:

- + At a time when families need more information and interaction, teachers are likely to be less available and communication becomes more formalized.
- + For many low-income families, their own school experiences may have been negative, and their level of trust and comfort may be so low that they are reluctant to become engaged with the school.

When both sending and receiving institutions are aware of these and other potential challenges, pre-emptive steps can be taken to ensure parents have all the supports they need to be involved (CCCH, 2008). Again, it is important to remember that transition activities must move beyond traditional school orientations and single events in order to be most effective for families.

The goals of family-to-school connections are to:

- + Make families equal contributing partners in planning and supporting children's transitions
- + Provide opportunities for families to share information about their children
- + Provide learning opportunities and information about kindergarten routines and expectations
- + Build parent capacity to advocate for their children and to support learning at home

To ensure parents can effectively support transitions they need to:

- + Learn about and visit the new school and meet the staff
- + Understand policies and procedures and register their children on time
- + Learn ways to support learning at home—in preschool and kindergarten
- + Connect with other families
- + Understand the importance of transition and what it means to be school ready
- + Link with parent leaders in elementary school to sustain or establish leadership roles

Strong evidence for the importance of family engagement in effective transition practices has been accumulating over the last several decades. Early evidence comes from the Head Start National Transition Initiative (1986) which funded a number of programs to implement comprehensive transition models. **Findings indicated that activities directed specifically at engaging and informing parents were most strongly associated with children's positive performance and adjustment.** These activities included kindergarten visits, training for parents regarding their rights, creation of parent support groups, and provision of parent home activities (LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2012). In their 2010 study of parents' perspectives on transition to kindergarten, Matsch, et al reported that what families valued most was information that helped them navigate the logistics of transition, helped them understand what the new kindergarten setting would be like, and provided them with concrete ways to be involved in the transition process.

Research previously cited in this report discussed the important links between effective transitions and children’s success. Many of these same studies reported links to increased family engagement as well (Schulting et al, 2005; LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2008). In both studies, researchers concluded that the use of more parent-focused transition activities, including having parents visit kindergarten classrooms, was associated with increased family involvement. Again, as noted earlier, these practices are less often available to low-income, vulnerable families and their children (Pianta et al, 1999; Schulting, 2005). In the Schulting (2009) study on the impact of home visiting, the author reported positive impacts on families as well as children—especially for non-English speaking families who found that the home visits reduced language barriers, increasing the likelihood that parents would be more engaged with the school.

3. SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

Connections between preschool programs and elementary schools will only be successful when both **teachers and leaders are willing to “cross boundaries” to learn about each other’s work** and are equally engaged in and committed to the transition planning process.

The goals of creating school-to-school connections are to:

- + Provide opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate and collaborate
- + Engage leadership as collaborative partners to provide flexibility and support
- + Develop mechanisms to share and exchange information and data
- + Support increased alignment and continuity across preschool and kindergarten settings

TEACHERS

Providing opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to connect with each other to support children’s transitions increases the likelihood that children will make better adjustments, families will be more informed and engaged, and teachers themselves will be better equipped and prepared to meet the needs of children (Geisler et al, 2013). When preschool and kindergarten teachers can communicate, share information, learn about and visit each-other’s programs, and even work together, they are better able to think about and develop strategies that will be effective in supporting both individual and groups of children and their families.

Preschool and kindergarten classroom teachers need the flexibility to be able to work together and to co-develop resources and activities. Teachers play a central role in ensuring that what is planned gets done. It is also at the classroom level where teachers working together across preschool and kindergarten settings can implement practices that create more continuity in day to day experiences for children. To that end, carving out dedicated times for preschool and kindergarten teachers to work and learn together is a critically important ingredient in planning successful transitions.

Recent studies have begun to examine the impact of specific transition activities on child and family outcomes. These new studies are setting the course for the next wave of investigation into best practices for effective transitions. What they are finding is that preschool-kindergarten teacher communication and collaboration is key to effective implementation and leads to the greatest outcomes for children.

In their 2008 study of transition practices, LoCasale-Crouch et al found that the activity that mattered most for promoting school readiness was an **opportunity for preschool and kindergarten teachers to talk together and to share information on their work and on the children in their classrooms.** A similar study of transition practices and their impact on child outcomes found that among a range of activities implemented, the strongest predictors of success – and also the most under-utilized practices - were cross-level (preschool and kindergarten teacher) information sharing about curricula and providing written information on children’s development and learning plans (Ahtola et al, 2011).

These findings have important implications for children’s long-term school success and will hopefully help to drive changes in practices commonly used to support transition. However, to date, there is little evidence to demonstrate teacher-to-teacher or preschool-to-school communication is commonly used as part of a transition planning strategy (LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2008). Indeed, some studies report that for kindergarten teachers, transition practices tend primarily to include activities that do not take them outside the classroom or school (Pianta et al, 1999; Schulting et al, 2005).

With more preschool programs being located in elementary school buildings, opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to connect have increased (Vecchiotti, 2003). Experience however, has shown that proximity does not necessarily translate into relationships. In many cases where programs are co-located, teachers and even administrators report having little or no contact with or understanding of one another’s programs. Anecdotal

reports have demonstrated however, when programs are co-located, it is possible to engage in a number of low-cost, low-risk practices that can result in better understanding and connections across programs. Activities such as classroom visits by preschool and kindergarten teachers, attendance at each other's events, preschool children visiting kindergarten classes and assemblies, and first grade students visiting preschool classrooms to read to children—all were successful and easy to manage (Geiser et al, 2013).

One of the most effective ways to ensure strong and effective teacher-to-teacher connections is to **provide opportunities for shared professional development among preschool and kindergarten teachers**. Most effective practices include joint training, cross-program classroom visitations, the creation of learning communities and on-line information exchanges, coaching, and leadership development. The key to success is creating a variety of opportunities for teachers to stay connected over the course of the year. In Seattle, Washington for example the public schools offered a series of training sessions as part of a Coaching Institute. Sessions focused on the core habits of teaching and learning for preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers and participants created a tool to promote peer observation and instructional practice discussions (NLC, 2012).

While finding common times and providing additional classroom supports to enable preschool and kindergarten teachers to participate in shared training and other professional development activities can be a challenge—and is often cited as a barrier to using joint professional development as a transition strategy—the pay-off can be great, and with some creative problem solving, it is possible to find ways of bringing teachers together on-site or digitally.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS WORKING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

Achieving positive outcomes by bringing teachers together can be achieved through relatively limited interactions. In one program, teachers met together four times over the course of the year to exchange information and work together to find ways to align children's experiences as they moved from preschool to kindergarten. Exchanges were practical focusing on those things that might be confusing to children ranging from different bathroom signs to different expectations and emphasis on certain skills. In a relatively short number of exchanges, teachers were able to develop strategies that resulted in positive outcomes for children, families, and the teachers themselves. These included an increase in family participation in transition activities, more consistency between settings with regard to routines and expectations, improved awareness of community needs and gaps in services. Preschool teachers reported feeling that their knowledge of families and children was valued and appreciated and kindergarten teachers reported they felt children were more socially and academically prepared (Smart Beginnings, 2011 as cited in NCQTL).

SCHOOL AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

The role of leadership in facilitating and supporting transitions cannot be underestimated. **Preschool program directors and school and district administrators must be equally engaged and mutually committed to finding ways to improve transition.** School and program leaders have the authority and ability to adjust policies and procedures to enable more coordination across settings.

Educational leaders who understand and appreciate the importance of the early years for later school success and who recognize that transitions are an important part of ensuring learning gains are sustained are best prepared to support new policies and practices that increase school to school connections. As with teachers, when program directors, school principals, and district administrators familiarize themselves with each other's programs, policies, and expectations, they are better able to create plans that support and recognize the assets each can bring to the table. **Program directors and school administrators can play three key roles** in helping to build continuity across learning systems and support successful transitions (Kauerz and Coffman, 2013):

- + Demonstrate visible leadership
- + Foster teamwork and cross-systems collaboration
- + Provide instructional leadership

District administrators play an important role by establishing policies and supporting local school flexibility in setting priorities for activities that support and enable more collaborative work across schools and preschools. Requiring the development of transition plans or establishing policies that facilitate the exchange of data across preschools and schools are two examples of how district leaders can support transition. School principals and preschool program directors can lead by example by forging relationships and agreements that link programs and schools and enable teachers to work more effectively together. For example, they can alleviate logistical and other barriers to creating time for preschool and kindergarten teachers to participate in joint training and other professional learning opportunities. They can support the development of preschool-school transition teams, and they can become actively involved in community-based efforts such as early learning councils to assure that transition efforts are part of a more inclusive community-wide effort. Finally, school and preschool leaders can deepen their own understanding and capacity to support transitions and increased continuity by visiting each other's programs and participating in specialized professional leadership development opportunities.

4. COMMUNITY-TO-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

Starting school is a community issue and a community responsibility. When communities work together and when children realize that they have the support of groups within their respective communities, starting school can be a positive and exciting event.

Dockett and Perry, 2001

The communities in which children and families live can play an important role in supporting transitions. Schools (elementary and preschool) can enhance their transition efforts by **recognizing and tapping into the array of community resources available to help make connections with families and children.**

The goals of establishing effective community connections are to:

- + Develop an understanding of the broader context in which children and families live
- + Help ensure that children and families continue to have access to needed out-of-school community-based services and supports
- + Leverage the resources and expertise of community agencies and institutions to support transition planning

By establishing relationships with neighborhood service providers, members of community-based early learning councils, civic leaders, and local philanthropists, schools and preschools can gain a deeper understanding of conditions and emerging issues that could impact children’s school readiness and capacity to make smooth transitions. Many organizations collect and map data on local demographics and service availability across a range of providers such as health, child care, social services, housing, and employment. Access to this information—often collected at zip code or census tract levels—can increase understanding of local conditions and inform transition planning to ensure plans are appropriate and tailored to the needs of children and families in the community.

Conditions that children encounter outside of school can play a significant role in how well they are able to engage in learning. When barriers to learning are reduced or eliminated, children are more likely to perform well in school. Meeting the needs of children in all areas—including health, social-emotional, and cognitive development—plays an important role in ensuring school readiness and sustained learning success. However, when children transition to kindergarten, there is an increased risk that they may become disconnected from important child and family support services that had been available to them through early learning and other programs. To that end, an important part of transition planning for individual children and families must **focus on assuring children have continuing access to needed out-of-school services and supports.**

When preschool programs, elementary schools, and community service providers work together—especially across the crucial time when children and families are transitioning to kindergarten—the likelihood that existing services will be sustained and needed new services will be accessed increases. This is especially critical for the support of low-income and special populations of children and families, such as dual language learners, children with developmental delays or disabilities, children in the welfare system, and children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

OHS, unpublished guide to Head Start-School Partnerships

COMMUNITY-WIDE INITIATIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to supporting continuity of service delivery across learning systems, community agencies and institutions often play direct roles in providing transition activities for children and families. Communities across the country have established collaborative efforts to support children and families as they make the transition to kindergarten. For young children

who are not enrolled in formal early learning programs or whose families do not have access to important resources to support transition, launching multi-agency, community-wide efforts can be an effective and important way to ensure all children experience successful transitions. Museums and libraries are especially well-equipped and are becoming important contributors to community-based efforts by disseminating information, developing programs, and providing books and collections designed to support transition.

TRANSITIONS AT THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF BOSTON

Are you ready for kindergarten? Ride a school bus. Put your belongings in a backpack. Choose an activity that will help you get ready to go to school. At the Children's Museum of Boston a permanently installed, model classroom has been developed to invite children and their parents to have a typical kindergarten experience. Adults can ask staff "teachers" questions they may have about the kindergarten registration process, child development milestones, and how to help their child be ready for school.

Children can practice important skills like taking turns, making a friend, and sitting in a group circle to read a story. The classroom includes a math and science area, dramatic play area, reading and writing corner, and creative arts area. Parents and teachers will find resources to support many aspects of a child's development including curiosity, social and emotional maturity, independence skills, and physical health.

The city of Boston's Countdown to Kindergarten and the University of Pittsburgh's Ready Freddy Kindergarten Club are two leading examples of effective community partnerships focused on supporting children and families making the transition to kindergarten.

Countdown to Kindergarten engages families, educators, and the community in a citywide effort to enhance early learning opportunities and to support the transition into kindergarten.

The Mayor's Office, the Boston School Committee, and Boston Public Schools partner with 28 local organizations to implement a school readiness campaign. The program includes a year-long, five-step process that includes visiting and selecting a school, completing the school registration process, meeting new selected school staff, getting ready for school over the summer, and starting school in the fall. The program plans a series of community-wide events throughout the year and provides families with resources and materials to support their involvement. The program's goals are to raise public awareness about school readiness and the importance of kindergarten, coordinate transition activities across the city, build family capacity to support children's learning at home and at school, and ensure all families

register their children on time and feel welcomed at their new schools. For children not enrolled in formal preschool settings, the program offers “play to learn groups” in public school buildings where parents and children participate in early learning activities and access needed community services that increase school readiness.

The Ready Freddy Kindergarten Club, a partnership between the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Public Schools, provides training and support for all families and children entering kindergarten. The program includes a six-part curriculum that engages both families and children in learning experiences and activities designed to prepare them for transition to kindergarten. The program was originally developed by elementary and early education providers, community-based family and housing services, parents, and the University. Blending existing research on kindergarten transition and parent involvement with feedback from stakeholders resulted in a community-specific model and a district-wide plan that affords each school with a basic framework and the flexibility needed to meet the needs of its families and children.

A READY FREDDY STORY

For Northview Elementary—an urban preschool–5 Pittsburgh Public School serving mostly minorities and those of low income—2007 began in typical fashion: Less than 25% of the anticipated kindergarten class was present on the first day of school, part of a growing trend of late and under-enrollment. Principals, staff, and faculty had to continue to orient and reorient new arrivals as they trickled in throughout the first months of the year.

As ordinary as 2007 was, the following year was anything but. In August 2008, as summer shifted into the school year, Northview Elementary was flooded with rising kindergarteners and their families. On the first day of school, everyone marveled as 100% of the anticipated new class was enrolled; many had also participated in special...transition events that occurred prior to the start of school. The new students marched excitedly down the hallway to the classrooms they had already visited and saw the faces of the teachers they had met weeks and even months prior. What happened prior to the 2008–2009 school year to bring about such change should not be described as miraculous. Rather, it demonstrates the kind of success that is possible when a school, community, and parents are united in a shared purpose.

Other examples of citywide efforts to support transitions and align learning include the following (NLC, 2012):

- ✦ In Hartford, Connecticut, The Welcome Center program based in public schools engages parents in their child’s education prior to school entry and provides resources to address barriers such as attendance, chronic health issues, and transportation. The City has also launched an effort to promote early registration and is testing models of transferring standard information from early education programs, family support centers, and home-visiting providers to schools to better meet the needs of children in the community.
- ✦ In Seattle, Washington, preschool and afterschool providers work with school teams to complete an Alignment Partnership Plan each spring for implementation in the fall. In exchange for rent-free lease agreements in school buildings, community providers specify how they will work with schools to support children’s learning before, during, and after school and commit to ongoing communication throughout the year.

COMMUNITY-BASED TRANSITION TEAMS

One commonly used approach to engage community in the transition process is the development of transition planning teams. By creating teams made up of parents, preschool and school personnel, and community representatives, **transition strategies will be tailored to the needs and characteristics of families, children, and the community** and can effectively and efficiently leverage multiple resources and sources of support.

Planning teams can be established at the state, local community, or school level. In some cases, a two-tiered approach is used where a centralized “steering committee” identifies community-wide transition needs, current resources, and gaps; and provides oversight, resources, policy support, and cross-agency coordination. At the school catchment level, teams of parents, preschool, and school personnel meet regularly to develop transition strategies that meet the needs of families and children in the area and to implement, evaluate, and revise activities on an ongoing basis. At both levels, a dedicated staff position is established to ensure efforts are sustained.

Other community-based efforts such as planning kindergarten camps or providing citywide enrichment events have been used extensively to leverage the substantial resources community agencies, institutions, and leadership can bring to support transitions.

Conclusion

When schools, preschools, families, and communities work together to create smooth transitions, children are most likely to be successful both before and after they start school.

Effective transitions provide information, support, and experiences that help children and their families move easily from the familiar to the new. They take the best of preschool programs and elementary schools to create a coordinated process that involves all stakeholders, including preschool and kindergarten teachers, school and preschool administrators, support staff, families, and community members. By building strong relational supports, sharing information, and fostering alignment across learning settings, transition planners can be ensured they are supporting young children's strong start in school.

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THE COLORADO LANDSCAPE: FINDINGS FROM A STUDY IN THE NORTHEAST CORRIDOR AND A SUMMARY OF STATE POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Findings: Transitions from the Preschool to Kindergarten Transitions project

In August of 2012 the Preschool to Kindergarten Transitions project was launched with funding from the Piton Foundation. Focused on investigating conditions, attitudes, and opportunities for developing a transition project in the Northeast Corridor of Denver, activities included holding focus groups with early childhood providers and Denver Public Schools/charter schools; meeting individually with providers, principals, kindergarten teachers and parents; completing a national review of the literature; and compiling a set of indicators based on the Common Core and Colorado Academic Standards. Findings from the focus groups and the recommendations included in a final report on the project are summarized here.

Two focus groups, one with early learning practitioners and one with elementary school personnel, were conducted to determine what was currently in place and working, what was needed to create smooth transitions, and what barriers existed to implementing transitions.

The primary barrier identified from the perspective of the early learning participants was establishing relationships with the feeder elementary schools, and the lack of involvement or interest from the elementary schools to engage with local early childhood programs.

Feedback from elementary school focus group however, indicated that they would welcome partnerships with the feeder early childhood facilities but there had never been anyone to coordinate the efforts. One respondent stated that it is difficult to take on one more unfunded mandate when they are already overwhelmed, but agreed that transitions needed to be addressed and would be helpful, especially in the beginning of the school year. Additionally, kindergarten teachers expressed their wishes that preschool teachers knew what was expected from the Common Core and the Colorado Academic Standards specific to school readiness issues. They also stated that social/emotional development was their biggest challenge when children enter kindergarten

Recommendations based on the review of the literature, focus groups, and interviews with providers, elementary schools, and families included the following strategies and activities:

- + Establishing transition partnership teams within the school and community
- + Visits to kindergarten classrooms by the preschool class and teachers
- + Visits to the preschool class by kindergarten teachers
- + Parent information meetings and family events done in collaboration between the preschool and elementary programs
- + Home visits by the kindergarten teacher done in collaboration with the preschool teacher for all incoming students
- + Providing information about community resources e.g., before and after school programs, libraries, and health care services
- + Participating in shared activities between the systems such as professional development opportunities, staffings, and preschool graduation
- + Transferring portfolios on individual children, nutrition plans, immunization records, individual education plans, curriculum progress, parent conference reports and other useful information
- + Sharing newsletters and other announcements
- + Establish a data portal for preschools and their feeder elementary schools as a tool for information sharing
- + Informing parents and families about standards, curriculum, assessments, and kindergarten expectations to ensure consistency in what is being taught within the home

Colorado State policies and initiatives to watch

Colorado has a long history of supporting young children and their families and early learning continues to be a high priority for the State. At the present time, a number of policies and initiatives are in place that could have relevance for and provide opportunities for scaling up effective transition practices statewide. By tracking developments across the following list of policies and initiatives, it will be possible to identify opportunities for increasing awareness of and support for improved transitions and alignment across early learning and the early grades.

- + Roll out of the **School Readiness Assessments/Kindergarten Entry Assessments** (KEA's) through CAP4K and the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant—including the use of Teaching Strategies GOLD across preschool, kindergarten, and grades first-third)
- + Implementation of the **Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act** (READ)
- + Work of the new **Office of Early Learning at the Colorado Department Human Services** and its oversight of the RTT-ELC grant—in particular work to implement plans for supporting KEA's and creating linkages across early learning and the early grades
- + Implementation of the new **Professional Development Plan**, teacher competencies and teacher preparation policies focused on professionals working with children from birth to age eight
- + State-level efforts to address the goals of the **Governor's Early Literacy Initiative** and its focus on school readiness
- + Introduction of the new **Early Learning Guidelines** and alignment with the Common Core State Standards and the Colorado K-12 Academic Standards
- + Work, focus areas, and priorities of the **Colorado Early Learning Leadership Commission**
- + Implementation of activities and priorities of the **Colorado Head Start-State Collaboration Office** (including meeting Head Start mandates to increase school readiness and establish partnerships with schools to support transition and alignment)
- + Activities of selected **Colorado Community Early Childhood Councils** to support transition and alignment at the local level

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EXAMPLES OF OTHER STATE AND LOCAL EFFORTS TO SUPPORT TRANSITIONS

Examples from RTT-ELC: Summary of state transition and alignment efforts

SUPPORTING AND IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACROSS ECE AND THE EARLY GRADES

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Pennsylvania // The Early Childhood Executive Leadership Institute is a five-day annual training held in eight regions across the state to help principals, superintendents, assistant superintendents, assistant principals, and ECE directors to better support instruction from birth to fourth grade. Training can be used to meet mandatory professional development requirements (existing program).

Connecticut // Planned to design and implement a 3-to-3 (preschool through third grade) Leadership Development Initiative to provide training for school leaders to implement and monitor the age three to third grade continuum. Longer term plans included work with the Connecticut Board of Regents to develop administrative competencies tied to leadership to support increasing achievement during the primary grades.

Arizona // Proposed to provide preschool to third grade leadership team training on the use of the Arizona Response to Intervention approach. This training was planned specifically to address the new Arizona law “Move On When Reading” that requires schools to retain third grade students who attain a “falls far below” designation on the third grade reading assessment. In addition, under the Arizona Ready plan, the State will establish local teams of public school administrators, public school early educators, and local early childhood partners to participate in intensive professional development on transition practices, effective instructional strategies for preschool through third grade, again using the Arizona Response to Intervention model as a basis for training.

TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT – INCLUDING JOINT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Connecticut // Proposed to expand teacher training to help K-3 teachers understand and use evidence-based practices. As part of a rollout of new early learning standards, the State planned to provide joint training and TA for preschool and K-3 teachers on the standards and how they connect with K-3 standards.

Maryland // Is implementing Leadership in Early Learning Academies to enable early childhood educators working with children from four to seven (preschool through second grade) in 60 Title I schools with high-needs populations to learn rigorous, developmentally appropriate instructional practice to support the Common Core. Training includes use of the Early Education Pedagogy Guide, revised early learning standards, assessment tools, and data systems. Transition planning, health, and family engagement will be included as well.

North Carolina // Professional Development institutes will be organized for principals, teacher leaders, and central office staff to increase schools and districts’ capacity to implement P-3 reforms.

Delaware // Delaware will finance “Readiness Teams” in up to 20 high-need communities. Teams will be made up of early learning and elementary teachers, principals, providers, parents, and community partners. Using a “ready families plus ready communities plus ready services plus ready schools” model, the teams will coordinate services for these components, with a focus on promoting clear expectations for transition to kindergarten, building on linkages between Early Learning Foundations and Common Core; aligning experiences across ELDP, elementary schools, and other service providers; and assessing local needs and supporting local capacity to address barriers to academic and non-academic success. Over a four-year period, districts will go from 0% financing to 100% of local financing for this work, and the State will provide staff facilitation for this work.

Maryland // Together the State’s Early Education and Care agency and its Elementary and Secondary Education agency will collaboratively extend the wrap-around zone concept to birth. The following strategies will be used to achieve sustaining impacts into elementary grades: targeted supported to high-need districts, supportive effective transition, family engagement, expanding access to comprehensive community services, data and assessment, and communications and raising awareness. Funds will be made available to local districts that will create sustained strategies to improve the educational experience for children from birth to kindergarten and beyond. These partnerships will include the early childhood and school communities. Other transition activities will include extending the Boston based Countdown to Kindergarten home, school, and community activities to the State’s Coordinated Family and Community Engagement grant recipients.

The State will also use its top educational leadership to communicate with superintendents, private donors, and educational stakeholders about the connection of ECE to public schools, and will also hold Communities of Practice meetings in regional offices to address early intervention in public school transition, the importance of family engagement, and supports for high-needs children and English learners. Likewise, there will be regional meetings on ECE topics to help strengthen relationships between the ECE and public school systems.

DEVELOPING COMPREHENSIVE TRANSITION PLANS

Arizona // Proposed to develop a model Kindergarten Transition Plan to assist LEAs in creating and implementing quality transitions that meet the needs of children, parents, and teachers.

Nebraska // Through the QRIS, Early Childhood Coaches would work with ECE providers in both center and family settings to support children’s transition into kindergarten. At the same time, Early Learning Connections Coordinators would be placed in Educational Service Units to work with K-12 teachers to better coordinate with ECE providers. Health and Community Resource Consultants would continue addressing the health, dental care, and social-emotional needs of children through the transition into kindergarten. Finally, districts operating state preschool would be encouraged to organize joint professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers and to find ways to enhance their communication and coordination with each other.

SCHOOL–COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, TRANSITION AND COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING TEAMS

Ohio // Since 2008, 40 schools have participated in the Ready Schools Initiative, which outlines nine critical steps to increase school-community coordination to support early learning from preschool to third grade. Results have included changing beliefs/attitudes, new connections

and relationships, more and better transition activities, and collaborative professional development. In addition, the Ready Schools Initiative produced a resource guide to help both ECE and school leaders coordinate their policies and practices and develop a comprehensive transition plan for children (existing program). <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Early-Childhood-Education/Early-Learning-and-School-Readiness-Documents/School-Ready-Report-OPTIMIZED.pdf.aspx>

Pennsylvania // The Pennsylvania Keys administer funding in communities to support Local Education and Resource Network (LEARN) teams that in turn provide resources to school and early childhood leaders, teachers, providers, and families for school readiness, ECE quality improvements, and transition activities (existing program). http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Community_Engagement

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Maryland // Maryland will invest \$4 million of the RTT-ELC funds to identify core elements of currently successful community-family partnerships that have demonstrated the potential for reaching high-needs families and connecting them to community resources. Funding will be applied to 17 high-need communities and ten rural communities. These family-community partnerships will be a resource for promoting health and family engagement through local governance focused on the transition from early learning through the early elementary grades.

State and local transition and alignment policies and practices: States leading the way

NEW JERSEY

At the State level, the Division of Early Childhood Education oversees the development, implementation and alignment of standards, curricula, and assessments from preschool through third grade. As part of that charge, the Division provides access to professional development for administrators and teachers. In addition, district boards of education are required to submit formal transition plans as part of their five-year strategic planning process. Local practices include:

- ✦ Preschool-family partnerships that employ a year-long series of conversations and orientations to keep families informed. Partnerships include parent meetings and interactions with kindergarten teachers, half-day visits to kindergarten classrooms for children, transition activities incorporated into the preschool curriculum, and site

based parent surveys used to inform ongoing practice.

- + Preschool-school partnerships to co-create and share student portfolios. Preschool and kindergarten teachers co-designed a prototype portfolio for each child as well as a checklist of items that should be included in the portfolio. Portfolios are updated across the preschool year and hand-delivered to kindergarten teachers before the beginning of school. In the first months of kindergarten, preschool specialists follow-up with kindergarten teachers for feedback and progress reports.

GEORGIA

At the State level, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning has focused in recent years on strengthening links between early learning and the early grades. As part of that focus, the State supports aligning standards and assessment across all levels of learning, providing joint professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers to support implementation of new assessments being put in place, and increasing readiness and successful transition through summer enrichment activities. Local practices include:

- + Preschool-family partnerships to enhance the engagement of parents in transition. One center in Georgia has created a year-long transition process in partnership with elementary school staff. Activities include a family survey to understand concerns and questions, ongoing meetings with teachers and administrators, and a series of kindergarten panels where parents can hear from kindergarten teachers and other parents about transitions and the kindergarten experience.
- + Preschool-school partnerships are designed to familiarize children with the specific kindergarten they will be attending. Once school assignments have been made, preschool and elementary schools establish agreements that allow preschool children to learn about their future kindergarten environment by attending book fairs, lunch periods, and school assemblies.

MARYLAND

At the State level, Maryland has developed a number of effective transition and alignment policies over the years. Their comprehensive model of school readiness (MMSR) uses a systemic approach to supporting children that includes instruction, assessment, family engagement, community collaboration, and professional development. Local practices include:

- + A number of school systems have adopted the 30 indicators in the MMSR and have integrated them into their programs so that teachers in the early grades are looking at the indicators and using them to make decisions throughout the year.
- + Parent's surveys are used to give families a voice in the transition process.

Bi-annual surveys of preschool and kindergarten parents are administered in the fall and spring.

- + Community partnerships include the use of a local shopping mall to engage large numbers of families in transition activities. Families can register their children for kindergarten, receive information packets, register their children for a library card, and learn about adult education and financial literacy opportunities. Children receive vision and speech screenings.

MINNESOTA

The Minnesota Office of Early Learning provides school readiness and transition leadership, guidance, and support to school districts (which operate under a system of local control) through an interactive website for parents that offers information and activities on school readiness and transitions, offering developmental screenings for children, and operating a School Readiness program for children who may be at risk of not being prepared for kindergarten. Local practices include:

- + Kindergarten teacher surveys are used in the Bridges to Kindergarten program, a local summer early learning program that serves the district's three elementary schools. Kindergarten teachers are asked about school-specific vocabulary used in classrooms and about their classroom management systems. The program uses kindergarten assessment information and survey data to plan the summer program.
- + Local community coalitions bring together a diverse group of families and stakeholders from the education, early education, health, social services, and business community to identify gaps in services and plan community-based solutions.

WASHINGTON

The Washington Department of Early Learning and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction oversee the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS). Conducting this kindergarten readiness assessment was mandated through legislation for all full-day kindergarten programs in the State. WaKIDS supports transition, family engagement, and systems alignment through its three major components:

- + Family Connection welcomes families into the K-12 system by requiring all kindergarten teachers to meet individually with families prior to school entrance.
- + Whole child assessment ensures that all aspects of a child's development are measured and used to inform individualized instructional planning.
- + Early Learning Collaborative aligns practices of early learning and kindergarten teachers to support smooth transitions.