



## Research Brief

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# Facilitating Kindergarten Transitions: The Role of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between Head Start and Local Education Agencies

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## SUMMARY

The analyses presented here are part of a larger project, *Understanding Children's Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten* (HS2K), a joint research venture between NORC at the University of Chicago, Child Trends, and the National P-3 Center at University of Colorado Denver, with funding from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. This secondary data analysis supports other project activities, including a review of the knowledge base, case studies, instrument development, and other secondary data analyses.

The HS2K research team analyzed 23 MOUs from 10 Head Start programs that participated in the Office of Head Start & Public Schools Collaboration Demonstration Project (CDP). This 2020 initiative brought together many early childhood partners and staff across Head Start and public-school systems to improve collaboration and coordination on kindergarten transitions.

These MOUs, a federal legislative requirement for both Head Start and Title I funded public-school systems, are written expressions of these partnerships that can shed light on the perspectives, policies, professional supports, and practices that influence kindergarten transition experiences.

- Although kindergarten transitions were not the explicit primary focus of the MOUs, these documents often included detailed descriptions of partnerships across two systems that attempted to align expectations, resource allocations, and key activities.
- When MOUs explicitly mentioned kindergarten transitions, there were three federal policy requirements often noted: **1)** creating cross-system communication channels; **2)** developing family collaboration and involvement practices; and **3)** transferring, sharing, and obtaining student records and data.
- Findings suggest that relatively few MOUs currently contain explicit references to kindergarten transition perspectives, policies, professional supports, or practices. Yet, MOUs remain an important potential vehicle by which to align transition-related activities with key legislation, statutes, and requirements, and create collaboration and communication structures. This brief provides examples of MOU language that may support aligned transition activities.
- There is an opportunity for HS programs and LEA administrators to think more collectively about and articulate joint policies, perspectives, practices and professional supports that support the kindergarten transition. However, there is also an opportunity for more specific federal and state guidance to programs and schools on what should be included in MOUs.

**READ MORE ABOUT THE CDP:** <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/office-head-start-public-schools-collaboration-demonstration-project-summary-practice-implications>.

## Introduction

### HEAD START-LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY (LEA) PARTNERSHIPS

**Head Start has a long history of providing comprehensive supports for children as they transition into kindergarten.** This approach is driven partially by specific legal requirements that direct Head Start grantees

to coordinate and collaborate with the schools and local education agencies (LEAs) into which Head Start children will transition.<sup>i</sup> Current policies require Head Start grantees to formalize these collaborations through memoranda of understanding (MOUs).

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)<sup>ii</sup>, created a parallel requirement for the kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) system. ESSA requires formal—by written agreement—coordination and collaboration between LEAs that receive Title I funding and local Head Start grantees (and other early care and education [ECE] providers). Legal requirements on both the Head Start and K-12 sides lay out what MOUs should broadly accomplish.

## MOUs Reviewed

We received a total of **23 MOUs from 10 CDP** Head Start sites:

**6 sites sent a single MOU.**

**4 sites sent multiple MOUs** representing agreements that one Head Start agency held with multiple LEAs.

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***Note:** Because the MOUs were primarily provided by the Head Start programs, they may not fully represent the extent to which each partner is invested in the shared work.*

Although MOUs are required, we do not know how they may or may not facilitate kindergarten transitions. In this study, we examined the structure and content of a selection of Head Start programs' and LEAs' MOUs. This is a first step toward better understanding the role MOUs play in supporting the transition to kindergarten and serves as a starting point for future research.

MOUs can be a key policy lever to provide explicit linkages between ECE and K-12 systems. They can potentially structure relationships that enable coordination and collaboration of transition strategies; this in turn can fundamentally reshape children's experiences of and their families' engagement in the kindergarten transition.<sup>iii</sup>

These agreements have the potential to influence the presence and strength of shared perspectives and cross-system policies, professional supports, and

transition practices. Having these shared beliefs and approaches are hypothesized to support the most positive kindergarten transition experiences.<sup>iv</sup> However, policymakers know little about what MOUs actually include. Understanding the structure and content of existing MOUs is a necessary first step to learning how MOUs are related to actual transition strategies, which can then guide the development of future MOUs.

**We examined whether and how MOUs describe the ways in which Head Start and LEAs align their perspectives, policies, professional supports, and kindergarten transition practices.**

## Methods

**HS2K project researchers received MOU agreements from Head Start programs that participated in the Office of Head Start & Public Schools Collaboration Demonstration Project (CDP sites).<sup>v</sup> These MOUs represented their relationships with their CDP LEA partners, and in some cases, their relationships with other LEAs.**

## Focus of This Analysis

Our analysis focused on references to kindergarten transitions in each MOU, including:

- The structural features of the MOUs
- If and how kindergarten transition perspectives, policies, professional supports, and practices are described in MOUs
- Whether and how MOUs refer to key statutes and regulations related to kindergarten transitions

We focused on MOUs from these sites because their CDP participation demonstrated a commitment to collaboration and were likely to have purposeful MOUs between Head Start and LEAs. Given their participation in this unique initiative, however, they may not be representative of the national context.

We used a conventional content analysis<sup>vi</sup> and manual coding approach with Dedoose qualitative analysis software to categorize information in the MOUs. This software allows researchers to assign analysis codes that categorize information from written documents. We began with an initial list of codes we were interested in exploring within the data. After applying initial codes, we developed a more robust codebook influenced by the information in the MOUs (i.e., an inductive approach<sup>vii</sup>) and did another round of coding.

## Findings

### STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF MOUS

#### How Kindergarten Transitions Appear in MOUs

**18 out of 23 MOUs**—representing 7 of 10 Head Start CDP sites—specifically mentioned the kindergarten transition. Some included simple mentions in a purpose statement while others included full descriptions of transition-related policies, practices, and professional supports.

**14 MOUs** included purpose statements, but only 3 included an explicit goal of achieving a smooth transition to kindergarten.

**5 MOUs** (representing 3 of 10 Head Start CDP sites) had sections dedicated specifically to transitions, with 3 assigning responsibilities to signatories and 2 laying out shared responsibilities. In some cases, these also included transitions for 3-year-olds moving into pre-kindergarten.

**13 MOUs** (representing 6 of 10 Head Start CDP sites) incorporated transitions-related items into broader program, service, or content areas.

We did not find existing research on education-related MOU content or structure, so we examined how sites organized these documents. The ways programs organize their MOUs and who signs them can provide a sense of how partners think about their relationships, the purpose and goals of their partnerships, what they prioritize, and how they think of each other's roles and responsibilities.

One indicator of organization is the headers used to name each major section of the MOU. Another indicator to inform our understanding of sites' collaborative approaches is which organizations listed as potential signatories (Exhibit 1). Across all MOUs, there were two primary approaches to MOU organization.

#### Exhibit 1: Signatories for the 23 MOUs



**Organization Approach #1: All but three MOUs used headers that were labeled either by content/service area (i.e., “special education”) or by signatory responsibilities.**

Some MOUs used both approaches. For example, some MOUs started with main headers that focused on content/service area, followed by sub-headers related to each signatory’s responsibilities. Others reversed this strategy and used signatory responsibilities as their main headers, with content/service area as their sub-headers to further organize those signatory responsibilities.

The vast majority of MOUs reviewed in this study structured partnerships around key program areas, priorities, or activities, addressing these topics discretely.

**Organization Approach #2: Some MOUs detailed individual or shared activities and responsibilities, or even some combination of individual and shared responsibilities**

Whether and how an MOU dictates responsibilities can provide insights into perspectives programs hold about kindergarten transition, such as the responsibilities of ECE programs compared to the responsibilities of elementary schools or LEAs. Whether shared responsibilities are mentioned and how much they are emphasized could indicate a more two-sided and equitable partnership.

**Responsibilities in MOUs**

**2 MOUs** dealt exclusively with shared responsibilities.

**1 MOU** listed at least some shared signatory responsibilities separately from individual ones.

**1 MOU** detailed activities and responsibilities as exclusively those of individual signatories.

**KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION PERSPECTIVES, POLICIES, PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS, AND PRACTICES**

Next, we considered the language the MOUs used for kindergarten transition approaches that fell under the categories of perspectives, policies, professional supports, and practices (the “4Ps”).

**We used these 4Ps as a conceptual framework for understanding different types of transition approaches (Exhibit 2).<sup>viii</sup>**

The 4Ps offer a way to organize our understanding of how Head Start and LEA systems collaborate and coordinate with each other. Each of the 4Ps is present in legislation impacting both systems, as shown in Exhibit 3. The HS2K theory of change suggests that strong alignment among the 4Ps within and across the Head Start and K-12 systems will lead to the most successful transitions for teachers, families, and children.<sup>ix</sup> Therefore, the fact that the 4Ps are embedded in policies in both systems sets the stage for Head Start programs and LEAs/schools to coordinate and align transition approaches.

We found that the MOUs we examined had little mention of 3 of the 4Ps: perspectives, policies, and professional supports related to kindergarten transitions. However, there were more explicit mentions of kindergarten transition practices (the 4<sup>th</sup> P).

**Exhibit 2: Defining the 4Ps**



**PERSPECTIVES:** Visions, values, and beliefs. How might MOUs help align administrator, teacher, and parent perspectives on roles and expectations across the transition process?

**POLICIES:** Explicit documentation of organizational regulations, standards, procedures, and guidance. How might MOUs help align and support policies both within and across systems that strengthen coordinated transition practices and improve cross-system communication?

**PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS:** Learning opportunities, professional development, and relationship building. How might MOUs help foster an alignment of perspectives, connections across systems, and trust among teachers and administrators?

**PRACTICES:** Concrete activities designed to support the kindergarten transition. How might MOUs help coordinate practices across Head Start and public schools to improve adjustment, development, and academic outcomes?

**Exhibit 3: Examples of the 4Ps in Legislative Language of the Head Start Act and Every Student Succeeds Acts**

	Head Start Act (HSA)	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborate to ensure a comprehensive, two-sided approach to transitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish channels of communication between school and Head Start staff to facilitate coordination and alignment</li> </ul>
Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enter into an MOU with local education agencies</li> <li>Share curricular and instructional resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Link LEA educational services with Head Start agency services</li> <li>Receive and transfer child records</li> </ul>
Professional Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Align professional development and technical assistance to improve early learning experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organize and participate in joint transition-related training with Head Start staff</li> </ul>
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help parents of dual-language learners understand the instructional and other services provided by the child’s new elementary school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct family meetings regarding developmental and individual child needs that involve teachers on both sides</li> </ul>

## PERSPECTIVES

For **perspectives**, we found a variety of examples of vision, value, and belief statements related to kindergarten transitions.

For example, one MOU stated a goal to “*Create and maintain a meaningful partnership to promote school readiness so that children from low-income families in Head Start programs, or who are preschool age, may receive comprehensive services to prepare them for elementary school and to address any potential ‘achievement gap.’*” This may indicate a perspective that school readiness is more than just academic preparation and may help set expectations that school readiness includes comprehensive services. However, this also places the burden of readiness on Head Start programs and children and families; instead, they could include language recognizing the roles LEAs and schools have in supporting all children based on where they are when they enter school.

### Perspectives in MOUs

**4 MOUs** included ensuring a smooth transition as part of the documents’ purpose.

**2 MOUs** noted that they wanted to avoid duplication of efforts across parties.

**2 MOUs** provided guiding principles that included creating meaningful partnerships to promote school readiness and preparing children for school.

## POLICIES

MOUs are considered policy documents in and of themselves. However, the MOUs we examined also included discussions and references to other policies. Although MOUs are federally required agreements (ESSA, Head Start Act [HSA]), we looked to see how sites referenced or addressed requirements or guidance contained in other state and federal statutes. Therefore, for **policies**, we analyzed examples of local, state, and federal legislation that were directly mentioned in the MOUs.

**The MOUs explicitly mentioned multiple federal policies. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was cited the most, while HSA, HSPPS, and ESSA were often not explicitly referenced.**

Although mentions of policies were often specific, one MOU described the need to “*establish comprehensive transition policies and procedures that support children transitioning to school*” and noted that the LEA would be included in developing those policies.

MOUs varied in whether they described transition approaches for all children and families or were targeted for specific groups of children and families (some of which are the subject of specific requirements in the mentioned legislation). IDEA was the most frequently mentioned federal policy with kindergarten transitions provisions and, subsequently, children with disabilities was the most frequently mentioned target population. Other specific populations mentioned less often included: dual-language learners, migrant families, and families without stable living situations. This finding indicated a purposeful focus on children with disabilities and other special needs across many MOUs.

We examined how Head Start programs used MOUs to implement key laws and regulations related to kindergarten transitions. Since MOUs are federally required agreements under HSA and ESSA, we looked to see how MOUs referenced or addressed specific requirements or guidance articulated in the laws and regulations; we also examined whether *other* state and federal statutes were cited in the MOUs.



## MOUs referenced key laws and regulations in one of two ways:

- **Explicit mentions of policies** (e.g., maintain homeless children in their program of origin [per ESSA], according to the best interest of the child).
- **Descriptions of practices** that described legally required kindergarten transition practices without explicitly mentioning the policy that required the practice.

**For example, an MOU might have mentioned practices that align with the requirements of the Head Start Act without explicitly mentioning the Act itself (e.g., “The overall goal is to ensure a timely, effective plan for the individual child and family that promotes on-going communication and continuity of services to sustain benefits the child has gained through participation in early intervention programs”).**

Findings showed that MOUs often described transition practices that met legal and/or regulatory expectations but only sometimes cited the statute and regulation explicitly. It is important to note that Head Start issued regulatory guidance on kindergarten transitions (HSPPS), but there was no similar regulatory guidance provided to LEAs in concert with ESSA.

- MOUs referenced local or state legislation the most, which suggests that Head Start programs were attuned to the immediate needs of their communities. For example, some MOUs referenced state privacy laws and state-based early education standards.
- It was less common for MOUs to explicitly reference federal laws or regulations, such as HSA, HSPPS, and ESSA. The federal policy explicitly mentioned the most was the IDEA. This may suggest that Head Start programs and LEAs view transition activities pertaining to children with disabilities as more important to spell out explicitly in MOUs than transition activities pertaining to Head Start-enrolled children generally. It could also suggest that programs and LEAs receive stronger legal guidance regarding children with disabilities.
- For only one site, all policies that were explicitly mentioned in their MOU were federal policies.

## PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

For **professional supports**, we looked to see whether MOUs communicated information about teachers' and administrators' transition-related professional development. We sought to understand whether staff received the same types, amounts, and depth of information and trainings across Head Start and LEA settings. While research suggests that joint, cross-system professional development is associated with positive transition outcomes for teachers, families, and children (Ehrlich et al., 2021), we found that discussion of within- and across-system professional supports were not present in the vast majority of MOUs.

- One MOU out of the 23 examined noted that the partners agreed to “provide consultation and technical assistance to each other, relative to delivery of services as appropriate to develop and implement students' service or transition plans.”
- Two MOUs discussed joint, cross-systems training regarding transitions. One mentioned joint planning committee meetings, and one mentioned opportunities for Head Start and kindergarten teachers to meet and discuss transitioning children's individual needs.

Head Start programs and LEAs may be able to implement more effective transition strategies by communicating and committing to specific professional support opportunities for administrators and teachers. This could include information about the content, amount, and purpose of those professional learning sessions.

## PRACTICES

Overall, we found many examples of concrete practices, which we present in Exhibit 4. We categorize them by points of connection within and across systems.<sup>x</sup>

- Specific practices were mentioned in 16 out of 23 MOUs. Of the different types of practices, organizational practices (i.e., Head Start to school) were most often described—mirroring the requirements of the HSA and ESSA (Exhibit 3), which focus on organizational connections.
- Across all four types (Exhibit 4), most transition practices mentioned focused on coordinated family engagement activities. MOUs generally appeared to place an emphasis on a warm handoff of families between systems, which indicates the perspective that families are vital to successful transitions.

### Exhibit 4. Transition Practices Referenced in MOUs

FAMILY TO SCHOOL	HEAD START TO SCHOOL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Registration supports</li> <li>• Communication and parent outreach</li> <li>• Provide information to parents on kindergarten requirements and rights</li> <li>• Support families during the transition</li> <li>• Help parents understand importance of parent involvement during transition</li> <li>• Help parents understand services provided by school after leaving Head Start</li> <li>• Transition meeting for parents</li> <li>• Provide literature on transitions to parents</li> <li>• Provide parents with workshops on kindergarten</li> <li>• Help families fill out health forms for kindergarten</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint staff development between pre-k and kindergarten teachers</li> <li>• Data sharing between pre-k and kindergarten</li> <li>• Principals and kindergarten teachers join transition planning meetings</li> <li>• Teachers present at meeting on what to expect in kindergarten</li> <li>• Share Head Start records with kindergarten teacher</li> <li>• Meetings between Head Start representatives and kindergarten teachers</li> <li>• District to share information on kindergarten events with Head Start</li> <li>• Head Start invited to Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), or Individual Interagency Intervention Plan (IIIP) meetings and periodic reviews on Head Start children</li> <li>• LEA to provide registration documents to Head Start</li> <li>• Coordinate registration for families</li> <li>• LEA to designate a Head Start Transition Service Facilitator</li> <li>• Head Start to provide LEA with names of children transitioning for school census</li> <li>• Set up procedures for transferring records</li> </ul>
<h4>CHILD TO SCHOOL</h4>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation for children</li> <li>• Take children to visit kindergarten classrooms</li> <li>• Help children get familiar with kindergarten setting</li> </ul>	
<h4>COMMUNITY TO SCHOOL</h4>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation of pre-k and Head Start staff at a county event</li> </ul>	



## Summary & Implications

For this brief, we analyzed 23 MOUs from 10 Head Start CDP sites to better understand their content and structure. The small sample of sites and their participation in a federally supported program emphasizing coordination and collaboration are limitations to our analyses, since these sites might have been more likely to include purposeful thinking about transitions. Although these MOUs may not be representative of the broader landscape of Head Start-LEA MOUs, our examination is an important stepping stone for future research that could systematically examine the connections between the content of MOUs and systems-level coordination and collaboration.

Overall, we found that:

- The MOUs were primarily policy documents, establishing the structures that support the implementation of transition practices and professional supports.
- No standard template was used for the MOUs, but perspectives about the kindergarten transition and collaboration came through in some MOUs' purpose statements and goals. Not all MOUs included clear purpose statements/goals, and few explicitly described supporting the kindergarten transition as part of their purpose. Without these purpose statements and goals, it was hard to decipher how those sites thought about their partnership or their perceived role in supporting children and families as they moved from Head Start to kindergarten.
- MOUs rarely mentioned federal policies and regulations related to kindergarten transitions explicitly. IDEA was the most mentioned federal policy. This indicated that Head Start and LEA settings were more purposeful in their focus on transition provisions for children with disabilities and other special needs.
- The MOUs studied did not outline specific details, procedures, processes—rather they set high-level policy goals. This means that perspectives, policies, and professional supports related to kindergarten transitions had minimal representation across MOUs. MOUs set out *what should* happen but did not necessarily lay out a path to get there. Very few MOUs provided details for how kindergarten transition strategies would be implemented (e.g., timing, dosage, resources).

Although some MOUs provided significant details about kindergarten transition approaches, the majority did not. This suggests that MOUs may be just one document or tool needed to ensure comprehensive transition approaches. For example, MOUs may set the high-level policies, and then partners may create transition plans or implementation timelines that provide more specific information on how the approaches would be put into practice.

**A key implication of this work is that MOUs between Head Start programs and LEAs may not be meeting their full potential in aligning and supporting the implementation of cross-system transition strategies. There is more opportunity for administrators on both sides to collectively think about—and articulate in one document—joint policies, perspectives, practices, and professional supports that support the kindergarten transition.**

On the flip side, both systems need more specific guidance and expectations on developing successful MOUs. The information on MOUs in policies and regulations such as ESSA and the Head Start Act are limited, and state and local guidance on MOUs varies. More guidance is needed at the systems-level to better support program level MOU development. However, MOUs alone are unlikely to lead to the successful implementation of transition approaches.

Analysis of MOU content and structure is just one piece of the puzzle when considering the best practices for MOU development and use. Although MOUs are required by federal law for most LEAs and all Head Start programs, researchers have yet to probe the links among MOUs, their structure, their content, and the presence of strong coordination and collaboration between signatories. We do not yet know if the presence of an MOU helps lead to smooth kindergarten transitions for teachers, children, and families. This examination of 23 MOUs at 10 CDP Head Start sites was a first step in that direction, laying the groundwork to inform future research questions by detailing structure, content, and approaches in this purposeful sample.

Future research should examine the development of MOUs and their direct influence on the existence, implementation, and within- and cross-systems alignment of the 4Ps—policies, perspectives, practices, and professional supports.

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<sup>i</sup> Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9801 (2007).

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services; Administration for Children & Families (2016). *Head Start Program Performance Standards*. Available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>.

<sup>ii</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015).

<sup>iii</sup> The National Head Start Association (NHSA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) authored the 2017 report titled *New Early Childhood Coordination Requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): A Toolkit for State and Local Education Agencies, Head Start Programs, and the Early Childhood Field*. The report highlights statutory requirements, sample MOUs and their role in strong Head Start–LEA partnerships, guidance for entities establishing MOUs with partners, and sample transition activities and strategies to emulate. Available at: <https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/Toolkit-New%20Early%20Childhood%20Coordination%20Requirements%20in%20the%20ESSA-for%20pr....pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Ehrlich, S. B., Cook, K. D., Thomson, D., Kauertz, K., Barrows, M., Halle, T., Gordon, M., Soli, M., Schaper, A., Her, S., & Guerra, G. (2021). *Understanding Children's Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten: A Literature Review and Theory of Change*, OPRE Report #2021-128, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>v</sup> National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning. *Office of Head Start & Public Schools Collaboration Demonstration Project: Summary and Practice Implications*. Available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/office-head-start-public-schools-collaboration-demonstration-project-summary-practice-implications>

<sup>vi</sup> Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15, 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>

<sup>vii</sup> Bradley, E. H., Curry, L. A., & Devers, K. J. (2007). Qualitative data analysis for health services research: developing taxonomy, themes, and theory. *Health Services Research*, 42, 1758-1772. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6773.2006.00684.x>

<sup>viii</sup> Ehrlich et al. (2021)

<sup>ix</sup> Ehrlich et al. (2021)

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services; Administration for Children & Families. *Transition to Kindergarten*. Available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/article/transition-kindergarten>; Ehrlich et al. (2021)

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