

Seeds of Inspiration for Effective Transition Approaches



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Introduction

Together, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) gained a better understanding of current transition practices and barriers to effective transitions across Washington through funding from the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) in 2019. The transitions team met with schools, programs and families to learn about current practices and barriers, and to foster conversation around efforts to strengthen transition practices for children and families, especially those furthest from opportunity.

Through a series interviews, listening sessions and surveys, we found that early learning programs and schools engage in a range of practices intended to facilitate a smooth transition to kindergarten. Participants generously shared their current approaches and challenges, and demonstrated a powerful interest in increasing support for strengthening transitions.

Data gathered reveal a broad range of practices that touch on critical principles for effective transitions, with the notable exception of practices that focus on family voice and leadership. While participants could articulate the importance of authentic family engagement, few demonstrated what that might look like in practice in the context of effective transitions.

With the launch of the renewal PDG in 2020, we planned to build on these findings to facilitate deeper conversations and co-create community-specific approaches and strategies that incorporate stronger family voice and leadership.

And then, COVID-19 struck. The statewide school closure announced by Governor Inslee on March 13, 2020, necessitated an entirely different approach. For more information, go to www.governor.wa.gov/node/481616. The implementation of modified services and distance learning offered an opportunity to reconsider how children and families could access effective transitions in this unfamiliar context.

Pivoting implementation to work within the constraints of the pandemic, we realized that a primary focus for improving the quality of transitions was suddenly immediately available across the public education system. During quarantine, essentially every child was isolated at home with their family.

Our research participants are not alone in their struggle to build robust partnerships with families. Despite decades of compelling data, longitudinal evidence and current thriving examples of the power of family partnerships, few school districts successfully orient toward the family as paramount in education. Even with the best of intentions, systemic and institutional barriers are formidable. This crisis, however, brought an ideal opportunity.

The disruption created by COVID-19 provides the unique opportunity to support a child's transition experience firmly situated in the context of her family. The necessity of supporting transition practices with families as partners aligns with what we know to be true about the critical role of families in effective transitions and in a child's long-term prospects for educational success.

Now is the opportunity to bend systems and align transition approaches to focus on family strengths.

Relationships are Key

Prenatal to third grade research and frameworks demonstrate that providers, programs and schools engage in a wide range of practices intended to smooth the transition from early care and education to kindergarten. Whether practices are common to many districts or unique in focus for a specific community or population, effective approaches engage adults across systems to smooth transitions for children.

Transition practices can be visualized along a continuum of lower impact to higher impact activities (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Cook, 2019). The most common transition practices are often low-impact, informational

activities such as sending home kindergarten registration flyers with preschool children (Cook, 2019; Patton & Want, 2012). Higher-impact transition practices are relational and might include activities such as data sharing to inform conversations among families and educators or bi-directional activities that engage and empower families as leaders. The most effective practices authentically engage adults across systems – including the full range of possible experiences a child may have prior to kindergarten and elementary school. Examining prospective approaches and strategies for where they fall along this continuum may guide communities toward more effective practices.

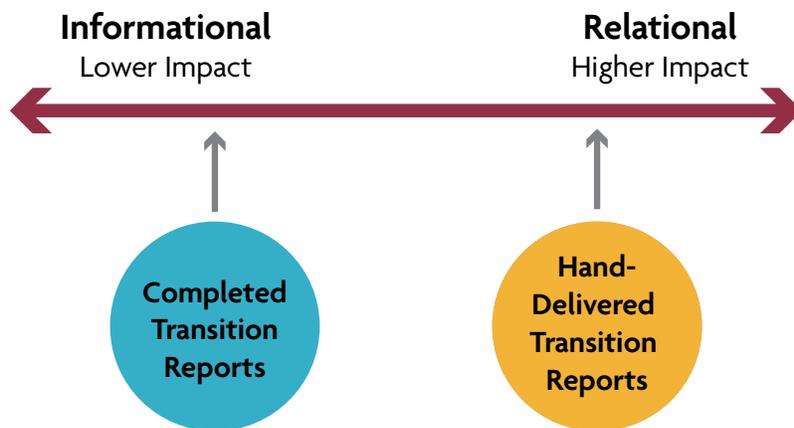


Figure 1: Continuum of transition practices

Seeds: Common and Unique Transition Strategies



DCYF and OSPI analyzed and summarized data in the report *Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington* (Taylor & Stahr-Breunig, 2020) and a companion data brief (Taylor & Stahr-Breunig, 2020) using the Pianta and Kraft-Sayre framework to categorize the findings. In this brief, we expand upon the categories of common and unique strategies as seeds to inspire early learning programs, schools, families and communities.

Recommended strategies include one or more of the following characteristics:



Relationships



Family Voice, Leadership and Advocacy



Inclusion



Culturally Sustaining Transitions



Shared Recruitment and Enrollment from birth through age 8



Program Alignment

High-Quality, Inclusive Classrooms

 Head Start and ECEAP could extend their months of required enrollment to keep more slots open for children with disabilities who are exiting Part C. Currently, programs have tight windows to reach full enrollment early in the year that preclude many children exiting Part C from enrolling in Head Start or ECEAP. Centralized recruitment and enrollment would offer the best learning environment for each child with disabilities to learn with their typically developing peers.



 Allow families time for individual tours of the elementary school to see the options for individualized support in general education kindergarten to 3rd grade classrooms and select the least restrictive environment.



 Schedule shared planning time in the spring for the kindergarten teacher to observe students in their developmental preschool classroom and begin discussions about their transition with the family, preschool teacher and specialists.



 Developmental preschool teachers spend a few hours per day supporting children with disabilities in the first few weeks of kindergarten to help children adjust to new routines and to help kindergarten teachers individualize instruction with strategies that were successful in developmental preschool.



 School districts could evaluate their own special education programs to see how inclusive their strategies are currently and make plans for improvement with Local Inclusion Self-Assessment for school districts: <https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/topics/inclusion/local-inclusion-self-assessment.pdf>



Family as First Teacher

 Adapt existing family surveys, make time to phone families in the evenings or schedule office hours to ask families how the transition felt to their child!



 Listen to the children's feedback on their learning environments. What elements of learning environment and pedagogy build empathy and belonging and provide developmentally and culturally appropriate challenges? What do the children see, hear, and do when they enter kindergarten, and what would they like more of?



 Familiarize families with their new school to increase their confidence and interdependence in the school community.



 Host families to a scavenger hunt at the school to meet all the staff and get to know the school campus.



 Play with other entering kindergartners and families on the school playground in summer.



 Host a spring game night and ask families to bring a game played in their culture of origin. Play games with kindergartners and families, providing interpreters.



 Open the school library to check out books together, either with the preschool or families in evenings and during the summer.



Continuum of Transition Practices



Recommended Strategy Characteristics



SEEDS OF INSPIRATION FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSITION APPROACHES

 Partner with cultural and parent organizations to create culturally specific menus of teaching moments. While Washington has multiple resources available for families, few provide culturally specific approaches. For example, there are activities highlighted in Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines: Birth through 3rd Grade (DCYF, 2012), Vroom™, Ready Rosie, that support families' understanding of child development. Understanding how families experience these activities would help DCYF and OSPI support next steps in co-designing resources.



- Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines: Birth through 3rd Grade (DCYF, 2012): www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/GovernorGregoire/priorities/education/read/guidelines.pdf
- Vroom™: www.vroom.org
- Ready Rosie: www.readyrosie.com

 Office of Policy Research and Evaluation developed survey instruments for Head Start programs, which could benefit elementary schools in evaluating the depth of families' trust and communication with the classroom teacher and family liaison: Family Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ).ⁱⁱ For more information, go to www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/development-of-a-measure-of-family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq



 Engage families in their home languages at school events.ⁱⁱⁱ Schools could prioritize interpreters for every family conversation and gathering.



 Provide meaningful opportunities for families to engage their children in learning.



- Create extended learning opportunities for families of all income levels for children from birth through high school.



 OSPI posted several resources intended to support migrant and multilingual families including:



- Home Visits with Migrant and Bilingual families: www.k12.wa.us/student-success/access-opportunity-education/migrant-and-bilingual-education/funds-knowledge-and-home-visits-toolkit/home-visits
- Language, Culture, and Funds in Academic Settings: www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/migrantbilingual/webinar/fundsoknowledge5-27-15.pdf

Continuum of Transition Practices



Recommended Strategy Characteristics



Alignment and Transition Planning

 Build a cycle of continuous improvement with a transition team of preschool teachers, Head Start, ECEAP and kindergarten teachers and the principal.



 Home visits: ECEAP/Head Start required spring visit is shared with kindergarten teacher, special education teacher, and/or district family liaison. Home visit tool kits support children's fund of knowledge in entering a new learning community are available at www.k12.wa.us/student-success/access-opportunity-education/migrant-and-bilingual-education/funds-knowledge-and-home-visits-toolkit. Every child needs to feel they belong to their community and feel the safety of strong relationships with the teacher and peers to share what they know.



 The Wyoming Department of Education created a Self-Assessment Tool for Effective Transition Planning as part of the Transition Summit, which could serve as an effective guide for the team. For more information, go to <https://wyominginstructionalnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Self-Assessment-Tool-for-Effective-Transition-from-Prekindergarten-to-Kindergarten.pdf>. In addition, *Enhancing the Transition to Kindergarten: Linking Children Families, and Schools*, Kraft-Sayres & Pianta (2003) includes several chapters on convening an effective transition planning team. For more information, go to <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED479280>.



 Host cross-sector classroom visits among preschool and kindergarten teachers to improve teachers' awareness of developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive practice and the continuum of growth.

 Head Start programs and Title I, Part A elementary schools have program requirements to enter Memoranda of Understanding. OSPI and DCYF seek to understand how many Title I, Part A and Head Start programs comply with these requirements, and what is considered best practice to support children's transitions.



 DCYF and OSPI released 100 Schools Reach funded by the Preschool Development Grant in 2020-21. DCYF Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO), DCYF ECEAP, and OSPI will expand the number of Office of Head Start/HSCO Demonstration Projects to include 13 additional school district-community partnerships, which will pursue "Wildly Important Goals" for innovative transition practices. The National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, & Learning created transition resources useful to community-school partnerships, including *Transitions to Kindergarten: Partnering with Families and Schools* available online at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/sim5-transitions-to-kindergarten-summary-of-content.pdf>.



 Districts could foster stronger relationships with families and early learning programs by assigning kindergarteners to teachers as early as January prior to kindergarten entry. Families need earlier opportunities to establish relationships with their child's teacher and guidance to register in the spring prior to kindergarten entry.



 Families expressed strong desire for more Jump Start summer programs and extended transitions to kindergarten such as staggered start dates and shorter days for the first weeks of kindergarten.



 Kindergarten teachers and families recommended that districts provide additional paraeducator support in all kindergarten classrooms in the first few months of the school year, especially to support English language learners in their home languages.



Continuum of Transition Practices



Recommended Strategy Characteristics



Form Collaborative Relationships

 We recommend that school districts partner with neighboring Head Start, ECEAP, and Early Achievers to create a shared enrollment process. Families need guidance to ensure children are placed in the most appropriate setting, including developmental preschool, Transitional Kindergarten and full-day kindergarten. To facilitate this approach, OSPI created the Coordinated Enrollment and Referral Plan Worksheet is available online at www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/earlylearning/pubdocs/CoordinatedEnrollmentandReferralPlanningWorksheet.pdf.



 Moving from a play-based developmentally focused preschool to kindergarten can be a stressor for children and families. Young children depend on their trusted adults to share information and provide comprehensive care: academic, social-emotional and physical. Especially during at-home distance learning, share a daily template of information between the educator and the family member about the child.



 We recommend that kindergarten classrooms attend to children's need for belonging including reflections of their cultures in learning environments.



Foster Relationships as Resources

We identify the need for building trusting, collaborative relationships among all the important adults in a child's life in order to support effective transitions. Young children who cannot advocate for themselves and may not yet be reliable reporters of their own experiences require an alliance of adults who know them, hear them, love and respect them, and can provide safe and meaningful transition experiences from birth through kindergarten and beyond.

To ease families' access and navigation of school culture, we learned about a few districts who hired family liaisons from the students' cultural communities. For example, the Toppenish School District employs a Tribal Family Liaison whose office is located at Kirkwood Elementary School in order to be accessible to families available online at www.toppenish.wednet.edu. As a targeted strategy to build trust in a cultural community, principals and superintendents could hire more family liaisons and interpreters from specific cultural communities.

Conclusion

DCYF and OSPI offer these seeds of inspiration to encourage schools, programs and communities to explore approaches that will facilitate effective transitions for children and families. With these seeds, we support cross-sector teams to create robust universal

transitions practices and distinct culturally-specific approaches to transition that focus on family strengths, especially for migrant and refugee families, children with disabilities, Black or African American children and American Indian Alaskan Native families.



Endnotes

- i Sullivan-Dudzic, Gears, and Leavell (2010)
- ii HHS Office of Planning Research and Evaluation Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality instruments.. For more information, go to www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/development-of-a-measure-of-family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq.
- iii www.ncela.ed.gov/files/fast_facts/19-0199-FamilyEngagement-20191024-508.pdf

References

- Cook, K. D. (2019). Transitioning across Systems: Head Start and Elementary School Coordination *Efforts to Enhance Low-Income Children's Academic and Social Success in Kindergarten*. ProQuest LLC, Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston College.
- Patton, C., & Want, J. (2012). *Ready Schools: Creating collaborative and thoughtful transitions to kindergarten*. Harvard Family Research Project.
- Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). Successful kindergarten transition: *Your guide to connecting children, families, and schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.
- Sullivan-Dudzic, L., Gears, D.K., & Leavell, K. (2010). *Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Taylor, M. J., Stahr Breunig, G. (2020). *Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington*. Washington Department of Children, Youth & Families. Retrieved from www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/EL_0018.pdf.