

Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington

Data Brief



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington: Data Brief

Effective transition practices are key to smoothing the path to kindergarten, as the quality of a transition will affect how the child experiences this first year of formal schooling (Cook, 2019; Little et al., 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Though we know that all children benefit from a comprehensive approach to transition, children furthest from opportunity receive the greatest benefit. (Cook, 2019; Little et al., 2016; Shulting et al., 2005). Yet, children from lower income families are less likely to have access to comprehensive transition practices, and schools with historically underserved student groups are less likely to provide effective transition practices (Shulting et al., 2005; Little et al., 2016).

As a part of the national Preschool Development Grant (PDG), the Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) seek to partner with policymakers and early learning program leaders to support a comprehensive approach to early transitions for children and families in Washington. This data brief summarizes stakeholder responses from the 2019 federal PDG. DCYF and OSPI explored commonly used transition practices and activities that are unique to specific communities to address barriers and gaps in support. We aim to support leaders to test new universal and focused solutions for effective transitions. Successful transition strategies will engage early care and education providers, K–12 schools, special services and – most importantly – children, families and their home communities.

DCYF and OSPI partnered to gather stakeholder input through multiple modalities including in-person and online listening sessions, interviews and surveys. Weⁱ have encapsulated comprehensive data from each of our sources to reveal the range of responses and stimulate further thinking in support of effective transitions. This brief includes a broader view of the data that were contained in Successes and Challenges of Strengthening Transitions in Washington (Taylor & Stahr-Breunig, 2020).

DCYF and OSPI began collaboration on the Kindergarten Transitions project in August 2019, designed strategies for data gathering, identified stakeholder groups and developed research questions. The following questions guided our approach over six months of research and analysis:

1. What kindergarten transition practices are currently used in Washington?
2. How do culturally specific programs and communities support their own children and families in transition into kindergarten?
3. What ideas could families and communities share with early learning programs and school districts seeking more culturally attentive approaches?

Practitioner Listening Sessions and Interviews

From August 2019 through January 2020, the transitions team conducted listening sessions and/or interviews with more than 60 participantsⁱⁱ from the following groups:

- ECEAP and Head Start Directors
- Indian Policy for Early Learning (IPEL) committee members
- Elementary school principals and kindergarten teachers
- District assessment coordinators, early learning coordinators and early learning special education coordinators and when feasible Migrant Education, Bilingual Education and or Special Education Coordinators
- Educational Service District (ESD) Early Learning and Early Learning Special Education Coordinators
- Rural Alliance

DCYF and OSPI collaborated to plan and facilitate interviews with ESD coordinators and district administrators as well as listening sessions for cross-sector teams and families. OSPI conducted 17 interviews from September to December 2019. Listening sessions took place between November 4, 2019 and February 1, 2020. The transitions team facilitated six in-person listening sessions with cross-sector groups of school district, preschool and elementary staff and five sessions via video conference. DCYF and OSPI facilitated two listening sessions with Head Start and ECEAP families, both in person.

The transitions team designed presentation and inquiry materials to identify transition practices using the lens of Pianta and Kraft-Sayre’s Guiding Principles of Effective Transitions (2003). Materials, including invitations, agendas and presentation slides were available in English and in Spanish. Interpreters were in attendance as needed. In the introduction to each session, the transitions team presented the purpose and context of the project along

with a brief synopsis of the literature regarding effective transitions, including an explanation of informational (lower impact) to relational (higher impact) practices and defining readiness.

Participants were asked to identify their current practices and write them on post-it notes (or type them into the chat box in the remote video sessions). The teams then identified where to place their current practices on the informational to relational continuum. The listening sessions included 15–20 minutes of planning time for the teams to identify a few feasible practices for the next school year, either enhancing an existing practice to build relationships or building new cross-sector connections. Participants then wrote their ideas for new or improved practices on a different colored note and affixed them to the continuum. As participants shared their ideas around transition practices, discussions often included strategies to move practices along the continuum to become more relational and therefore more effective.



Figure 1. Transition practices continuum completed by listening session participants.
Note: Blue dots represent current practices, and pink represent proposed practices.

Listening session participants discussed and shared current transitions practices, barriers to effective transitions and finally considered transition approaches that would address barriers and improve transitions for children and families in their community (Figure 1).

At the conclusion of each listening session, we requested participants complete a brief feedback form to help us adjust our approach and to glean how or whether the conversation affected participants’ thinking about transitions practices.

The transitions team conducted qualitative analysis on the notes collected from each listening session. The data were categorized for current transition practices, barriers to effective transitions and proposed practices. Themes that emerged were used to code practices and

approaches across the data set. The number of times each theme was coded were aggregated to identify the most common themes across all listening sessions. Raters discussed these data until they reached agreement on the individual coding and the placement of each of the codes into Pianta’s Guiding Principles.

The following data represent practitioner responses categorized by Pianta’s Guiding Principles of Effective Transitions as well as frequency of responses.

Table 1. Practitioner listening session results by principle

FORM COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS	CURRENT	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Family-teacher/school admin physical meeting	X		X
Face to face connections	X	X	X
Partnerships with early learning programs	X	X	X
PreK-Kindergarten information sharing	X	X	X
Connecting with families in community	X	X	X

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS AS RESOURCES	CURRENT	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Family-teacher/school admin relationships	X	X	X
Student-teacher relationships	X		X
Early learning-Kindergarten teacher relationships	X	X	X
Student-student relationships	X		X
Extended weeks of kindergarten	X	X	
Family and child feedback	X	X	X

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES OF EARLY LEARNING TRANSITIONS IN WASHINGTON: **DATA BRIEF**

TAILOR PRACTICES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	CURRENT	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Special education and special needs	X	X	X
WaKIDS assessment	X	X	
Language and translation	X		X
Representation and inclusivity	X		X
Geographic proximity/distance	X	X	X
Disabilities	X	X	
Native American/ Tribal communities	X	X	X
Written communication for families	X		
Home visiting	X	X	X
Diverse staff	X		
Technology	X	X	X
Culturally specific outreach and messaging	X	X	X
Cultural practices/history reflected in student learning opportunities	X		X
Referrals and access to nutrition, household supplies and family wellness	X		X

SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES OF EARLY LEARNING TRANSITIONS IN WASHINGTON: **DATA BRIEF**

PROMOTE CONTINUITY FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN	CURRENT	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Professional development	X	X	X
Kindergarten registration	X	X	X
Aligning data collection and usage practices	X	X	X
Aligning Pre-K and Kindergarten classroom practices	X	X	X
Teacher planning and scheduling flexibility	X	X	
Funding	X	X	

FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS	CURRENT	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Family advocacy skills	X		X
Family education	X		X

Table 2. Practitioner listening session themes most frequent codes

CURRENT PRACTICES THEMES	NUMBER OF TIMES THEME CODED
Family-teacher/school admin relationships	32
Family-teacher/school admin physical meeting	20
Face to face connections	19
Student-teacher relationships	12
Partnerships with early learning programs	12

BARRIERS THEMES	NUMBER OF TIMES THEME CODED
Early learning-Kindergarten teacher relationships	6
Connecting with families in community	6
Understanding how to use data	5
WaKIDS assessment	4
Special Education (SPED)	4
Kindergarten registration	4
Aligning data collection and usage practices	4
Native American/Tribal communities	4
Funding	4

PROPOSED PRACTICES THEMES	NUMBER OF TIMES THEME CODED
PreK-Kindergarten information sharing	12
Face to face connections	12
Early learning-kindergarten teacher relationships	10
Family-teacher/school admin relationships	9
Partnerships with early learning programs	8
Student-teacher relationships	8

Family Listening Sessions

Families from Eastern Washington Head Start and ECEAP programs participated in Family Listening Sessions in January and early February 2020.

The transitions team modified the listening session approach to learn directly from families about their experiences with kindergarten transitions. With support from Head Start and ECEAP contractors, DCYF and OSPI met with families from Educational Service District and community-based early learning programs. The introduction to each session included a brief presentation on the purpose and context of the project along with a synopsis of the literature regarding effective transitions, highlighting the importance of the family’s role in effective transitions. Materials, including invitations, agendas, resources and presentation slides were available in English and in Spanish. Language interpreters were available for each session.

Small groups facilitated the recording of ideas of what families want to see more frequently in supporting relationships and sharing information, and practices families consider less helpful. Family members who felt comfortable doing so shared out to the larger group, sparking conversation and insight from other participants. Participants were also invited to share written feedback in their preferred language.

Table 3. Most frequent themes from family listening sessions

CURRENT PRACTICES
Parent-child communication
Bridging physical boundaries/family connection to school
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships
BARRIERS
Meals at school
Attending to child’s physical needs
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships
PROPOSED PRACTICES
Technology to facilitate conversations
Meals at school
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships

Early Learning Staff Surveys

The transitions team designed online surveys, administered from November 15, 2019 through January 10, 2020. Surveys distributed through partner organizations to practitioners, included:

- ECEAP Coaches (through DCYF staff)
- ECEAP Family Support Staff (through DCYF staff)
- Head Start Coaches surveys (through DCYF Head Start Collaboration)
- Head Start Family Support (through DCYF Head Start Collaboration)
- Head Start Directors (through DCYF Head Start Collaboration)
- Early Achievers Coaches (through Child Care Aware of Washington affiliates)

Potential survey respondents were identified through Head Start, Early Achievers and ECEAP staff. Invitations were sent with anonymous links to the survey including potential participants in each category from several regions across the state. Anecdotally, there appeared to be some snowball effect as respondents shared access to the survey link, though DCYF and OSPI cannot identify the location or program connection of each respondent. Current practices and practitioner involvement were captured in the quantitative portion of the survey. Open response questions provided opportunity for practitioners to share their perspective on barriers to effective transition and their ideal transitions approaches.

A total of 155 early learning respondents from programs that work with children ages birth to five years participated in surveys. The sample sizes for each group of respondents were as follows: Early Achievers (EA) coaches (n = 26), ECEAP coaches (n = 38), ECEAP family support specialists (n = 37), Head Start coaches (n = 16), Head Start directors (n = 13) and Head Start family support specialists (n = 25). The following analyses exclude missing and random data. Two participants provided largely null results, and one participant did not provide reliable data. Therefore, the analytical sample consisted of 152 responses to the early learning surveys.

Respondents were asked to rate their overall level of engagement in supporting children and families leaving Prekindergarten (PreK) and entering kindergarten on a 5-point scale (1 = not my role, 5 = a significant role). The level of engagement across all six groups was high with an average of 3.77. ECEAP family support specialists reported the highest level of engagement (M = 4.24, SD = 0.95) and EA coaches reported the lowest level of engagement (M = 3.08, SD = 0.87). These data should not be interpreted as level of commitment to effective kindergarten transitions by individual practitioner groups. The designation of roles in this survey is only to provide context for how the data were generated.

In terms of specific transition practices, 79% of respondents indicated that they send children home with flyers about kindergarten orientation (Figure 3). The least common practices included collaborative planning between preschool and kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers visiting families of incoming kindergartners at home and aligned pedagogy between preschools and kindergartens (Figure 4).

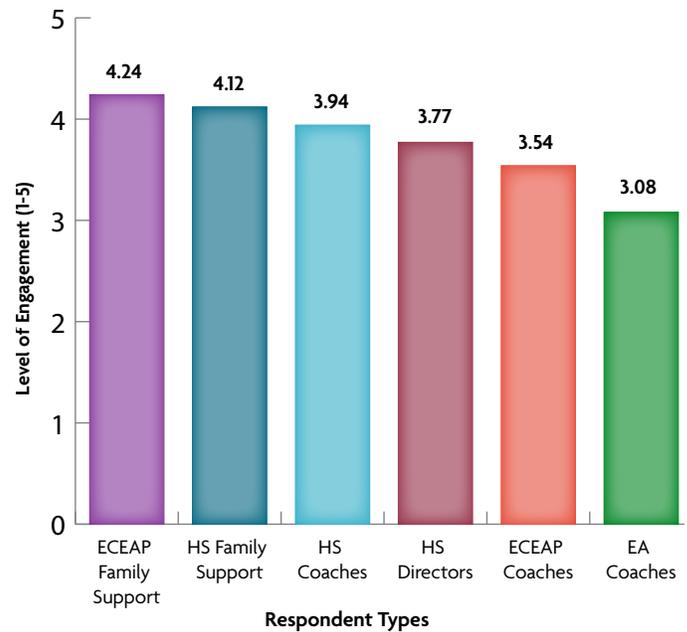


Figure 2. Average level of engagement in supporting children and families entering kindergarten by respondent type

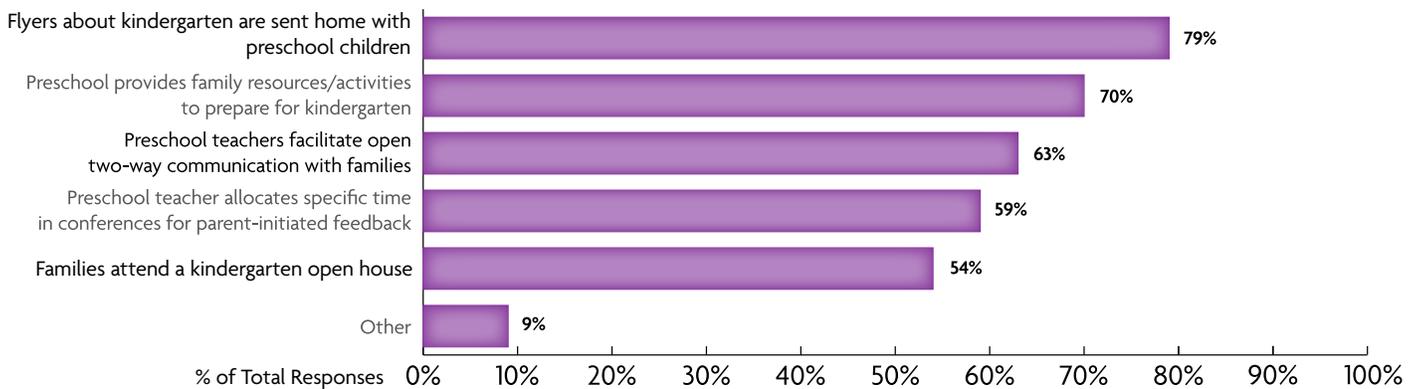


Figure 3. Most frequently identified transition practices

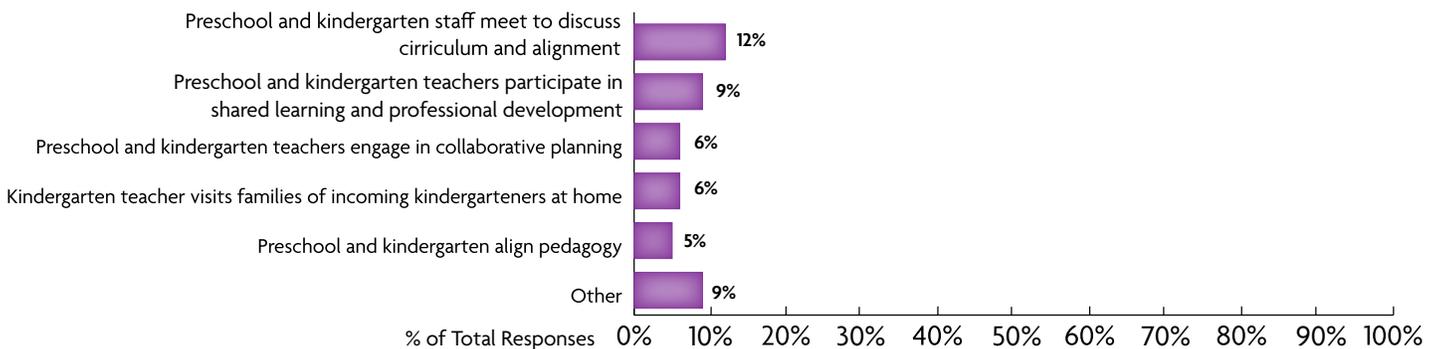


Figure 4. Least frequently identified transitions practices

Specific to the practice of data sharing, respondents were asked to choose the types of data used in their program that inform their understanding of how to meet the needs of children and families served. Data from GOLD® were indicated as the most commonly used by all groups while data from carousel reviews were identified as the least commonly used by all groups.

Respondents were asked to indicate what percentage of the school districts in their area collaborate with their program around kindergarten registration. Notably, Head Start directors perceived a high rate of collaboration between their programs and school districts with over half the sample (62%) indicating a rate of 100%. More than half the sample of EA coaches (58%) perceived a low rate of collaboration between their programs and school districts (25%).

In addition to surveying current practices, open response questions provided space for respondents to share their perspective on barriers to effective transitions as well as their ideal approaches to effective transitions. Coded data from these questions is recorded according to Pianta’s principals in the tables below.

Table 4. Practitioner survey open response themes

FORM COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS	BARRIER	PROPOSED
PreK-School connections/ collaboration	x	x
PreK-K teacher visits	x	x
PreK-K information/ data sharing	x	x
Reciprocal PreK-K efforts	x	x
PreK-K Communication	x	x
Family events at elementary school	x	x
Family PreK-K meetings		x

FORM COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Superintendent/ Admin engaged with ECE	x	x
Feeder patterns		x
Community partnerships		x
FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS AS RESOURCES	BARRIER	PROPOSED
PreK-K teacher relationship	x	x
Connect school with families	x	x
PreK-School District connections	x	
PreK child at K prior to K start	x	x
Family-school relationships	x	x
Child-teacher relationships	x	x
Earlier K placements	x	x
Transitions Coordinator/PreK-K Liaison		x
PreK-K Provider evening meetings		x
Family visits K classroom		x
TAILOR PRACTICES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Special Education - Coordinated services	x	x
Language Services	x	x
Homelessness/ unstable housing	x	x
Diverse multi-lingual staff	x	x

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF EARLY LEARNING TRANSITIONS IN WASHINGTON: **DATA BRIEF**

TAILOR PRACTICES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Culturally responsive classroom	x	x
Cliff effects	x	x
PreK-K transition meetings	x	x
Culturally specific outreach for K registration	x	x
Family Support in Kindergarten	x	x
Transportation		x
WaKIDS/TSG	x	
Spring/Summer Kindergarten	x	x
Technology access	x	
Trauma informed practice	x	x
PreK-K Transitions Coaches		x
Transition forms	x	x
PROMOTE CONTINUITY FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN	BARRIER	PROPOSED
PreK-K Teacher collaborative planning, PL and PLCs	x	x
Align classroom practices	x	x
Align behavior practices/supports, SEL approach	x	x
PreK not valued/perceived teacher status	x	x
Developmental approach/K ready expectations	x	x

PROMOTE CONTINUITY FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Coordinated registration/orientation/transition activities	x	x
Class size and ratios	x	x
Coordinated messaging for families	x	x
Align curriculum	x	x
Suspension/Expulsion	x	
Co-located PreK and K	x	x
Time constraints/flexibility	x	x
PreK staff turnover	x	
Increase staff at start of K		x
Attendance		x
Teacher contract constraints	x	
FOCUS ON FAMILY STRENGTHS	BARRIER	PROPOSED
Family advocacy skills	x	x
Family activities for K preparation	x	
Combined home visits		x

Kindergarten Teacher and Kindergarten Family Surveys

OSPI drafted surveys for kindergarten teachers and families. The agencies shared administrative support and data analysis for these surveys and offered financial support for district costs and incentives with family gift cards.

With outreach from the ESDs, OSPI invited a sample of 27 schools from districts with the highest percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, migrant education, special education and English learner support.

The kindergarten surveys received the following responses from at least 17 schools. Because OSPI invited districts to participate through email with electronic links to the surveys, OSPI can only estimate the full sample size of teachers and families.

- Kindergarten teacher survey received 27 responses.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Kindergarten family survey received 138 responses in English, 11 in Spanish, 0 in Somali of about 928 families in the schools that accepted the invitation.^{iv}

Only respondents who completed the entire survey were included in the analysis. The following results are based on descriptive analyses of 26 responses to the kindergarten teacher survey. More than 80% of respondents were involved in facilitating open two-way communication with families and meeting individually with incoming kindergartners and their families in the first weeks of school (Figure 5). The least common practices included visiting families of incoming kindergartners and visiting preschool classrooms.

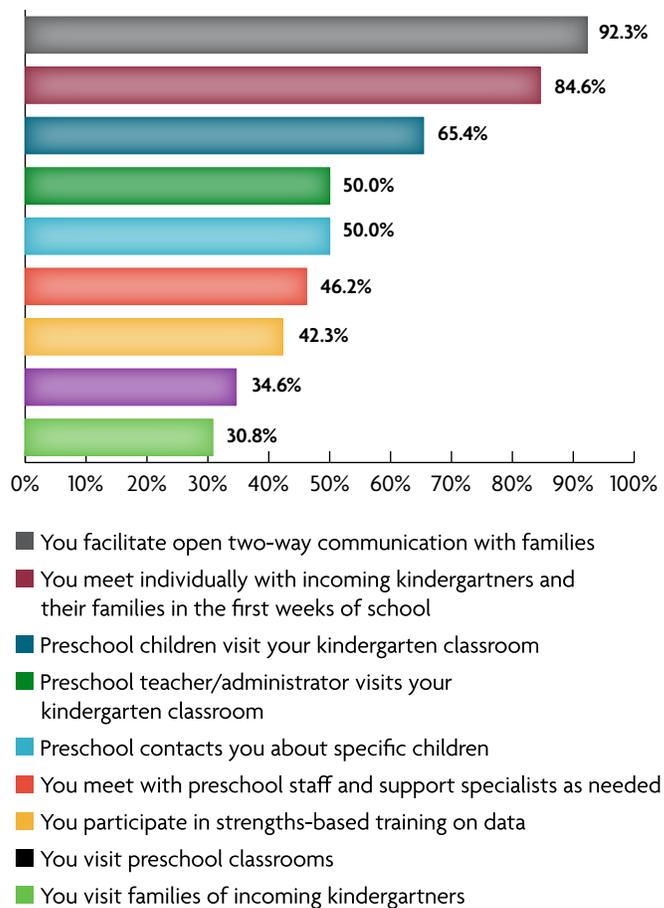


Figure 5. Transition practices reported by kindergarten teachers

At the school and district level, the vast majority reported that elementary schools sent home flyers with preschool children about kindergarten registration (Figure 6). Teachers attending kindergarten registration events and schools providing open houses were the next most commonly reported transition practices. Less than a fourth of respondents reported that preschool and kindergarten teachers align behavior supports, engage in collaborative planning or conduct home visits.

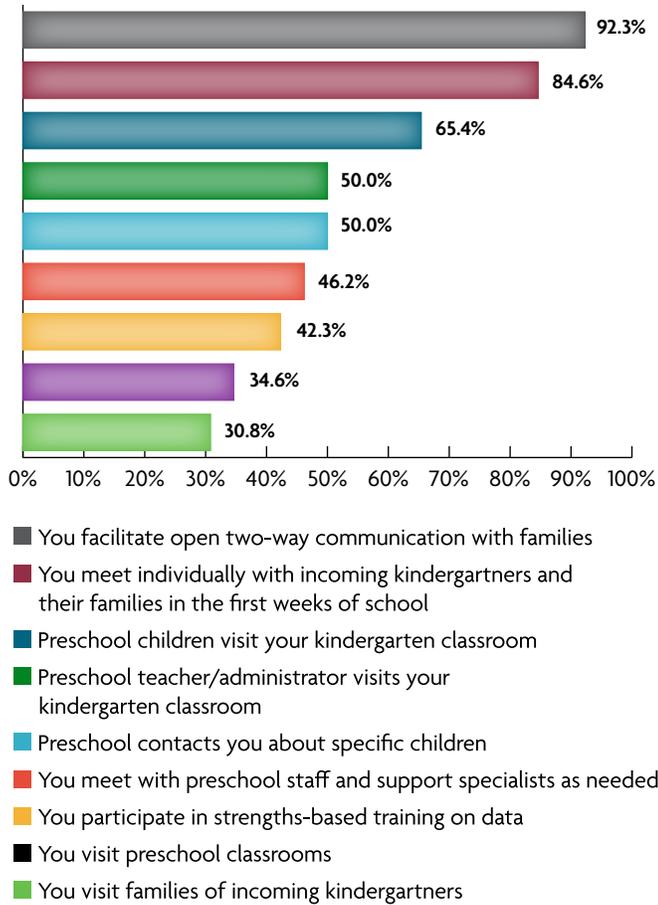


Figure 6. District/School transition practices

The most common way respondents shared information about a child’s development with their family was through report cards or conferences (Figure 7). The majority of respondents also used email, phone calls or classroom newsletters or blogs.

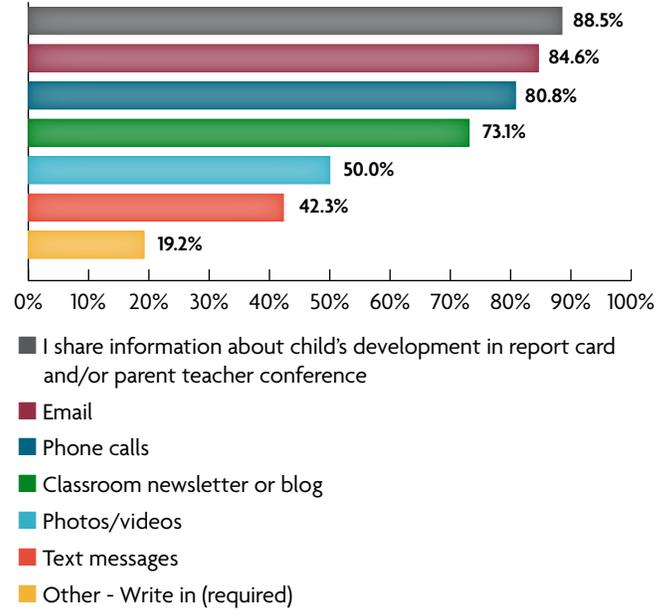


Figure 7. Strategies used to share information about child development with families

The survey offered respondents several opportunities to write in responses. Because of the write-in nature of the following questions, not every respondent answered each part of the question posed. When asked what the best aspects of these transition practices were, 77% cited the opportunity to meet parents and family. Other common responses were learning about specific needs of incoming students (31%) and students feeling comfortable in the classroom and with the teacher (23%).

When asked about how teachers ensure transition practices meet the needs of children and families and whether they receive feedback about the cultural relevance of these practices, only 12% indicated they had received positive feedback while 24% had received no feedback at all. Two respondents (8%) indicated that there was no attention given to family’s cultural needs and beliefs. There were a wide range of responses, but the most common included discussing what parents and family should expect in kindergarten (20%), giving parents and family the opportunity to ask questions or share concerns (20%) and listening and attending to families’ cultural needs and beliefs (20%).

Respondents were also asked to discuss their perspective on barriers to effective transitions. Some responses were reflective of the environment in which families and schools operate, like funding (11.5%), language (7.7%), poverty (11.5%), lack of reliable transportation (7.7%) or time, both for parents to participate in school events and for teachers to fulfill their duties (34.6%). Another common concern was collaboration between kindergarten teachers and early learning programs/PreK (34.6%).

Suggestions for improving kindergarten and WaKIDS ranged widely. However, the most common suggestions included a need for paraprofessionals (38.5%), funding and support for developmentally appropriate classrooms (34.6%) and additional funding (34.6%). Suggestions specific to WaKIDS indicated a need for better training and more resources. Nearly a fifth of respondents wanted help understanding how to use WaKIDS data and more time to complete it or a simplified version.

Kindergarten Family Survey

Only respondents who completed the entire survey were included in the analysis. The following results are based on descriptive analyses of 138 English survey responses and 11 Spanish survey responses (n=149).

Slightly more than half of respondents indicated that this was their family’s first experience with kindergarten transition in Washington (53.7%). The most common way kindergarten families found out about registration was online (40.9%), by having an older child already enrolled at the same school (34.2%) or from a preschool or family program their child attended (22.8%). Three families phoned the school or researched the process and three families indicated they learned about registration on social media (Facebook).

When given the opportunity to write in responses about the kind of information families received from

the school and whether it was helpful, a variety of responses indicated different levels of satisfaction, types of information and methods of information sharing. Because of the qualitative nature of this question, each respondent interpreted it in their own way and provided different types of responses: 36.9% reported being satisfied with information received while 16.8% reported being unsatisfied. The most common type of information received included general information (32.9%), events/orientation (24.2%) and enrollment/registration (22.1%). The most common methods included in-person (27.5%), paper (24.2%) and online/email (10.7%).

Kindergarten families reported very little interaction with kindergarten teachers and other school staff prior to kindergarten.

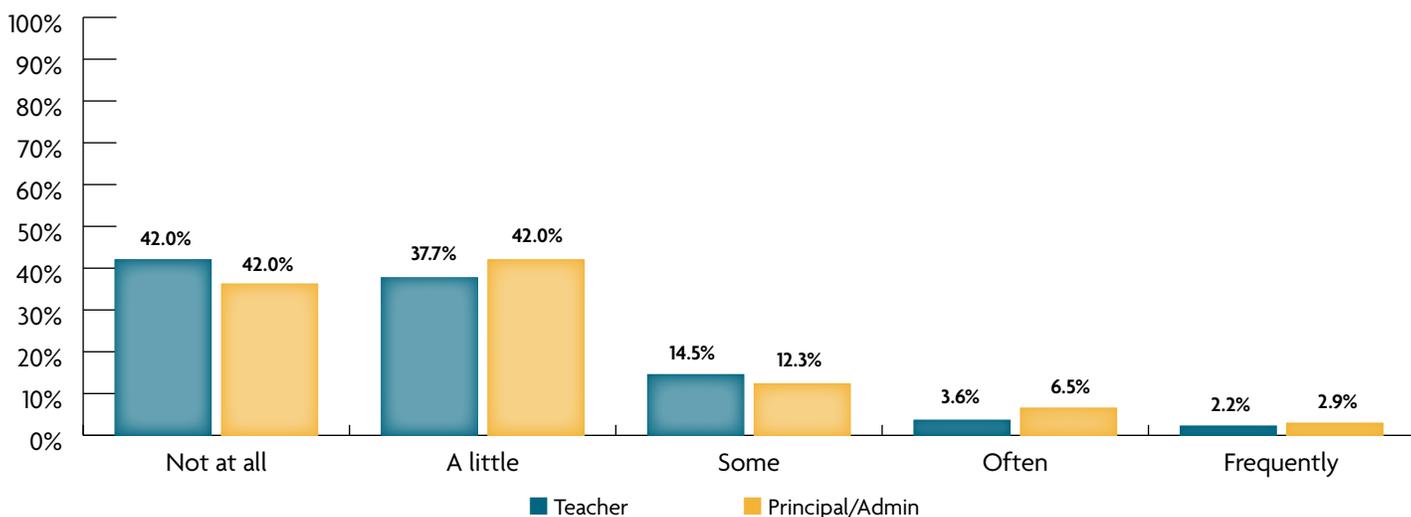


Figure 8. Frequency of family interaction with school staff prior to kindergarten

However, of the respondents that reported having a conversation with their child’s teacher prior to kindergarten, 83.2% were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” and 6.7% (10 respondents) reported not having a conversation at all.

Most kindergarten families (67.8%) indicated that they or their PreK teacher had shared information with the elementary school about their child before kindergarten, whereas 18.8% did not and 13.4% did not know whether the PreK teacher had shared information with the elementary school.

Overall, families have a positive view of their child’s kindergarten experience: 85.9% believe their child’s needs are being met in kindergarten and 98% believe their child is engaged and learning. Additionally, 87.9% are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their child’s transition. The most common write-in suggestion for improving children’s kindergarten experience was more developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. The most common write-in request for what would have helped families feel more prepared for the start of kindergarten was more information on teachers and classrooms.

Conclusion

DCYF and OSPI collected and examined a depth and breadth of data on current and proposed transition practices in Washington, funded by the Preschool Development Grant in 2019. DCYF applied for and received a competitive renewal PDG for implementation and testing of innovations to strengthen transitions from 2020-2021. Modified services in the time of COVID and the limitations of face-to-face or site based programs will necessitate creative solutions based on community priorities. Transition strategies for children entering school districts will apply principles never fully tested to date.

DCYF and OSPI pivoted the approach for PDG in 2020 to test solutions – connecting partners to serve families and children in this new context. To reach focus populations and address the highest priority barriers in a community, we are partnering with the Office of Head Start and Head Start Collaboration Offices on the 100 Schools Reach project. Additionally, OSPI and DCYF will implement a mini-grant to scaffold Transitional Kindergarten with shared recruitment and enrollment of four-year-olds, high-quality materials, professional development, and an administrator community of practice.

The findings from Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington (Taylor & Stahr-Breunig, 2020) support creation of an array of resources to support families, teachers and community partnerships in bridging barriers and implementing proposed innovative practices.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ The Preschool Development Grant Transitions Team includes representatives of DCYF ECEAP, Head Start Collaboration and Office of Innovation Analysis and Research. In addition, the PDG Team includes OSPI Early Learning, Title I and LAP, Special Education, Migrant Education, Office of Native Education and Student Information, among others. “We” refers to the collective of this team, led by Mari Taylor, DCYF ECEAP, Kindergarten Transition Specialist and Gretchen Stahr Breunig, OSPI Early Learning, Kindergarten Transitions Specialist with significant analysis and support by Adassa Budrevich-Ryan, DCYF Office of Innovation Analysis and Accountability and Katherine Keller, OSPI, Student Information.
- ⁱⁱ Rural Alliance responses were collected as part of a statewide conference including up to 200 participants. We cannot be sure how many of the conference attendees engaged in the data collection.
- ⁱⁱⁱ OSPI initially invited 27 schools with an estimated 45–50 kindergarten teachers (estimating average class sizes of 25 students). However, as additional districts accepted the invitation and electronic link could have been forwarded, OSPI has no basis to estimate the potential number of responses.
- ^{iv} OSPI sent invitations to 27 schools located in regions with the highest percentages of child welfare cases and with the highest percentages of full-day kindergarten students eligible as English language learners, special education, migrant and high poverty. However, additional schools volunteered with responses from families and teachers. Because the surveys were anonymous, OSPI cannot be sure exactly how many schools sent the email link to families and teachers, and therefore, we can only estimate the sample size.