

SMOOTHING OUT THE BUMPS OF TRANSITIONING TO KINDERGARTEN

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The transition to kindergarten is an important time in the young life of a preschooler. When children transition to kindergarten from their prekindergarten (pre-K), Head Start, or child care programs, they leave behind children and teachers with whom they have established relationships. They also leave behind a familiar environment and a daily schedule that includes “choice time”, play, and naptime. They will need to adjust to a new teacher and classroom, make new friends, adhere to a new set of rules, and respond to more academic expectations. Preschoolers’ families also need to make the transition to kindergarten. Families will need to build relationships with the kindergarten teacher, the parents of the new children, and adjust to the differences the “big school” presents such as bus transportation and fewer opportunities for informal communications with the teacher. For families who need day long child care, they may need to find before and after school care to fill in the gaps of the typical school day (Patton & Wang, 2012).

The quality of a child’s kindergarten transition process is important since it has implications for the child’s future outcomes. Some families may experience the transition to kindergarten as a bumpy road that takes a toll on the child, family members, and eventually the kindergarten class. Other families enjoy a smooth transition process and enthusiastically look forward to “stepping up” to kindergarten. The findings from a large research study conducted by Schulting, Malone, and Dodge (2005, para. 62) indicated “that school transition practices are related to improved academic achievement and increased parent-initiated school involvement during kindergarten and that the impact of these practices is greatest for the low-income children who are least likely to receive them.”

Given the importance of kindergarten transition practices, are there policies or practices that can be implemented to increase the likelihood that all children, especially children living in families with low incomes who are at the greatest risk of school failure, have positive transition experiences? What efforts at the local and state levels support successful transitions? What can be done to smooth out the bumps along the way?

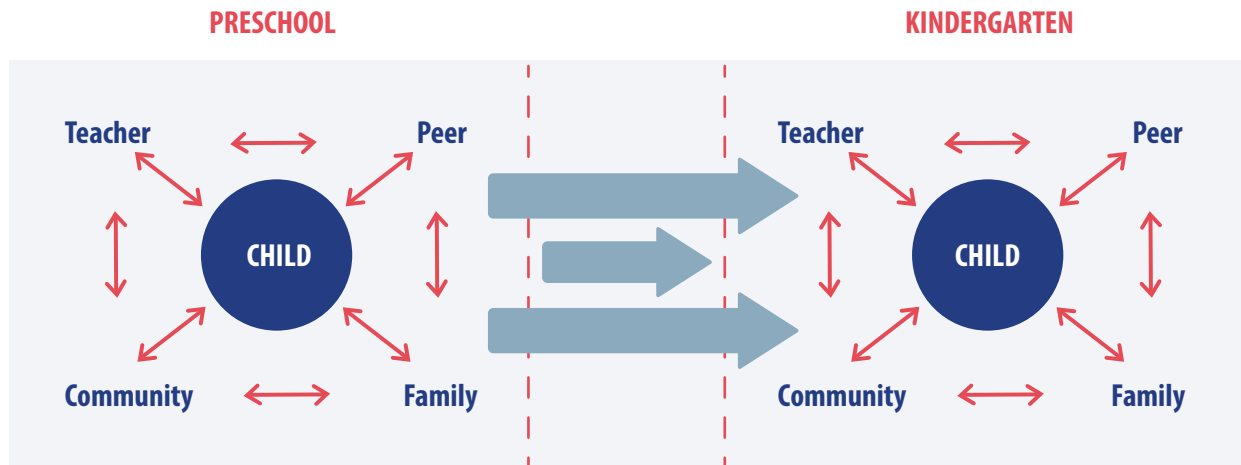
A MODEL FOR CREATING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS TO KINDERGARTEN

Successful transitions from preschool¹ to kindergarten don’t simply happen; transitions require planning, communication, intentionality, leadership, and time. Kindergarten transition should be “a process and not a one-time event” (Patton & Wang, 2012). The foundation for successful transitions is relationships among and between all involved: the child, family, preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, child’s peers, and community.

The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition shown in Figure 1 is often used to depict the relationships, interactions, and contexts involved in the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

¹ In this brief, “preschool” is used to denote the various programs children may participate in prior to kindergarten. These include state or local prekindergarten, Head Start, center- and home-based child care settings, and nursery schools.

Figure 1. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition



From: Rimm-Kaufman, S. & Pianta, R. (2000). An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 491-511.

Implicit within this model is the shared responsibility all parties have to support the child by creating some continuity from preschool to kindergarten and the primary grades. In both the preschool and kindergarten contexts, the child is at the center. The teacher, peers, family and community interact with the child and with each other, and across these two contexts. Any transition practices or mechanisms “should be understood in terms of the influence of contexts and the connections across these contexts at any given time and across time” (Rimm-Kaufman, S. & Pianta, R. 2000, p. 494). The relationships that evolve from these connections “can serve as a bridge from preschool to kindergarten and can help a child and family in [their] adjustment” (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000, p.3).

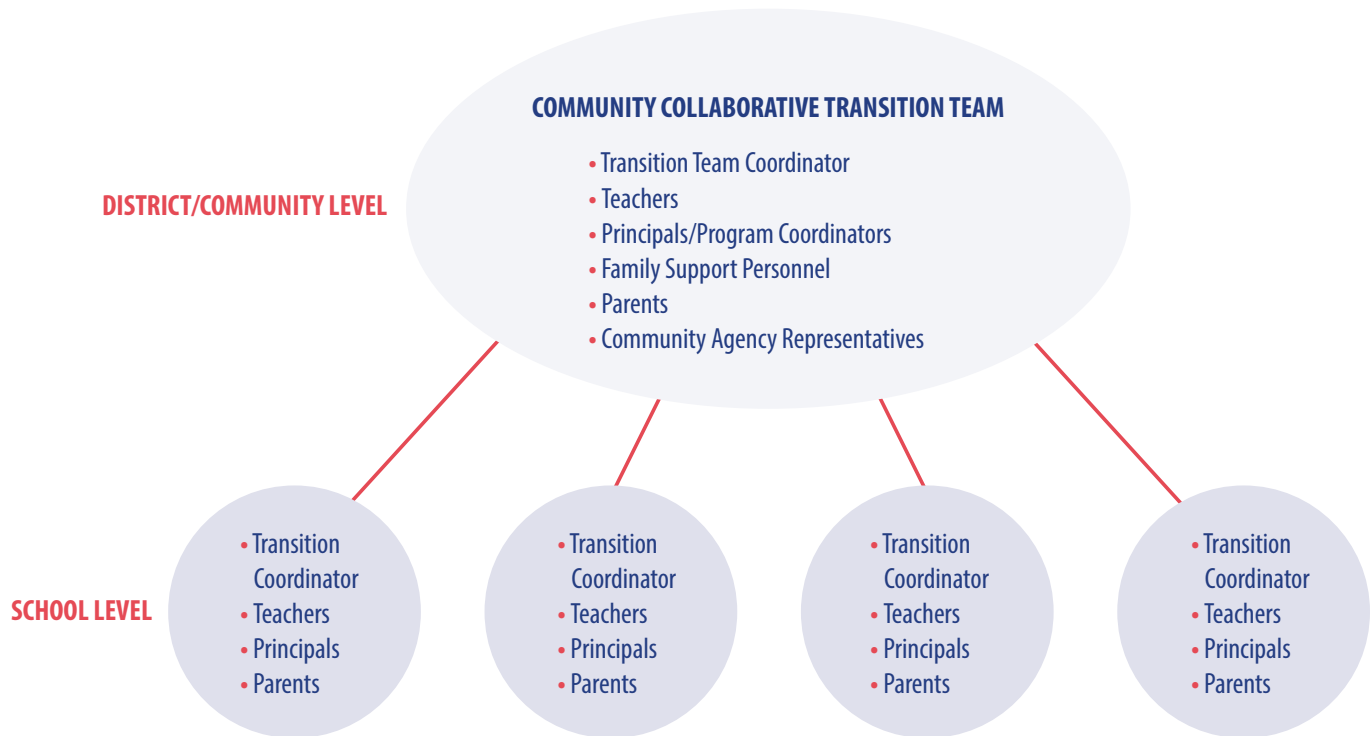
According to the implementation manual² Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) wrote for implementing the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, there are five principles that should guide transition planning and practices (p. 2):

1. Foster relationships as resources
2. Promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten
3. Focus on family strengths
4. Tailor [transition] practices to individual needs
5. Form collaborative relationships [among the key players]

The recommended first step to take in the planning process is to establish Community Collaborative Transition Teams at the community or district level, and smaller transition teams at the local school level (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). The membership of the Community Collaborative Transition Team should include preschool and kindergarten teachers, parents, school principals and preschool leadership, and community representatives. The local school transition team should, at a minimum, include preschool and kindergarten teachers, school principal, and parent. Each team has an identified “transition coordinator”. Figure 2, shown on the following page, illustrates the configuration and connections of these transition teams.

² Only highlights from the implementation manual are included here. The reader is referred to the full manual for more details. The manual can be accessed here.

Figure 2. School & Program Transition Teams



From: Kraft-Sayre, M. & Pianta, R. (2000). Enhancing the transition to kindergarten linking children, families, & schools. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development & Learning Kindergarten Transition Studies

The Community Collaborative Transition Team at the community or district level supports the school level transition teams. Together they plan various transition activities designed to engage families and children, connect early care and education programs to kindergarten, and result in a smooth transition process. These teams, typically initiated and funded by school leaders, work to customize the transition activities offered families to meet their unique needs (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). The following section examines the characteristics of promising kindergarten transition practices, and provides some examples of these practices at the community and state levels.

KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION PRACTICES

There are many different types of transition practices described in the research literature, in state and school district websites, and in parent advice publications. But which of these practices appear to be most effective prior to and after the child enters kindergarten? Here are some questions for school and program transition teams to consider when planning transition activities:

- Do some practices start a full year before kindergarten?
- Do the activities provide timely information that families, children, and teachers need?
- Is there a range of activities going from low intensity (e.g., kindergarten registration announcement) to high intensity (e.g., a home visit by the kindergarten teacher prior to kindergarten)?
- Are there activities in which the schools are proactive?
- Are there activities the child's early childhood program uses to support the transition process?
- Are activities available to families in their home language and are these activities culturally appropriate?

- Is there a menu of activities available to meet the unique needs and contexts of each family, because transition is not a “one size fits all” process?
- Are there any activities during the kindergarten year that will continue to engage families with schools and cultivate these home-school relationships?

The importance of the child’s family in the transition to kindergarten process cannot be overstated. Family engagement is an “integral part of transition policies and programs. . . The research on the benefits of involving families in their children’s education indicates that families are a critical partner in providing continuity as children move between systems of care and education” (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002, p. 8). Family involvement in the kindergarten transition process is more effective when it starts **before** the first day of kindergarten. Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (2000) identified three inter-related principles for involving families:

1. “Reaching out” means that schools need to reach out to families and establish two-way communication and trust. Families need information about the transition process so they can be effective partners.
2. “Reaching backward in time” refers to connecting with families of children who will be transitioning to kindergarten while the children are still in preschool. Helping children and families become familiar with the school, kindergarten teacher, and even the children and families of the child’s future kindergarten class will lessen anxiety and fears, and build trust.
3. “Reaching with appropriate intensity” acknowledges that families’ needs are varied, from needing only basic information on registration to needing home visits and support services.

Transition activities should be offered to children and families starting in the fall of the year prior to their entering kindergarten, and extended throughout the kindergarten year. Starting early while the child is still in preschool enables families and children to feel more comfortable and connected with the school. If families feel comfortable, they are more likely to interact with the elementary school (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000).

The following sections provide some examples of policies, practices, and resources at the state and local levels that warrant mention. While this is not an exhaustive list of promising kindergarten transition practices, collectively they illustrate a range of strategies states and local communities are using to smooth children’s and families’ transitions.

Kindergarten Transition Policies and Practices at the State Level

Transition practices are best developed and implemented at the local level where they can be tailored to the unique needs of families, schools and communities. However, state governments can also take a leadership role. Some states are proactive in promoting successful transitions to kindergarten by developing policies, resources, and communications. Some states offer professional developmental opportunities that bring together preschool and kindergarten teachers, and some provide funding for summer programs for at-risk children. Examples of states from across the nation that use one or more of these strategies are summarized in the following section.

West Virginia

West Virginia’s Board of Education Policy 2525 establishes the state’s Universal Pre-K program and it addresses the preschool to kindergarten transition process. A section of the policy mandates that the collaborative early childhood teams at the county level develop a written transition plan that describes: (1) how written information to parents about kindergarten and the registration process will be made available, (2) the opportunities for families to visit the kindergarten their children will probably attend, and (3) how opportunities for pre-K teachers to meet annually with kindergarten teachers will be provided.

The collaborative early learning teams are required to “establish a system for transferring pre-K assessment data that is documented as a part of each child’s Kindergarten Transition Report to the student’s future kindergarten teacher” (Loewenberg, 2017, p. 4). West Virginia’s policy also requires that the county collaborative teams implement the best practices for transition described in the Board of Education’s *Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework*.

Georgia

Georgia funds the Summer Transition Program (STP), a “six-week intensive academic program for rising kindergartners” who either did not attend Georgia’s Pre-K or Head Start, or attended these programs but need additional support. To qualify for STP, families also need to be at or below 85% of the state median income level. STP is held during June and July. The average STP class size is fourteen children with a lead and assistant teacher. The STP curriculum focuses on oral language, literacy, and numeracy. Children have individualized learning plans and receive some 1:1 instructional time, and participate in group activities to develop social skills and learn kindergarten routines ([Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning webpage](#)).

The [Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning website](#) provides several resources and information for the families of children transitioning to kindergarten such as a [brochure](#) and suggestions of [activities](#) to increase children’s readiness. Additionally, there are ideas [preschool teachers](#) and [kindergarten teachers](#) can use to support smooth transitions to kindergarten.

New Jersey

New Jersey has a policy directly addressing the transition process. It enacted the State Transition Policy (Code 6A:13A-6.1) requiring district school boards to submit a five-year preschool program plan for the Department’s review and approval. The district’s plan must address (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016):

- A process for collaborating with preschool through third grade administrators in the district,
- Methods for sharing information about individual children with their new kindergarten and elementary teachers, and for sharing results from a comprehensive performance-based assessment,
- The process for communicating the preschool curriculum and practices to the kindergarten and elementary teachers, and
- The process for informing families about the kindergarten program their child will attend, and the district’s P-3 transition plan.

Oregon

Oregon has established a competitive grant program, the Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation (KRPI) grant, to encourage communities to propose innovative approaches addressing one or more of the following areas:

- Children’s smooth transitions to kindergarten,
- Increasing alignment and collaboration across the birth to grade 3 continuum,
- Engaging families to support their child’s learning and development, and
- Providing joint professional development opportunities for early childhood and elementary level educators.

The KRPI funds flow through the state’s sixteen regional early learning hubs. The hubs make grant awards based on the quality of the proposals they receive from within their hub. An example of a successful proposal is the P-3 Schools Project in Portland. This proposal enabled hiring eight P-3 coordinators to manage early learning activities, accompany kindergarten teachers on visits to the homes of incoming students, and help organize a two- or three-week summer program for incoming kindergarteners (Loewenberg, 2017).

Promising Kindergarten Transition Practices at the Local Level

Many kindergarten transition activities are initiated at the local level, closest to where schools interact with children, their families, and early learning programs. It is at the local level where relationships are made and bridges between preschool and kindergarten can be built. There are many formal programs and informal strategies that are used

across states and communities (refer to Appendix). The following is a sampling of kindergarten transition programs from across the nation that were initiated and are implemented at the community or school district level.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Ready Freddy Program

The Office of Child Development (OCD) at the University of Pittsburgh began working with the Pittsburgh Public Schools to tackle the problem of children starting kindergarten partway through the year, and missing learning opportunities. This problem was pronounced among families living in low-income communities.

The OCD staff at the University of Pittsburgh used the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) by Wandersman to collaboratively develop and implement a kindergarten transition project starting with one low-income community in Pittsburgh (Fleming, 2016). The OCD staff engaged community organizations, families, preschool and elementary school staff to explore what kinds of strategies could be effective with these hard to reach families. These conversations led to some innovative and community-specific strategies. For example, a local pizza shop was recruited to include dates and details about kindergarten enrollment and the registration process in its pizza boxes. Along with this effort and other outreach strategies with families, Freddy, a green-speckled frog, became the mascot and symbol of kindergarten readiness. Freddy (i.e., someone in a frog costume) attends various community events to excite children about starting school and to spotlight kindergarten readiness throughout the year.

The Ready Freddy program is a voluntary program Pittsburgh's elementary schools can adopt. Components of the program include: creating a "welcome center" for parents and children who are visiting the school. Each partnering school runs a Kindergarten Kickoff event on the first day of school to make the day special and memorable for incoming kindergartners and their families. The OCD at Pittsburgh University hosts an interactive website for families and school/community leaders (<http://www.readyfreddy.org/>) that includes an activity calendar, information on planning a Kindergarten Kickoff event, and numerous resources for families, schools, and even researchers. Ready Freddy is supported by several philanthropic organizations.

Boston, Massachusetts' Countdown to Kindergarten

Countdown to Kindergarten was established in 1999 by the mayor's office to provide wraparound supports to families of children about to start kindergarten. Countdown to Kindergarten continues to be sponsored by the mayor's office, along with the Boston Public Schools, and numerous public and private partners (e.g., public libraries, Boston Medical Center, Thrive by 5, WGBH Educational Foundation) as well as local community organizations (e.g., Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative). Countdown to Kindergarten hosts a [website](#) that includes information about kindergarten registration, the city's schools, activities for families, calendar of events, and a list of resources for educators. Local public libraries and other community-based organizations help to connect families to area schools and services.

A unique feature of Countdown to Kindergarten is the partnership with Boston Children's Museum. The museum has a 1,500-square-foot model kindergarten classroom that is a permanent exhibit. The classroom is set up with stations typically found in a developmentally appropriate kindergarten (e.g., reading area, arts center). Children can practice skills such as taking turns, sitting in a circle for story time, and packing a backpack (Fleming, 2016).

Portland, Oregon's Early Kindergarten Transition Program

Multnomah County in Oregon offers a three-week summer "Early Kindergarten Transition" (EKT) program in its Title I schools. EKT "prioritizes...children who have not had a structured preschool experience, have a primary language other than English, and/or struggled with attendance or behavior when enrolled in Head Start" (Tarasawa, Ralson, and Waggoner, 2016, p.2). One feature that differentiates EKT from other summer-before-kindergarten programs is the family component that runs alongside the school-based program for children.

Children attend the EKT program five half-day sessions per week for three weeks at the end of the summer. The curriculum is focused on early literacy, practicing kindergarten routines and expectations, and developing relationships with the kindergarten teacher and classroom peers. While a child attends the EKT program, parents and guardians are required to attend meetings twice a week. The goal of these meetings is to promote family involvement. These family meetings focus on: early literacy and math strategies for families to use at home with their child, the importance of regular school attendance, and the importance of families developing relationships with the kindergarten teacher and school staff.

The results of a longitudinal study of EKT comparing children who participated in the program with comparable groups that did not participate suggest some positive impacts. Children who attended EKT had higher school attendance rates than those who did not participate, and that trend continued beyond kindergarten. Additionally, a higher proportion of EKT students achieved literacy benchmarks as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) than students who did not participate in EKT (Tarasawa, Ralson, and Waggoner, 2016).

Louisville, Kentucky's Camp Ready4K

For the past six years, the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) district in Louisville, Kentucky has offered Camp Ready4K, a free summer kindergarten readiness "camp" for children entering kindergarten in the fall. In 2016, 700 children participated. The Camp is supported by public and private funders, and a partnership with local Catholic schools (Fleming, 2016).

Camp Ready4K is held in ten locations in the district and runs throughout the month of July. It operates five hours every weekday for four consecutive weeks. The Camp is taught by early childhood educators, kindergarten teachers, and educational specialists. Although the opportunity to attend Camp Ready4K is available to all incoming kindergartners in the JCPS district, children from families with lower incomes and who had limited access to preschool programs are prioritized.

Evidence suggests that Camp Ready4K is having a positive impact. In a comparison of the children's results on the district's kindergarten skills assessment in 2016, 70% of the children attending the Camp were deemed "prepared" at the beginning of kindergarten. However, only 48% of the children who did not participate in Camp Ready4K were found to be "prepared" (Fleming, 2016).

STATE POLICIES AND PRACTICES CREATING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PRE-K AND K-3

The main reason why children and families may struggle with transitioning to kindergarten is the oftentimes stark differences between prekindergarten (pre-K) and kindergarten. What if those differences were diminished? What if there was a continuum of practices across pre-K, kindergarten, and possibly the primary grades?

Some states are seeking to create a more seamless system through aligned standards, data sharing, and professional development that brings together teachers from pre-K, kindergarten, and grades 1-3. Developing school leaders who are knowledgeable about early learning, pre-K through grade 3, is another strategy states are using. The following section spotlights some of these state efforts.

New Jersey

Over the past few years, New Jersey has focused on aligning standards and practices across the pre-K through third grade (P-3) continuum to create continuity, promote developmentally appropriate practices, and produce a gradual progression from preschool through the primary grades. New Jersey has published a set of guidelines for teachers and school leaders that explains and illustrates P-3 appropriate practices: *Preschool Implementation Guidelines, Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines, and the newly published First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016). The Department also has produced a three-part video

series, [High Quality Kindergarten Today](#), that shows the Kindergarten Guidelines in action. These guidelines are supported by extensive professional development opportunities the state offers for both P-3 teachers and leaders.

Georgia

Georgia revised the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) to better align with the Georgia Performance Standards for kindergarten through third grade. Georgia has developed a statewide data system that follows a child from preschool through college. Hence, data from the Work Sampling System (WSS) used in state prekindergarten programs to assess child progress and demographic data are easily transferred to the elementary school where the child will attend kindergarten. Having this information helps kindergarten teachers and schools better prepare for the incoming kindergartners.

Preschool and kindergarten teachers in Georgia receive joint professional development the state offers in areas such as learning standards, formative assessment, and collecting and using data. Joint professional development can increase collaboration and establish a shared “language of preschool and kindergarten teaching practices” (Patton & Wang, 2012, p.7).

Minnesota

Minnesota is supporting elementary school principals to become preschool to third grade (P-3) leaders who create and support connections between pre-K and K-12. Since 2015, Minnesota has implemented a three-part [leadership series](#) for elementary principals. This year-long professional learning series is delivered through online modules and in-person meetings. The curriculum focuses on understanding the P-3 continuum, high-quality learning environments and teaching, blended learning environments, and using multiple measures to assess child progress and improve teaching and learning.

In 1977, Minnesota established a statewide, free early childhood health and development screening program that is administered at local school districts. The screening includes: hearing and vision tests, height and weight measurement, a check on immunizations, and an assessment of large and small motor development. The screening also assesses children’s language and communication skills, their social and emotional development, and their cognitive and thinking skills ([Minnesota Early Childhood Screening webpage](#)). Screening results can indicate if there are any issues with the child’s physical health and development. If there are issues, referrals to appropriate services are made. Families are advised to have their child screened at any age; however, screening is required of all children prior to kindergarten. Having the local schools host the screening brings families to the school their child will be attending. Screening also enables school staff to be ready for the incoming kindergartners.

Washington

Washington revised its early learning standards to reflect a birth through grade 3 continuum. The [Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines Birth Through Third Grade](#) was published in 2012 and are aligned with the Common Core language arts and mathematics standards the state adopted for K-3. Aligned standards across preschool and K-3 make for a smoother preschool to kindergarten transition. The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS) has three parts (Butts & Taylor, 2014):

- 1. Kindergarten Entry Assessment:** Kindergarten teachers observe and record each kindergartner’s development in six areas: social-emotional, physical, cognitive, language, literacy, and mathematics. These observations are recorded and analyzed using a customized version of GOLD™ by Teaching Strategies® by October 31st.
- 2. Family Connection:** Kindergarten teachers meet with the families of their incoming class prior to or shortly after school starts. The teacher also meets with the children’s pre-K teachers. This way, kindergarten teachers begin building relationships with families and bridge the preschool to kindergarten divide. Kindergarten teachers are trained to do these visits and have three days at the start of the school year to complete them.

- 3. Early Learning Collaboration:** Throughout the school year, elementary school staff, early learning program staff, and community groups meet to discuss ways to improve children’s learning experiences throughout the birth through grade 3 continuum.

In addition, Washington provides professional development and resources to teachers and families as part of WaKIDS. The following is a brief list of some of these resources:

- Washington State’s [Kindergarten Transition Summary Form](#) for teachers in early learning programs to complete for children going to kindergarten
- [Family Connection Guidelines for Teachers](#)
- “[Introducing Me!](#)”, a booklet to guide the family connection conversation. It is available in several languages.

CONCLUSION

The transition to kindergarten is an important event for young children and their families. Some families experience a smooth transition process while other families, especially children from families with lower incomes and opportunities, may experience a very bumpy and discontinuous transition process. Research indicates that the quality of a child’s kindergarten transition process is important since it has implications for the child’s future outcomes. Every child and family deserves a positive start to formal schooling.

Positive transitions don’t simply happen; they require planning, collaboration, communication, time and resources. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) offers a blueprint for developing a system at the community and district level that can be responsive to the various types and levels of need families with young children entering kindergarten present. Many partners and relationships are needed to bridge the preschool and kindergarten divide.

States as well as communities can have a leadership role in supporting smooth transitions. As the examples illustrate, states can enact policies that build a preschool through third grade continuum, or require intentional planning and collaboration. They can provide resources for joint professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers, interactive websites for families and educators, and resources to fund grant programs for communities to develop innovative programs and supports for children and families. And states can use their “bully pulpit” to communicate statewide about the importance of smooth transitions to kindergarten.

Despite the leadership role states can have, transition activities occur at the local level through specific strategies (e.g., preschoolers’ visits to kindergarten in the spring), relationships, and in larger scale programs such as Ready Freddy, Countdown to Kindergarten, and summer “camps” prior to the start of kindergarten. These efforts work to smooth out the bumps of transitioning to kindergarten for all children and families.

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