



Kindergarten Transition

INTRODUCTION

The transition to kindergarten marks a critical point in the lives of children and families. Regardless of previous early childhood program experiences, kindergarten may be a challenging leap for children and their families. Kindergarten transition refers to the period of time when families register their children for kindergarten and prepare to begin elementary school. Transition activities intentionally build continuity in curriculum, expectations, and experiences across settings while offering social and emotional support.¹ The transition activities support children and engage families as they enter a new school, as well as promote collaboration between early childhood programs and elementary schools.

RESEARCH ON TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Some research suggests that early gains made in preschool may fade as children move through the early elementary grades. This may be attributed, in part, to the differences in parent involvement, classroom organization, and teaching practices between early childhood programs and elementary school.² However, the National Head Start Demonstration evaluation suggests that commitments to effective transition appear to combat the fadeout effect.³ Findings from the Abecedarian Project indicate children who received additional support as they moved into and through kindergarten and the early elementary grades performed better in reading and math.⁴

A growing body of evidence underscores the importance of transition activities to sustain and build on children's social, emotional, and academic competencies.⁵ Studies demonstrate the potential of purposeful coordination between settings to maximize the gains children achieve in pre-k.

The Effect of School-Based Kindergarten Transition Policies and Practices on Child Academic Outcomes (2005) examined kindergarten transition activities and children's academic outcomes at the end of the year. It found more transition activities were associated with academic gains throughout the year as measured by a standardized test. The gains were greatest for children from low- and middle- income families who experience social and economic risks and enter school behind their peers. Additionally, more transition activities were linked to increased parent-initiated school involvement during kindergarten.⁶

Another study in 2008, *Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Use of Transition Practices and Children's Adjusting to Kindergarten*, found a positive association between the number of transition activities and the kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's social and emotional adjustment. The individual

transition activity of pre-k teachers connecting with kindergarten teachers about curriculum and/or the children had the strongest and most consistent associations with children's adjustment as perceived by kindergarten teachers. Efforts to connect vertically and improve continuity between settings provided increased opportunities to share relevant developmental or systemic information.⁷

Positive findings likely point to quicker adjustment to kindergarten from the transition activities, allowing children to gain more from learning opportunities in the classroom. The transition activities for both of these studies can be found in Appendix A.

PROMISING PRACTICES

As part of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, the Pennsylvania Department of Education recognized the importance of P-3 alignment. The Community Innovation Zone (CIZ) grants enabled recipients to implement kindergarten transition activities and other birth through third grade alignment strategies to positively impact early learning experiences for children. Best practices will be recorded and shared with other school district communities across the state.⁸

Kindergarten transition activities should meet the needs of local communities. The United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania supports local transition activities in Allegheny, Westmoreland, and Fayette County.

Hi5!, led by the United Way, Allegheny Intermediate Unit, and Trying Together, engages with nearly all 43 school districts in Allegheny County to ensure on-time kindergarten registration and supports schools to implement effective kindergarten transition activities. During the fall planning meeting and spring celebration, transition teams from the school districts have the opportunity to share the successes and challenges of transition activities.

The United Way of Southwestern PA leads kindergarten transition work in both Westmoreland and Fayette County which includes 17 and 6 school districts, respectively. The transition teams made up of a district administrator, kindergarten teacher, family/community member, and a pre-k provider are required to meet twice a year. An annual kindergarten transition retreat is held at the end of the school year. Examples from the local transition work are highlighted in Appendix B.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) envisions a pre-kindergarten through grade 12 continuum. ESSA encourages alignment and collaboration in the birth through third grade continuum by providing more flexibility for states and districts to use federal investments for evidence-based early education opportunities. Specifically, under Title I, federal funds can be used to support the kindergarten transition process. Title I plans must include how local education agencies will smooth transitions between Head Start and elementary schools. Title II, Part A of ESSA allows and encourages joint professional learning and planning activities for school staff and educators in pre-k programs that address the transition to elementary school.⁹

There are a number of states acknowledging the importance of effective transitions by outlining strategies in their state ESSA plans:

- New Jersey plans to use Preschool Expansion Grant funds to establish transition teams made up of administrators, families, and teachers across early grade levels.¹⁰
- The Illinois state plan encourages within and between school collaboration to smooth out transitions between grades and buildings.¹¹
- Michigan requires school districts to address the transferring of student records and coordinating developmental screenings with early care and education programs.¹²
- North Carolina is compiling a planning document to guide the development of local transition plans.¹³

The Pennsylvania state plan promotes successful transitions from pre-k to kindergarten by (a) emphasizing the importance of coordination and collaboration between early childhood programs and school districts; (b) sharing and connecting data between the early childhood system and K-12 system; and (c) promoting principal preparation focused on early childhood development.¹⁴

In addition to leveraging opportunities to promote early learning and transition under ESSA, states have taken the opportunity to play a greater role in encouraging or requiring effective transition policies. Individual schools and districts can use state policy examples and adapt strategies to best meet the needs of the community. Appendix C displays examples of four state policies to support kindergarten transitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE KINDERGARTEN TRANSITIONS

Effective transition policies call for activities that are more individualized, initiated earlier, and focused on both vertical (pre-k to kindergarten classrooms) and horizontal connections (teacher to family).¹⁵ Hi5!, for instance, focuses on four connections: child to school; family to school; school to school; and community to school. The following recommendations are key takeaways for the state and school districts to consider. Some recommendations require state policy, while other recommendations can be pursued at the district level.

STATE POLICYMAKERS

1. **REQUIRE LOCAL TRANSITION TEAMS** - Effective transition activities include pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, school administrators, child care providers, and families. Including specific guidelines for all of these stakeholders will enable better informed sharing and planning that enhances the early learning continuum.

2. **PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON LEVERAGING FUNDS** - Leveraging funds to support transition activities may be difficult for school districts since there is no designated federal, state, or local funding source. However, the state can support districts by encouraging the use of Title I, Part A and/or Title II, Part A funds for transition activities.
3. **ENCOURAGE DATA SHARING** - Early childhood programs should share observation and assessment data of children with their future schools. Transferring records to kindergarten teachers provides them with a baseline of children’s social, emotional, and early academic skills. Streamlining pre-kindergarten and kindergarten screenings and assessments will allow for teachers to track gains and improvement of their children over the course of the year. While individual efforts for sharing student records between an early childhood program and elementary school is possible, the state can help resolve problems with a data bridge as a means of supporting transitions. Historically, data sharing has presented problems due to different standards for the early childhood data system PELICAN and the K-12 data system PIMS. OCDEL is working to address these inconsistencies but local initiatives are an important support in the interim.

LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

4. **INCLUDE PARENTS AND GUARDIANS IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS** - Parents are a child’s first teacher. The stress of transitioning to kindergarten impacts them too. Schools will be able to best address the social and emotional needs of children with support from families. Partnerships between schools and families that support children’s progress are the foundation of successful transitions.¹⁶
5. **ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE KINDERGARTEN** - Developmentally appropriate practices require educators to meet children where they are. Kindergarten teachers should have an understanding of child development and incorporate meaningful play-based learning activities in the classroom. Policies working on P-3 alignment can support developmentally appropriate practices and expectations in kindergarten classrooms. This includes developmentally appropriate screenings for incoming kindergarteners.

BOTH STATE AND LOCAL

6. **STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS** - The importance of relationships and collaboration in kindergarten transitions cannot be overstated. Policies need to foster communication between early care and education programs and elementary schools, specifically on topics like alignment in expectations and curriculum across programs. Relationships and coordination between pre-k and kindergarten teachers support children’s ability to function successfully within a new classroom environment, setting the stage for future school success.

7. **RETHINK THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SCHOOL READINESS** - The concept of school readiness is often associated with kindergarten transition. However, children develop in different ways and at different times; they are not innately ready or not ready for school. Policymakers, educators, and families must be developmentally appropriate with the goal of school readiness. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) “believes it is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school and to provide whatever services are needed to help each child reach his or her fullest potential.”¹⁷ Rather than the child as the focus of school readiness indicators, readiness is a result of relationships established by adults in early care and education programs, schools, families, and the community.

APPENDIX A

KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION ACTIVITIES	
<p><i>From The Effect of School-Based Kindergarten Transition Policies and Practices on Child Academic Outcomes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication from the elementary school to home of incoming kindergartener (letter or phone call) ● Pre-k children visit kindergarten classroom ● Shorter school days at the beginning of the year to ease children and families into school ● Children and parents visit kindergarten classroom and teacher prior to beginning of school year ● Teachers visit homes of new kindergarteners at the beginning of the school year ● Parent orientation at the elementary school prior to the beginning of the school year 	<p><i>From Pre-Kindergarten Teachers’ Use of Transition Practices and Children’s Adjusting to Kindergarten:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-k children visit kindergarten classroom ● Pre-k teacher visits kindergarten classroom ● Kindergarten teacher visits pre-k classroom ● Spring kindergarten orientation for pre-k children ● Spring kindergarten orientation for parents of pre-k children ● School-wide activity for pre-k children ● Individual meetings with parents about kindergarten ● Early childhood programs share records of incoming students with elementary schools ● Pre-k and kindergarten teachers communicate about curriculum and/or children

Note: This is not an all encompassing list of possible transition activities.

APPENDIX B

LOCAL EXAMPLES	
Avonworth School District¹⁸	<p>It is never too early to think about connecting schools to the community to increase awareness about the importance of kindergarten transition. Avonworth Primary Center partners with the local pre-k providers during the fall to host a <i>Pre-K Open House</i> at their school. This is one of many events for families and incoming kindergarten students to experience the school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-k teachers and directors tour the building, meet our staff, and discuss the strengths and challenges of kindergarten transition. ● Network and improve communication among the school and providers. ● Share best practice resources with the providers so that both the pre-k and kindergarten programs are using the same materials for letter identification with all students.
Derry Area School District¹⁹	<p>Derry Area families can register children online or in person. The district holds various events throughout the year for young children and their families including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Two story time events held annually for infants, toddlers, and pre-k children. ● <i>Shadow a Kindergarten Buddy Day</i> allows pre-k students to experience a portion of the school day. Ninety percent of children that will be in Grandview Elementary kindergarten classrooms the upcoming fall participate. Eleven center staff members accompany their students to the school for this event. The school district provides bus transportation to and from the school.
Greensburg Salem School District²⁰	<p>The <i>P.A.W.S.</i> program, which stands for <i>Parents Are Welcome in School</i>, invites pre-k students and their families to experience the kindergarten classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● During four evening sessions leading up to kindergarten registration, families meet with kindergarten teachers in the elementary school their child will attend the following year. ● Teachers actively engage pre-k students and their families in literacy, math, and science activities. Families take home books and activities to prepare children for kindergarten. ● <i>Kindercamp</i> is held the first week of August and provides incoming kindergarteners another opportunity to get to know their new teacher and classroom prior to the beginning of the school year.

<p>Laurel Highlands School District²¹</p>	<p>Laurel Highlands engages in various activities to smooth the transition to kindergarten for children, families, and educators which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shared professional development opportunities between public school kindergarten teachers and community pre-k teachers, as well as surrounding school district personnel. ● Multiple community events targeting pre-k students: <i>BookStops/Book Nook, Dr. Seuss Night</i> events, and regional kindergarten registration dates. ● Resources for families to access online.
<p>Pittsburgh Public Schools²²</p>	<p><i>Message from Me (MFM)</i>, a technology tool developed Carnegie Mellon University’s CREATE Lab in collaboration with Trying Together, engages families in everyday classroom experiences of preschool and kindergarten children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Many kindergarten classrooms in various Pittsburgh area public schools utilize <i>MFM</i> to take pictures and record audio messages of learning experiences during the school day. ● Students and teachers send digital messages to families in the form of a text message and/or email to capture daily activities in a kindergarten classroom. ● Messages sent from the school to families supports the home-school connection, as well as engages children in the learning process in the classroom environment.
<p>Quaker Valley School District²³</p>	<p>Quaker Valley takes a comprehensive approach for the transition to kindergarten.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● During a week long registration event in February, parents visit the school to register their child for kindergarten and sign a waiver to allow the school to connect with the child's early learning provider. ● Families have the opportunity to meet with teachers, the principal, and other community organizations. ● In addition to kindergarten registration activities, the district hosts a <i>Story Walk</i> which is held twice a year for families with young children. ● This event provides children many opportunities to visit the school throughout the first five years of their life.

Note: This table reflects examples from Allegheny, Fayette, and Westmoreland County. This is not a comprehensive list of all the transition activities that occur within southwest Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX C

STATE EXAMPLES ²⁴	
Oregon	<p>Encourages local innovation through the <i>Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnerships and Innovations</i> grant program. This includes initiatives through county early learning hubs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P-3 coordinators in eight high-needs schools lead kindergarten teachers on home visits to incoming students and organize playgroups for children ages birth to five and their parents. • Professional learning communities, including both providers and kindergarten teachers, meet monthly to discuss implementation of the <i>Conscious Discipline</i> model to support social-emotional development of children as they transition.
Washington	<p>State policy require that state-funded, full-day kindergarten programs implement three components to ease transition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family connection: Individual meetings between families and teachers to discuss goals and expectations for kindergarten. • Whole-child assessment: Kindergarten programs required to use GOLD assessment, the same tool used in state pre-k programs. • Early learning collaboration: Required to establish relationships with community providers and engage them and families in kindergarten readiness activities. Local education agencies have flexibility in the methods used to accomplish collaboration.
Colorado	<p>Data collection and organization through the statewide program – <i>Results Matter</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline observation systems – GOLD assessment used to track ongoing, observation-based assessments of children birth through five and used for kindergarten readiness assessment in many school districts. • State education department recommends pre-k teachers share hard copies of assessment data and summarize students strengths and needs with kindergarten teachers.
West Virginia	<p>Section of the universal pre-k policy mandates that the county collaborative early childhood team create a written transition plan that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for pre-k children and families to visit kindergarten classroom. • Written information for families about registration and expectations for kindergarten. • Annual meetings of pre-k providers and kindergarten teachers to discuss how to prepare students for transition. • System for transferring assessment data to future kindergarten teacher.

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