Planning the Transition to Kindergarten: Collaborations, Connections, and Six Steps to Success

This document provides a step-by-step approach to build, implement, and evaluate a kindergarten transition plan. Four sections are included that cover:

1. **The importance of kindergarten transition, forming a transition team, and fostering four types of connections**
2. **Six steps to transition planning**
3. **Successful stories of kindergarten transition**
4. **Resources**

The ideas presented here are largely based on the book *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools*, by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, at the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning.

SECTION 1:
The importance of kindergarten transition, forming a transition team, and fostering four types of connections

Transition Experience Matters

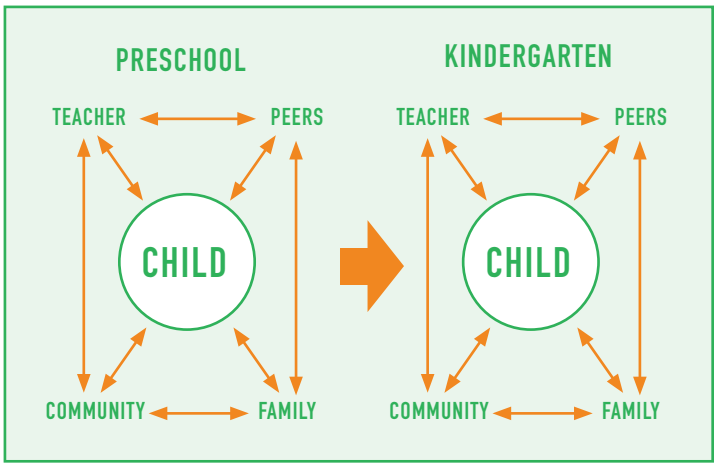
The transition from Head Start to kindergarten is an important event in children's lives and can be challenging for those who are not prepared for the adjustment. Multiple large-scale research studies have found that more transition activities provided to children and families (e.g., visiting the new setting, or forming a relationship with a new teacher before schools starts) are associated with the following gains in kindergarten (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008):

- Higher ratings of social emotional competence and reduced stress at the beginning of the school year
- Improved academic growth in kindergarten and increased family involvement over the year
- Stronger benefits for children living in poverty

Additionally, research suggests that when children experience discontinuities between preschool and kindergarten, they may be at greater risk for academic failure and social adjustment problems (Conyer, Reynolds, & Ou, 2003). Therefore, building and implementing a plan for seamless transition from preschool to kindergarten can make a significant difference for children's early education experience.

A Collaborative Framework

A collaborative approach to the transition to kindergarten recognizes that children, families, schools, peers, and communities are all interconnected throughout the transition process. A collaborative framework considers the contexts and people that interact as the child transitions from a preschool or home setting to kindergarten. The figure below illustrates this idea of a child being surrounded by a web of relationships that can support him or her during this transition. It shows that positive, high-quality relationships among teachers, peers, and families are especially important during transitions. These relationships can serve both as bridges from Head Start to kindergarten and as resources to help children and their families during the period of adjustment.



Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta (2000)

Four Types of Connections that Support the Transition to Kindergarten

It is important for educators to understand the different types of connections that facilitate effective transitions, and the goals associated with each, to plan successful transition experiences for children. We discuss the four key connections below along with a short explanation of each.

1. Child–School Connections

There are two goals of this connection. The first is to increase children's familiarity with the kindergarten setting, including the classroom, school environment, and their new teachers. The second is to increase the teachers' familiarity with individual children. Some of the ways to foster child-school connections are to:

- Establish relationships between Head Start children and kindergarten teachers. This can be done through visits to a kindergarten classroom during the Head Start year or through visits from a kindergarten teacher to the Head Start classroom. The visits will give Head Start children a sense of what a kindergarten teacher and classroom are like.
- Use school-wide activities, such as a spring fair or an informal summer playground time (e.g., a theme event such as "Popsicles in the Park") where children can meet and visit with their future peers and teachers. Explore other activities, such as allowing Head Start children to experience their first school bus ride, to connect children to their new school.
- Have children practice kindergarten routines in Head Start. For example, Head Start children can sing songs that are typically sung in kindergarten or practice using lunch trays like those that will be used in their new school.
- Familiarize Head Start children with kindergarten through conversations and stories. Teachers may read books that talk about kindergarten during story time (see the Resources section for a list of suggested books). Additionally, teachers can facilitate discussions with children about what they think kindergarten will be like, what kinds of worries they have about the transition, and how they can address those worries.

2. Family–School Connections

The goal of this connection is to increase family collaboration and engagement with the school during the transition process. Having a strong family relationship with the school can yield positive long-term outcomes for children (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2000). This goal can be accomplished by the following suggested practices:

- Have the teacher or transition coordinator contact the family before the start of kindergarten as well as after school begins. Contact before school begins can make families more comfortable with the elementary school, and therefore, more likely to become involved in their children's education. During this contact, information can be mutually shared. For example, families can share valuable information about their children's home lives and teachers can provide families with useful information about kindergarten expectations. Home visits are ideal for establishing these initial relationships with families.
- Involve families in the transition process by connecting them to community resources, such as physician's offices, behavioral consultants, and after-school programs.
- Conduct meetings for families about transition issues during elementary school orientation or an open house. Before the start of kindergarten, a group meeting can be held for families of Head Start children in the scheduled kindergarten classroom. Teachers can address the expectations for kindergarten and provide a tour of the school.

- Provide newsletters and resource materials that have information about the transition to kindergarten in the spring of the Head Start year. These materials can include springtime preparation for the transition, information on parent responsibilities, and summer transition packets. Give special attention to efforts aimed at reaching families who may not have the time or resources to attend open houses or fully understand information sent home about transition. Some ways to address this issue are to provide childcare and transportation for school events, such as open houses, provide information to parents in their native language, or make home visits to those families who are unable to travel to the school.

- Give families of dual-language learners information about their rights to have school documents, registration forms, and other important resources provided to them in their native languages. Direct families to additional resources, such as interpreters, when needed.

3. School–School Connections

The goal of this connection is to support the transition between Head Start and kindergarten classrooms. Head Start and kindergarten may facilitate the school-school connection by:

- Collaborating around placement, screening, and registration practices between Head Start and kindergarten (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2000).

- Aligning classroom practices by having the Head Start teacher, kindergarten teacher, and transition coordinator meet and discuss their programs and familiarize one another with classroom practices and routines. Some kindergarten routines, such as having lunch in a cafeteria or riding a school bus, may be incorporated into the Head Start day to help children prepare for their upcoming kindergarten experience.

- Encouraging kindergarten programs to identify and communicate clear expectations for children's performance and then work together with Head Start programs to ensure children have the opportunity to be taught the skills required to meet these expectations.

4. Community–School Connections

The goal of this connection is to support continuity in the transition process by using resources within the community. These resources may include community organizations, houses of worship, physicians' offices, and cultural organizations—essentially anyone in the community who works with young children and their families. These organizations can play a vital role in the transition process, especially in certain communities where families are hard to reach or are disconnected from the school environment. Schools can use these organizations to reach out to families and help them prepare their children for kindergarten.

Community linkages help ensure continuity for children and help provide cohesion to the services offered to children during the preschool and kindergarten years. Here are some ways to foster community-school connections:

- Ask community organizations, pediatricians' offices, and libraries to display or distribute brochures, videos, and home activity calendars to children and families. Also collaborate with community agencies that work with families (e.g., housing authority, social service agencies, etc.) to distribute information.

- Coordinate with local shops and restaurants that provide delivery (e.g., pizza restaurants) to deliver information about kindergarten registration to communities that might be difficult to reach by other methods.

SECTION 2:
Six Steps to Transition Planning

In this section we present six steps to successful kindergarten transition planning, along with tools and tips to help facilitate the planning and implementation process.

1

Step 1: Assess your partnerships—Identify transition team members and designate leaders.

Creating connections to facilitate a successful transition to kindergarten requires focused effort and leadership. Transition work is most effective when strong relationships and valuable partnerships linking children, families, school, and early childhood programs are established before kindergarten starts. Successful transition teams typically have these essential elements:

- Leadership and support from school principals
- Commitment to shared goals by all stakeholders
- Active engagement of preschool programs
- Shared understanding of the importance of quality early learning experiences
- Connection with families
- Ready access to community resources and support

It is also recommended that the transition team include individuals with a strong knowledge of services and procedures for dual-language learners and special education populations. Experts in these areas can provide valuable insights and guidance to ensure these populations' needs are met.

The ultimate goal of this step is to identify the key members and the leader(s) of your transition team. It is important to keep in mind that the leader needs to have the ability to direct resources, to focus attention, and to provide organization in ways that can facilitate the development of effective transition practices for children and families. Leaders should be able to control the allocation of resources and formation of policy that can shape transition planning and make it a priority for the community. Leaders should also have the ability and power to engage teachers, families, and communities in partnerships that build programs to help children experience a seamless kindergarten transition.

Creating connections to facilitate a successful transition to kindergarten requires focused effort and leadership.

This team has crucial roles and responsibilities in the planning for the transition, including:

- Identifying community-wide transition needs for parents, children, schools, and preschools.
- Identifying current transition practices and resources in the community.
- Providing support for the development of transition policies and practices.
- Facilitating coordination and organization across various agencies.
- Identifying key personnel related to transition in your school and including them in transition planning.
- Meeting regularly to communicate about transition planning and carry out the subsequent steps to be covered.

2

Step 2: Identify goals.

Once the transition team has been formed, it is essential that all members understand the scope of the work. To do so, the team needs to establish a common vision of what the transition to kindergarten should look like and use this vision to set goals. It is important to identify the goals for your team because without them, your team may have difficulty determining what course of action is best for children and families.

Here are some guidelines for creating transition goals:

- *Set broad goals at first:* Broad goals should be made to create a long-term vision for your transition team (e.g., "To enhance children's school readiness" or "To foster the child-school connection"). These goals will also help your team decide how you want to focus your resources and spend your time, and they will help to focus your more specific goals later on in the process.
- *Set measurable goals:* When setting up transition goals, your team should set goals that include benchmarks that can be used to measure the degree of success you are achieving to determine whether particular transition practices should be continued.
- *Set attainable goals: T*he goals must be realistic and achievable for your transition team.
- *Set time-bound goals:* There should be a deadline for every goal.

3

Step 3: Assess what current transition activities are being practiced in your community for each type of connection.

After identifying who will be on your transition team and setting initial goals, team members should come together as a group and identify what current transition activities are being practiced in your community for each of the four types of connections addressed in Section 1. For each connection (e.g., child-school, family-school, etc.), your team should consider what has already been done to foster:

- Sharing of information
- Building of relational support
- Aligning settings

This planning step will allow the transition team to focus on the area that needs the most attention (i.e., connections that are currently either not practiced or are occurring less frequently). In addition to assessing current transition activities, it is important to identify any specific resources that support these connections.

4

Step 4: Identify data or evidence you have that practices are or are not working.

The goal of this step is for the team to create a data collection process, or use data you already have, to identify evidence of whether current practices are working. This is a crucial step mainly because your team will use these data to evaluate transition activities and revise future transition plans. Depending on your team's goals, there are several types of data you could use to obtain evidence. Each of these types of data serves a different purpose, and the type you use should be chosen to fit your program's needs. These include:

- Informal observation
- Interviews
- Surveys
- Rating scales

If your team does not already have a formal data collection system in place, it is appropriate to use informal observations based on your transition team's prior experiences. For example, let's say that you have hosted a kindergarten orientation night at your school for the past four years, but last year you posted fliers in

public places, such as libraries and physicians' offices, in addition to sending information home with children. You may have noticed that last year's attendance at your orientation was noticeably higher than it had been in the past. Although these are not formal data, informal observation suggests that perhaps the practice of distributing information out in the community further promoted the school's kindergarten orientation event.

For planning purposes, you may consider more formal data collection, such as using interviews. For example, if one of your goals is to foster the family-school connection, your team may use parent interviews to evaluate the quality of this connection. These interviews serve the dual purpose of engaging families in a relationship with schools and gathering information about family experiences in schools and at home. Interviews could focus on parents' descriptions of their children's school experiences, children's behavior, routines in preparing for school, family relationships with schools, and peer contact outside of school. These interviews provide a window into parents' perceptions about their roles in supporting the transition and other school activities. With these interviews, school staff typically find it helpful to gather the information and then talk to the parents about their responses.

Another example of data collection is to use surveys. If one of your team's goals is to foster the school–school connection, these surveys could be designed to identify team members' experiences with various school-school transition activities. Head Start and kindergarten teachers, principals, and transition coordinators would respond to questions concerning the use of specific school-school transition activities, how helpful those activities are, and barriers to those transition practices. These questionnaires can provide information that will inform transition planning.

For planning purposes, you may consider more formal data collection, such as using interviews.

5

Step 5: Plan and prioritize: Reevaluate goals or create new ones and plan steps to take.

This step of transition planning is perhaps the most involved, and therefore, may require the most time in the planning process. One of the reasons behind the complexity of Step 5 is that there are several aspects that should be considered, such as the need to (a) reevaluate goals, (b) anticipate barriers, (c) create a timeline, and (d) assign roles to appropriate individuals.

(a) Reevaluate goals—Based on information gathered in Step 3, you may have found connections that need more attention than others. This information, along with data gathered in Step 4, may prompt you to reevaluate or refine the broad goals you set in Step 2 into more specific goals. When reevaluating your goals, you may consider the individual needs of your region or school system and set those goals accordingly. For example, you may find from Steps 3 and 4 that the area that needs the most attention is the family-school connection. Therefore, your team could then set specific goals, such as, "To increase family engagement during the kindergarten registration period."

(b) Anticipate barriers—Once the transition team has come up with its goals and planned the next action steps, the team can turn to identifying potential barriers to implementing effective transition practices. Some commonly reported barriers are: teachers' summer work not being supported by salary; transition plans not being available; home visits being dangerous; and parents not bringing their children for registration or open houses. The transition team should work to identify barriers that are specific to its community and then work to brainstorm ways around those barriers. For example, there could be factors that may bar parents from being active participants in the transition

process, such as having a work schedule that interferes with transition activities or a lack of transportation. Or they may simply just feel uncomfortable at school. By considering such factors during the planning process, the transition team will be better equipped to develop creative solutions that encourage more engagement. One of the ways to get ideas may be to ask some parents, who are involved in their children's schooling, what enables them to participate. Organizers may also consider offering multiple events at different times to accommodate various work schedules, provide transportation to events, or visit families at home where they feel more comfortable.

Other factors may present barriers for teachers. For example, many important and valuable transition activities would ideally be conducted in the evening or during the summer. Staging activities during these times infringes on teachers' vacation and non-salaried time; therefore, most kindergarten teachers identify lack of pay as the most important consideration as to why they are reluctant to participate. The transition team may need to consider alternate ways of funding teachers for this involvement or provide incentives to encourage the involvement of teachers during the transition process.

(c) Create a timeline—Once your team has identified barriers and solutions to them, it is important to outline a timeline for implementing the transition activities you have chosen. For example, a transition activity, such as organizing a kindergarten camp, should occur during the summer before kindergarten, whereas an activity, such as coordination between Head Start and kindergarten teachers around curricula and routines, should be an ongoing process throughout the school year.

(d) Assign roles—Once you have a transition plan laid out, your team should identify who needs to be involved in each activity and assign roles to them accordingly. For example, it may be necessary for your school to do fundraising to set up a kindergarten camp. This may require the office staff to mail out fliers about a fundraising event, someone else to secure a location, and additional people to handle catering, entertainment, etc.

6

Step 6: Implement and Evaluate the Transition Plan.

Once transition activities and the timeline for these activities are established, the implementation process can proceed. Transition teams should review the planned activities and timelines, and then implement practices as scheduled. Ongoing and regular meetings of the collaborators may be necessary to ensure smooth and timely implementation.

After the transition activities are implemented, it is important to evaluate their effectiveness to continue support of high-quality transition practices for children and their families and to provide an opportunity for you to reflect on your practices. During an evaluation process, the transition teams will evaluate the activities they used, identify needs that were not met, highlight the strategies that worked well, and revise future transition plans accordingly. Another reason why evaluation is necessary is because some strategies may work well with some families but may be less effective with others; therefore, an analysis of what works and what does not can help improve the transition process.

It is also important to note that transition planning is a dynamic process in which your team will need to constantly re-assess goals, modify plans, and when necessary, re-assess goals again. It is an ongoing process in which there will be times when your team will go back and forth between the steps before it can eventually move forward with implementation.

SECTION 3:
Successful Stories of Kindergarten Transition

Northview Elementary (Pennsylvania)

Northview Elementary is an urban pre-K-5 Pittsburgh public school serving ethnically diverse children from low-income families. In the 2007-08 school year, less than 25 percent of the anticipated kindergarten class was present on the first day of school. After experiencing such low turnout of kindergarteners in the fall of 2007, school and community leaders met early in the 2007-08 school year to propose the formation of a Kindergarten Transition Team to address the problem. The team consisted of:

1. The Northview vice-principal
2. The director of the community Family Support Center
3. Two staff members from the Office of Child Development
4. Head Start, and other early education, health, and social service providers
5. Parents of future kindergarteners

The Northview Kindergarten Transition Team then proceeded to create an action plan to address children's transition to kindergarten. The following is a sample of the team's plan. It set forth to:

1. Review data on enrollment and transitions and develop new goals.
2. Examine and improve the atmosphere and environment of the school to make the school parent-friendly.
3. Review and revise timelines and registration practices.
4. Develop and implement strategies for door-to-door outreach to hundreds of homes to find and engage all potential students and their families.
5. Implement several family transition events prior to the first day of school.

The transition team's many activities clearly yielded positive results. One example of its action plan that was particularly innovative was the use of a pizza shop to help spread information about kindergarten registration. This shop was used to deliver kindergarten registration information, along with their pizzas, to an isolated housing community. As enrollment numbers increased, parents responded that the advertisements on pizza boxes were the main reason they were aware of registration dates. In addition to using community resources, many children participated in breakfasts, a hair-braiding day, and several other transition events that occurred prior to the start of school. These opportunities allowed families and teachers to meet at an informal setting, and therefore, helped to foster the family-school connection.

In August 2008, Northview saw 100 percent of its anticipated new class on the first day of school.

This school's success demonstrates the kind of outcomes that are possible when parents, schools, and communities work together to create a smooth transition into kindergarten (Smythe-Leistico, 2012).

Smart Beginnings (Virginia)

In central Virginia, one community was able to make a sizable impact on children's transition experiences with a low-cost investment that fostered collaborations between early education providers. A local coalition called Smart Beginnings, which works to create quality care and educational experiences for young children, brought together teachers from kindergarten, preschool, and Head Start programs. These teachers began to meet four times a year to focus on aligning experiences for children to ease their transition from preschool into kindergarten. The educators talked through academic expectations for kindergarten and how Head Start and preschool teachers could best prepare students for the kindergarten classroom. They addressed such issues as the development of fine motor skills to prepare children for the emphasis on handwriting in kindergarten and even talked about simpler matters that may confuse children, such as how bathroom signs may look different between preschool programs and elementary schools. The teachers also discussed transition practices that might be helpful for children and families who are going through this setting change. These types of conversations helped Head Start teachers prepare children for the transition to kindergarten.

The quarterly meetings produced several positive outcomes. One outcome was increased participation in transition opportunities, such as kindergarten camp, which had children, families, and teachers reporting that they felt more prepared for the upcoming kindergarten year. Head Start teachers also reported being satisfied with their quarterly meetings because they felt that their knowledge of children and families was valued. Additionally, kindergarten teachers felt that children were entering school more socially and academically prepared. Another outcome of these meetings was an increased awareness of the community need for more physical space for Head Start/preschool children, a proposal that is now being considered by a local elementary school.

This case study is an excellent example of the fiscal payoff of transition planning. With minimal costs to schools, teachers meeting just four times a year were able to make an impact on children's transitions that likely provided more valuable learning time at the beginning of their kindergarten year. In other words, many more children came to school ready to learn instead of being unduly preoccupied by the shock of adjusting to new and foreign environments.

SECTION 4:

RESOURCES

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