Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington

Washington State Department of
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Successes and Challenges
of Early Learning Transitions in Washington

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Each transition into a new educational environment is a big milestone for children and their families. We know that when children arrive feeling welcomed and excited, they are more likely to find success in school. While this report provides context for all transitions from birth to age eight, we focus particularly on kindergarten transitions.

Inequities begin prior to the start of kindergarten and persist far into the child's K–12 experience and beyond. For too many children, this opportunity gap is never resolved (Cook, 2019; Iruka et al., 2018; Winsler et al., 2008). The data are clear that many children who experience an opportunity gap at the start of formal schooling, face further barriers created by the system that is meant to support them (Fontil et al., 2019; Winsler et al., 2008).

Strengthening kindergarten transitions in Washington presents both complicated and complex challenges. Complicated challenges require technical solutions; complex challenges require multifaceted, relational solutions that are informed by the context of the challenges. We approached this inquiry to learn about current practices, barriers, and solutions from stakeholders that address both complicated and complex challenges in transitions.

Purpose of the Report

Smooth transitions into school matter greatly as the quality of a child's transition will sway how the child experiences this first year of formal schooling (Cook, 2019; Little et al., 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2012).

This report summarizes the literature review and stakeholder responses from the 2019 federal Preschool Development planning grant. The survey and listening session research summarized in this report hints at gaps, and we aim to support leaders to use their points of leverage in testing new universal and focused solutions in the next stages of the Preschool Development Implementation Grant 2020–2022.

Intended Audience

Strengthening kindergarten transitions requires engagement and collaboration of leaders and policymakers at all levels. We hope this report supports any interested individual to think about their role in strengthening transitions, and how they can engage with others, to lead to positive child outcomes for all children, regardless of race, class, or ability.

Equity in Transitions

Inequities in education begin prior to the start of kindergarten and may persist far into a child's K–12 experience and beyond. For too many children, this opportunity gap is never resolved (Cook, 2019; Iruka et al., 2018; Winsler et al., 2008). The data are clear that many children who experience this opportunity gap at the start of formal schooling, including Black and African American children, English language learners, children of native heritage, and those receiving special services face further barriers created by the system that is meant to support them (Fontil et al., 2019; Winsler et al., 2008). Additionally, historically underserved children are over-identified for special education services and behavior disorders, over-represented in punitive disciplinary actions including suspension and expulsion, and are less likely to be represented in gifted education and leadership programs (Iruka et al., 2018; Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017; Ahtola et al., 2011).

Public schools have traumatized native, migrant, and immigrant learners, impeding families' ability to trust educators and build relationships (NARF, 2019). Native learners enter schools as citizens of sovereign nations that have experienced traumatic practices in boarding schools, an unacknowledged history which impairs the ability for students and families to trust schools. English language learners, refugee and migrant children also face damaging and discriminatory practices in schools.

Children and families from historically underserved populations may not see their culture represented in the school community. Families may not feel as though they have agency, adequate language, resources or social capital to engage with the school system and advocate for their child. Many schools are not equipped to recognize or mitigate the effects of this disconnect, nor are they prepared to recognize cultural assets and utilize family strengths to bolster opportunities for learning.

Since effective transition practices portend better outcomes for all children, and especially those furthest from opportunity, strengthening kindergarten transitions may reduce the need for remediation, behavioral supports, special education, and other intervention services. Washington can and must do better by listening to the voices of historically marginalized families, focusing on cultural assets, and responding with humility and intention to support effective transitions.

Research Framework

We approach kindergarten transitions from Pianta and Kraft-Sayre's developmental model of transition (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 8).

In the definitive work on kindergarten transitions, these guiding principles articulate a set of shared values as a foundation for strategies and practices in transition planning (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 9).

1. Foster relationships as resources
2. Promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten
3. Focus on family strengths
4. Tailor practices to individual needs
5. Form collaborative relationships

Each of these tenets interacts with stakeholders in all areas of transition; children, families, schools, and communities and we see profound results when transitions are guided by this approach (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2001; USDHHS, 2016).
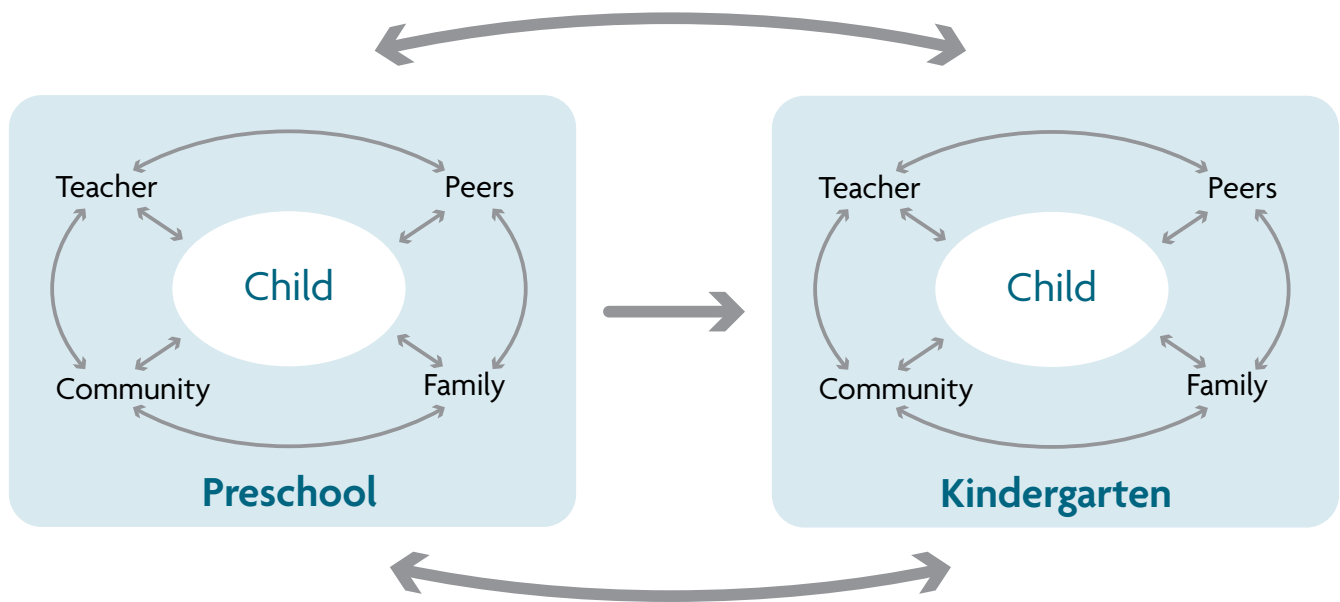
Figure 1: Pianta and Kraft-Sayre's developmental model of transition

Methodology

DCYF and OSPI began collaboration on the Kindergarten Transitions project in July 2019 and outlined the stakeholder groups and lead agency for each listening session or survey.

The following research questions guided our approach:

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 to kindergarten?

3. What ideas could families and communities share with early learning programs and school districts seeking more culturally attentive approaches?

Listening Sessions and Interviews

In August 2019, DCYF and OSPI created listening session/interview protocols. Initial listening sessions and interviews included participants from early learning programs, elementary schools, school districts, and community partners.

We modified the approach to learn about families' experiences with kindergarten transitions in January and February 2020.

Surveys

We designed online surveys to send to specific stakeholders through partner organizations:

- ECEAP Coaches and Family Support Staff (through DCYF staff)

- Head Start Coaches, Family Support, and Directors

- Early Achievers Coaches (through Child Care Aware of Washington affiliates)

- Kindergarten families and teachers (through invited elementary school principals and district administrators)

DCYF drafted surveys for the settings serving children from birth to five years of age. OSPI drafted surveys for kindergarten teachers and families. The agencies shared administrative support and data analysis.

Additional Primary Sources

Washington's Rural Alliance and ECEAP Directors welcomed us to their annual meetings during which they provided valuable feedback to inform our understanding of current practices, barriers to effective transitions, and recommendations for improving practice.

Findings: Current Practices

Survey respondents, interview and listening sessions participants representing stakeholders across various roles in early education articulated a range of universal and focused transitions practices. We found powerful connections in similar comments generated by early learning providers, kindergarten teachers, administrators, and families.

Although the most common transitions practice reported is purely informational (sending flyers home with children), participants provided many other examples that were much more relational in nature. Study participants from every group emphasized a focus on connecting early learning programs and schools to better support transitions for children and families. They shared strategies to build relationships with families and scaffold the transition between birth to five programs and kindergarten. Many participants described specific events or approaches that were developed collaboratively and unique to their school or community.

A majority of respondents from all groups spoke to strategies intended to improve communication among providers, schools, and families, including transition meetings and kindergarten teachers' individual family meetings at the start of school. A few schools and programs reported robust home visiting programs that included kindergarten teachers.

Findings: Barriers

Daunting barriers to effective kindergarten transitions are frequently identified as systems challenges: divergent program requirements, funding sources, staff salaries, educational requirements and locations. These challenges weigh heavily on study participants. Awareness of existing barriers also serves to catalyze effective responses and solutions that are within the reach of schools and programs.

Recommendations: Goals and Strategies

We identified a lack of evidence of culturally specific transition practices and building on family strengths in learning environments. Therefore, we recommend goals and strategies with a focus on families for the next stage of Preschool Development Grant in 2020–2022.

Foster Relationships as Resources

- *Relationships as Resources: Conduct Home Visits with Kindergarten Teacher.* Share the required spring home visits in Head Start and ECEAP: Family Support, kindergarten teacher and elementary special education coordinator or school family liaison.

- *Relationships as Resources: Communicate Frequently with Families.* Use technology to increase frequency of communication with families before and after the WaKIDS Family Connection meeting.

- *Relationships as Resources: Elementary Family Liaisons.* Hire Family Liaisons at Elementary Schools, especially multi-lingual staff with cultural affinity to indigenous communities and communities whose primary language is other than English.

Promote Continuity From Preschool to Kindergarten

- *PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Classroom Visits.* Host cross-sector classroom visits of the preschool teacher to the kindergarten classroom and vice versa shares examples of developmentally appropriate practice and the continuum of typical growth.

- *PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Partnerships between Head Start, ECEAP Elementary Schools.* In the next stage of the Preschool Development Grant, DCYF Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) and OSPI will expand the number of Office of Head Start/HSCO Demonstration Projects. In 2020, the Office of Head Start aims to create 100 new partnerships nationally with 10 in Washington.

- *PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Early Information about the Kindergarten Teacher.* Families emphasized their need for more information about the child's new teacher and classroom to be able to facilitate their child's transition.

- *PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Jump Start and Extended Transitions.* 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)

Focus on Family Strengths

- *Family Strengths: Family Leadership and Engagement.* Create family leadership and engagement based upon research on the highest-leverage approaches. A trove of highly-effective approaches and strategies are presented in the Global Family Research Project online at **globalfrp.org/content/download/421/3844/file/ GFRP_ExecutiveSummary.pdf** .

- *Family Strengths: Home Languages and Interpreters.* Engage families in their home languages at school events (OELA, 2019). Schools prioritize interpreters and materials in appropriate languages for every family conversation and gathering.

Tailor Practices to Individual Needs

- *Individualize Transition: Children with Disabilities.* Provide families with viable choices for their children with disabilities.

- *Individualize Transition: Family as First Teacher.* Ask families how the transition felt to their child (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Sullivan-Dudzic et al., 2010).

- *Individualize Transition: Ask the Kids.* Listen to the children's feedback on their learning environments. What do the children see, hear and do when they enter kindergarten, and what would they like more of?

Form Collaborative Relationships

- *Collaborative Relationships: Shared Enrollment.* 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.

- *Collaborative Relationships: Preschool and Kindergarten Alignment.* 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.

- *Collaborative Relationships: Elementary Schools Ready for All Five-year-old children.* Learn from elementary schools that build on children's strengths and offer play-based, developmentally appropriate instruction as required by the state full-day kindergarten statutes.

- *Collaborative Relationships: Build a Community of Learners.* Support kindergarten teachers to attend to children's need for belonging, including reflections of their cultures in learning environments.

- *Collaborative Relationships: Reframe the Concept of Readiness.* The WaKIDS Whole Child Assessment is only one way to understand each cohort of entering kindergarteners. Utilize multiple measures to ensure that "readiness" applies not only to the child, but also to ready schools, ready families, and ready communities.

Conclusion

While systems change and aligned institutional practices are critical, this phase of research was intentionally focused on approaches and practices. The knowledge that families and practitioners shared in this inquiry begs for more depth, more breadth, and greater scope of inquiry in the next phase of the Preschool Development Grant.

In the next stage of the Preschool Development Grant, DCYF and OSPI will initiate a shift in mindset about the concept of "readiness," putting families and community-based organizations in the lead to create culturally specific approaches to transition, especially for migrant and refugee families, children with disabilities, Black or African American Children and American Indian Alaskan Native families.

In addition, OSPI and DCYF will support cross-sector teams who aim to establish "Wildly Important Goals" (as described by the Office of Head Start) and test out new solutions, measuring the impact with feedback and data centered on children and families.

Systems are effective only to the extent that children and families see, hear, and experience the benefit. Families deserve a greater role in leading and advocating for their children's well-being. Washington children deserve more equitable transitions, and the Preschool Development Grant offers a valuable window to improve accountability in our systems.

Introduction

Each transition into a new educational environment is a big milestone for children and their families. We know that when children arrive feeling welcomed and excited, they are more likely to find success in school. While this report provides context for all transitions from birth to age eight, DCYF and OSPI focus particularly on kindergarten transitions. A smooth transition to kindergarten calls for families, schools, early learning programs and communities to work together to provide the best pathway for each child beginning long before the first day of kindergarten.

Inequities often begin prior to the start of kindergarten and persist far into the child's K–12 experience and beyond. For too many children, this opportunity gap is never resolved (Cook, 2019; Iruka et al., 2018; Winsler et al., 2008). The data are clear that many children who experience an opportunity gap face further barriers created by the system that is meant to support them (Fontil, et al., 2019; Winsler, et al., 2008). Since effective transition practices portend better outcomes for all children, strengthening kindergarten transitions may reduce the need for remediation, behavioral supports, special education, and other interventions services.

While OSPI conducted a kindergarten teacher survey in 2007 prior to the 2010 Early Learning Plan, Washington has not conducted recent research on current practice in transitions for children birth to age eight.

In the next phase of the Preschool Development Grant 2020–2022, Washington will structure universal and focused approaches to support effective transitions for all children and families.

Purpose of the Report

Effective transition practices are key to smoothing the path to success for all children entering kindergarten as the quality of a child's transition will sway how the child experiences this first year of formal schooling (Cook, 2019; Little et al., 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2012). 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, 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 understand how to best support a comprehensive approach to early transitions for children and families in Washington. This report summarizes the literature review and stakeholder responses from the 2019 federal Preschool Development planning grant. DCYF and OSPI explored commonly used transition practices and activities that are unique to specific communities to address barriers and gaps in support. The research summarized in this report hints at gaps, and DCYF and OSPI aim to support leaders to use their points of leverage in testing new universal and focused solutions in the next stages of the Preschool Development Implementation Grant 2020–2022. Successful transition strategies will engage early care and education providers, K–12 schools, special services and – most importantly – children, families and their home communities.

Intended Audience

Strengthening kindergarten transitions requires engagement and collaboration of leaders and decision-makers at all levels. Our goal is to support leaders and policymakers to connect with prenatal to third grade partners, braid and blend funding and try new approaches to build on family strengths. We hope this report supports individuals and organizations to consider their role in strengthening transitions and leverage opportunities to engage with others, leading to child outcomes that cannot be predicted by race or class.

Defining Transitions

Transitions extend from birth through the entire educational process. DCYF and OSPI seek to better understand families' experiences in transitioning from infant-toddler programs (especially Part C Special Education) into preschool settings (especially Part B Developmental preschool), into kindergarten and past kindergarten to first, second and third grades.

Kindergarten transition is not a moment in time, but a journey that begins long before the first day of kindergarten and extends into the kindergarten year. Effective transitions are a product of collaboration and strategic approaches that value and engage all adults in a child's life.

Equity in Transitions

Inequities in education begin prior to the start of kindergarten and may persist far into a child's K–12 experience and beyond. For too many children, this opportunity gap is never resolved. The data are clear that many children who experience this opportunity gap, including Black and African American children, English language learners, children of native heritage, and those receiving special services face further barriers created by the system that is meant to support them (Fontil et al., 2019; Winsler et al., 2008). Additionally, historically underserved children are over-identified for special education services and behavior disorders, over-represented in punitive discipline actions including suspension and expulsion, and are less likely to be represented in gifted education and leadership programs.

Public schools have traumatized native, migrant, and immigrant learners, impeding families' ability to trust educators and build relationships (Native American Rights Fund, 2019). Native learners enter schools as citizens of sovereign nations who have experienced traumatic practices in boarding schools, an unacknowledged history which impairs the ability for students and families to trust schools. English language learners, refugees, and migrants also face damaging and discriminatory practices in schools. Children and families from historically underserved populations may not see their culture represented in the school community. Families may not feel as though they have agency, adequate language, resources, or social capital to engage with the school system and advocate for their child. Many schools are not equipped to recognize or mitigate the effects of this disconnect, nor are they prepared to recognize and utilize family strengths to bolster opportunities for learning.

Since effective transition practices portend better outcomes for all children, and especially those furthest from opportunity, strengthening kindergarten transitions may reduce the need for remediation, behavioral supports, special education, and other interventions services. Washington can and must do better by listening to the voices of historically marginalized families, focusing on cultural assets, and responding with humility and intention to support effective transitions.

Literature Review

To identify our approach to this inquiry, we began by examining existing literature on kindergarten transition practices. This conceptual understanding formed a scaffold to frame our exploration of transition practices in Washington through engaging stakeholders in listening sessions, interviews and surveys.

What Do We Know About Early Learning Transitions?

Effective prekindergarten (PreK) to kindergarten transitions result in a higher likelihood of success for all children in kindergarten and beyond (Ahtola et al., 2011; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Shulting et al., 2005; Little et al., 2016).

Effective transition practices are most helpful for children furthest from opportunity (Cook, 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Shulting et al., 2005; Little et al., 2016).

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).

Kindergarten transition is not a point in time. It is a process involving children, families, schools and communities over the life of the child to set the stage for success in K–12 schools (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Kauerz & Coffman, 2013; Cook, 2019).

Readiness is more than just characteristics of a child entering kindergarten. Readiness applies also to families, schools and communities (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Patton & Want, 2012).

The experts on children, families and communities are – in fact – children, families and their communities! (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Scerra, 2012).

Schools, communities, and families across the state are working to create comprehensive, effective, culturally sustaining practices for successful kindergarten transitions.

Understanding Readiness

The measure of success of early learning programs is commonly articulated as "school readiness". Early care and education systems often include the term "readiness" in reference to program and system goals. Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric around "school readiness" reduces the concept to characteristics (often academic) of a particular child as they cross the threshold into their kindergarten classroom. A complete perspective of readiness encompasses more than just characteristics of a child at the point of entering kindergarten. Readiness applies also to families, schools and communities (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1996; Patton & Want, 2012). Considering these complex interactions, a static, binary measure of "readiness" that isolates a single component of this dynamic system (the child) does not adequately capture the nuanced interactions that make up "school readiness".

Readiness

"Readiness is not simply a property of the child. It is a reflection of a preschool's preparation of a child, of a kindergarten's preparedness to welcome that child, and of the parents' recognition of the differences between preschool and kindergarten and their ability to manage those differences (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

"Children are ready for school when, for a period of several years they have been exposed to consistent stable adults who are emotionally invested in them; to a physical environment that is safe and predictable; to regular routines and rhythms of activity; to competent peers; and to materials that stimulate their exploration and enjoyment of the object world and from which they derive a sense of mastery (Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

Developmental Model of Transition

DCYF and OSPI approach kindergarten transitions from Pianta and Kraft-Sayre's developmental model of transition.
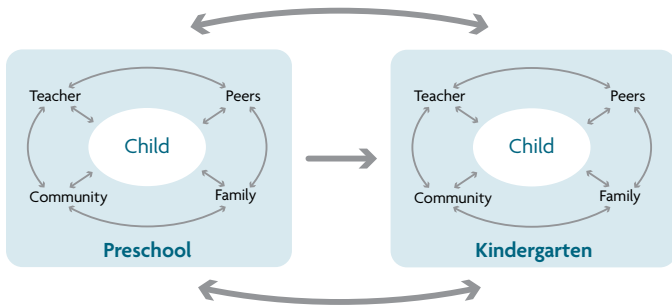
Figure 2: Pianta and Kraft-Sayre's developmental model of transition

Viewing kindergarten transition as a fluid process rather than a moment in time moves us away from considering only characteristics of an individual child in isolation and recognizes her in the context of her family and community as she grows and develops over time. The interactions and relationships among schools, programs, families and community are foundational to effective transitions (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Child-Centered Model of Transition

DCYF and OSPI developed a visual representation of this theoretical model to present during listening sessions to illustrate how the theory comes into practice for individual children and families.

This is Layla.

Layla doesn't just transition to kindergarten one fall day when she is 5 years old. Layla has been moving toward kindergarten since birth, with the help of her family, school, friends and community and through her ongoing growth and development. Every experience and interaction prepares her to take on the next challenge or learn the next new skill. Her family made that happen! Layla knows she is loved. She feels safe to explore her surroundings and has her own solid platform of experiences from which she can launch into learning.

In order to strengthen transitions, we think about a child in the context of her family and community. Transition is not a single moment in time. Every moment in the life of a child in her family contributes to her experience of transitions.

Figure 3: Child-centered model of transition

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. Many transition activities are common across systems and many others have been carefully structured to serve the needs of their specific community. Whether common or unique, effective approaches engage adults across systems to smooth transitions for children and families.

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.
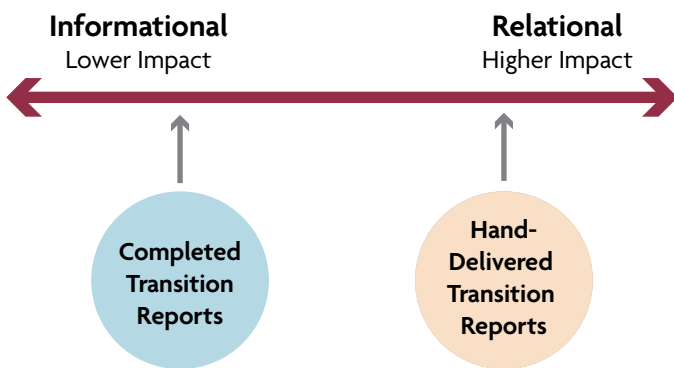
Figure 4: Continuum of transition practices

Guiding Principles of Effective Transitions

In the definitive work on kindergarten transitions, these guiding principles articulate a set of shared values as a foundation for strategies and practices in transition planning (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

1. Foster relationships as resources
2. Promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten
3. Focus on family strengths
4. Tailor practices to individual needs
5. Form collaborative relationships

Each of these tenets interacts with stakeholders in all areas of transition; children, families, schools and communities and we see profound results when transitions are guided by this approach (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2001; USDHHS, 2016).

Current Study: Methodology

DCYF and OSPI began collaboration on the Kindergarten Transitions project in July 2019 and outlined the stakeholder groups for our outreach plan.

The following research questions guided our approach:

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?*

DCYF submitted an application for Human Subjects Review to the Washington State Institutional Review Board on October 7, 2019, receiving notice of an Exempt Determination on November 7, 2019. Following IRB status determination, DCYF and OSPI released surveys electronically through SurveyGizmo and Survey Monkey links to maintain confidentiality and began conducting listening sessions and interviews.

Surveys

DCYF and OSPI designed online surveys, which were administered from November 15, 2019 through January 10, 2020. Surveys were distributed through partner organizations to send to specific stakeholders:

- 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)
- Kindergarten families (through invited elementary school principals and district administrators)
- Kindergarten teachers (through invited elementary school principals and district administrators)

While the initial plan was release of surveys in mid-October with responses due by November 1, DCYF and OSPI adjusted the timeline to receive data in late November. As of November 22, all five surveys had low response rates of 10–15%. To increase responses, OSPI and DCYF re-released surveys accepting responses through December 22 and January 10, 2020 respectively.

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 appears to be some snowball effect as respondents shared access to the survey link, though DCYF and OSPI have no means to identify the location or program connection of each respondent.

Full survey text is located in Appendix 1.

Practitioner Listening Sessions and Interviews

In August 2019, DCYF and OSPI created listening session interview protocols for use with the following groups:

- ECEAP and Head Start Directors
- ECEAP and Head Start families
- Rural Alliance
- Families in the Parent Advisory Council of Wahluke Migrant Head Start and Growing Hope Child & Family Learning Center ECEAP Program
- Tribes through the Indian Policy for Early Learning committee
- 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

DCYF and OSPI collaborated to plan and facilitate interviews with ESD coordinators and district administrators, and 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 sessions with cross-sector groups of school district, preschool and elementary staff and five sessions via video conference. We 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. Materials including invitations, agendas, and presentation slides were available in English and in Spanish. In the introduction to each session, DCYF and OSPI 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.

We asked participants 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 session included 15–20 minutes of planning time for the team 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, participants often lifted up strategies to move practices along the continuum to become more relational and therefore more effective.

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 for 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.

Figure 5: Transition practices continuum completed by listening session participants

At the conclusion of each listening session, DCYF and OSPI requested participants complete a brief feedback form to seek information that would help fine-tune the approach and to glean how or whether the conversation affected participants' thinking about transitions practices.

Kindergarten Teacher and Kindergarten Family Surveys

OSPI drafted surveys for kindergarten teachers and families.[i] The agencies shared administrative support and data analysis for these surveys, offered financial support for districts to provide 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 survey garnered the following responses from at least 17 schools. Because OSPI invited districts to participate through email via electronic links to the surveys, OSPI can not estimate the full sample size of teachers and families.

- Kindergarten teacher survey received 27 responses.[ii]

- 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.[iii]

Family Listening Sessions

As the Preschool Development Grant received a formal extension from December 2019 to March 15, 2020, DCYF and OSPI scheduled additional listening sessions in January and early February with Head Start and ECEAP families in Eastern Washington.

The transitions team modified the listening session approach to learn about families' experiences with kindergarten transitions. With support from Head Start and ECEAP contractors, we met with families from school district and community-based early learning programs. In the introduction to each session, DCYF and OSPI presented the purpose and context of the project along with a brief synopsis of the literature regarding effective transitions, highlighting the importance of the family's role in effective transitions. We divided participants into small groups to record ideas of what families want to see more frequently in supporting relationships and sharing information, and what should take place less frequently. 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. Materials including invitations, agendas, resources, and presentation slides were available in English and in Spanish. Language interpreters were available for each session.

Additional Primary Sources

Washington's Rural Alliance and ECEAP directors welcomed us to their annual meetings during which they provided valuable feedback to inform understanding of current practices, barriers to effective transitions, and recommendations for improving practice.

Current Study: Results

Early Learning Staff Surveys

A total of 155 early learning staff 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).
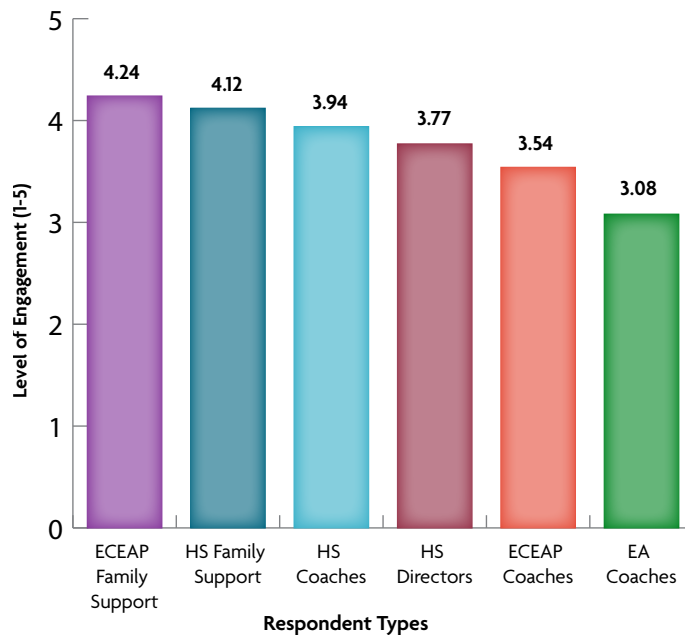
Figure 6: Level of engagement supporting children and families entering kindergarten

In terms of specific transition practices, 79% of respondents indicated that they send children home with flyers about kindergarten orientation (Figure 7). 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 8).
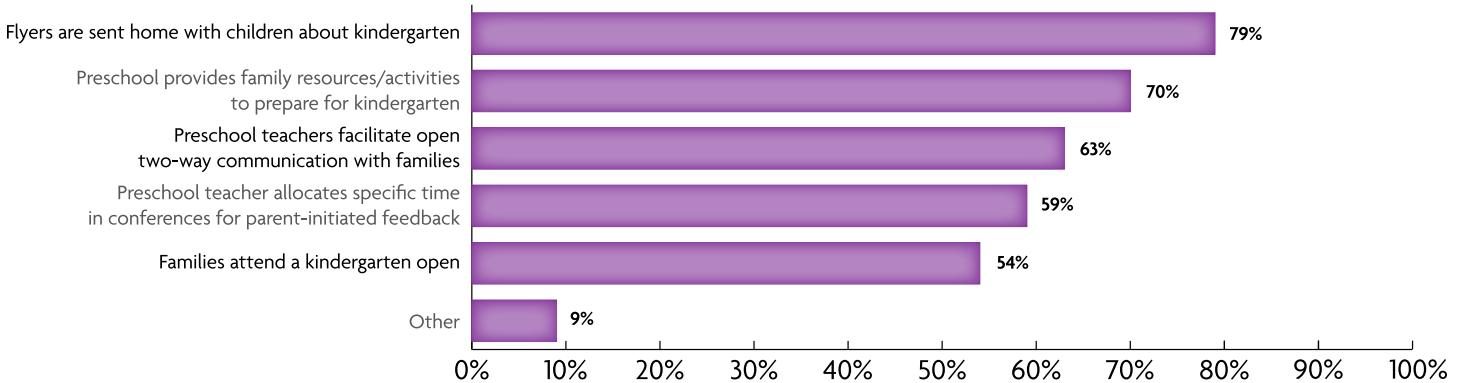
Figure 7: Top five transition practices

Practice	Percentage
Flyers are sent home with children about kindergarten	79%
Preschool provides family resources/activities to prepare for kindergarten	70%
Preschool teachers facilitate open two-way communication with families	63%
Preschool teacher allocates specific time in conferences for parent-initiated feedback	59%
Families attend a kindergarten open	54%
Other	9%

Figure 8: Bottom five transition practices

Practice	Percentage
PresChool and kindergarten staff meet to discuss curriculum and alignment	12%
Preschool and kindergarten teachers participate together	9%
Preschool and kindergarten teachers engage in collaborative planning	6%
Kindergarten teacher visits families of incoming kindergarteners at home	6%
Preschool and kindergarten align pedagogy	5%
Other	9%

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

Practitioner Listening Sessions

A total of 60 practitioners participated in listening sessions and interviews. Participants identified current practices through small group discussion and post responses along a continuum of informational to relational practices. (See figure 5.)

Participant responses were coded in categories of current practice, barriers to effective transitions and proposed improved practices. In Figure 5, blue dots represent current practices, and pink dots represent proposed practices.

MOST FREQUENT CURRENT PRACTICE 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

MOST FREQUENT 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

MOST FREQUENT PROPOSED 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

Table 1: Practitioner listening session responses by code

Kindergarten Teacher Survey

Only respondents who completed the entire survey were included in the analysis. An additional three responses were omitted because they were duplicates, and one response was removed because it was a preschool teacher and not applicable. 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 kindergarteners and their families in the first weeks of school (Figure 9). The least common practices included visiting families of incoming kindergarteners and visiting preschool classrooms.

- You facilitate open two-way communication with families — 92.3%
- You meet individually with incoming kindergartners and their families in the first weeks of school — 84.6%
- Preschool children visit your kindergarten classroom — 65.4%
- Preschool teacher/administrator visits your kindergarten classroom — 50.0%
- Preschool contacts you about specific children — 50.0%
- You meet with preschool staff and support specialists as needed — 46.2%
- You participate in strengths-based training on data — 42.3%
- You visit preschool classrooms — 34.6%
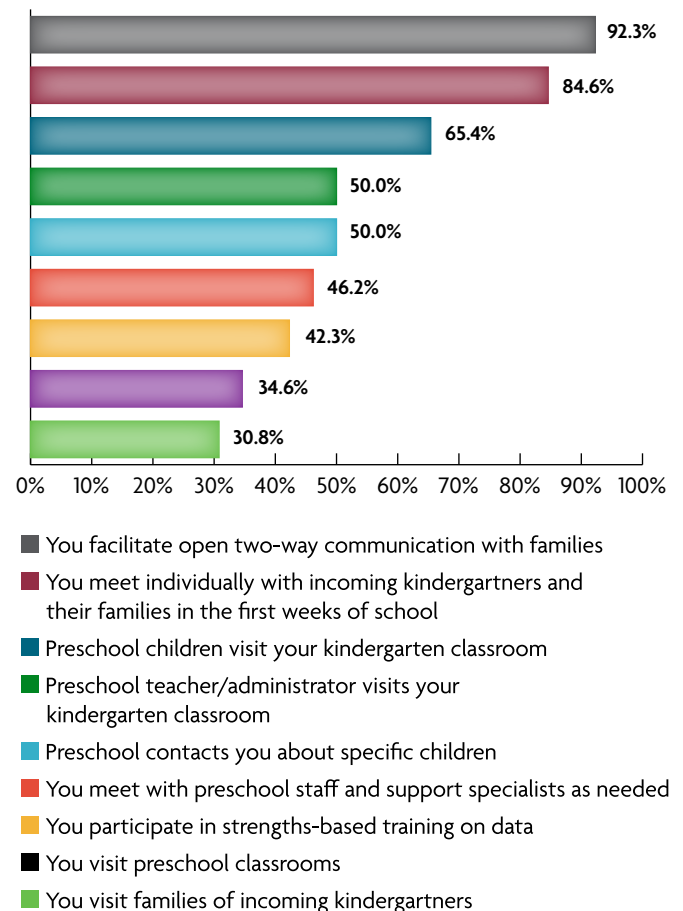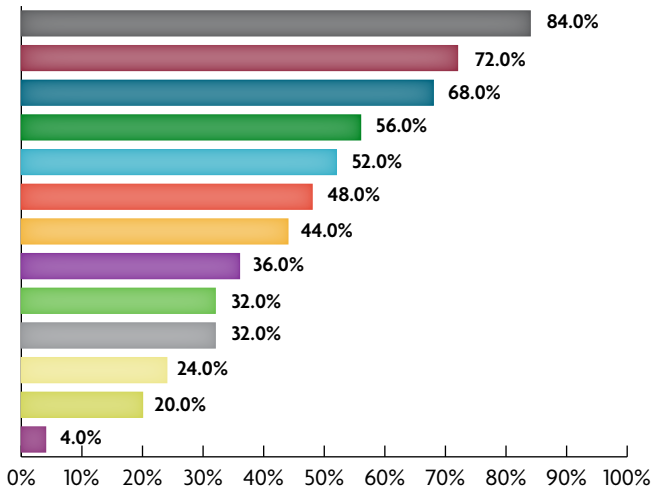- You visit families of incoming kindergartners — 30.8%

Figure 9: Kindergarten teacher transition practices

At the school and district level, the majority reported that elementary schools sent home fliers with preschool children about kindergarten registration (Figure 10).

Teachers attending kindergarten registration events and schools providing open houses were the next most commonly reported transition practices. Fewer than a fourth of respondents reported that preschool and kindergarten teachers align behavior supports, engage in collaborative planning or conduct home visits.

The most common way respondents shared information about a child's development with their family was through report cards or conferences (Figure 11). The majority of respondents also used email, phone calls, or classroom newsletters or blogs.

Chart values:
- 84.0%
- 72.0%
- 68.0%
- 56.0%
- 52.0%
- 48.0%
- 44.0%
- 36.0%
- 32.0%
- 32.0%
- 24.0%
- 20.0%
- 4.0%

- ■ Elementary school sends fliers home with preschool children about kindergarten orientation/registration
- ■ You and other kindergarten teachers attend the kindergarten registration events, perhaps participating in screening for special needs
- ■ School provides kindergarten open houses after school begins
- ■ Families of preschool children attend a spring orientation about kindergarten
- ■ Preschool and kindergarten teachers meet to discuss curriculum and alignment
- ■ Preschool solicits family input via kindergarten transition form or other documented processes
- ■ Kindergarten start dates are staggered to provide smaller class sizes for the child's first experience in the kindergarten classroom
- ■ School offers Jump Start during summer prior to kindergarten
- ■ Preschool and kindergarten teachers participate in shared professional learning or form a learning community
- ■ Elementary school engages in common kindergarten registration process with neighboring districts
- ■ Preschool and kindergarten teachers align behavioral supports
- ■ Preschool and kindergarten teachers engage in collaborative planning (Step up, step down planning)
- ■ School conducts home visits with incoming kindergartners and families

Figure 10: District/School transitions practices

Chart values:
- 88.5%
- 84.6%
- 80.8%
- 73.1%
- 50.0%
- 42.3%
- 19.2%

- ■ I share information about child's development in report card and/or parent teacher conference
- ■ Email
- ■ Phone calls
- ■ Classroom newsletter or blog
- ■ Photos/videos
- ■ Text messages
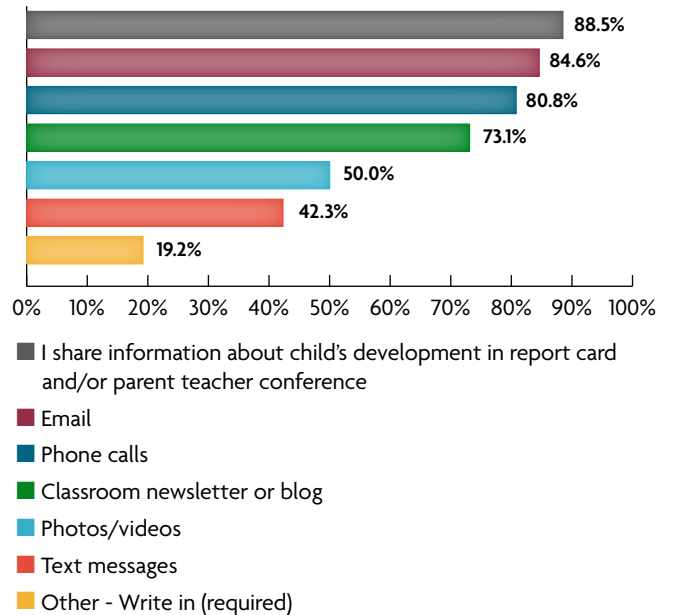- ■ Other - Write in (required)

Figure 11: 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. An additional one response was omitted because the respondent indicated they were not the parent or legal guardian of a kindergartener. 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 little interaction with kindergarten teachers and other school staff prior to kindergarten.
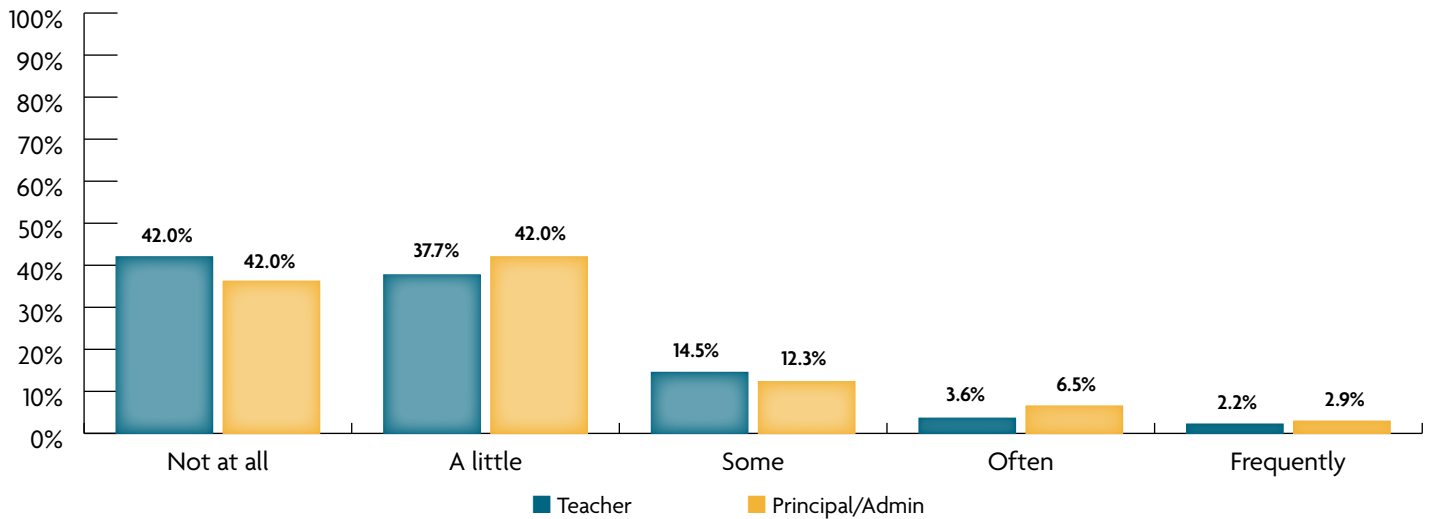
Figure 12: Frequency of family interaction with school staff before kindergarten (N=138)

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. 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 earlier in the year prior to kindergarten.

Family Listening Sessions

We modified the listening session approach to learn about families' experiences with kindergarten transitions. With support from Head Start and ECEAP contractors, we met with families from school district and community-based early learning programs. In the introduction to each session, we presented the purpose and context of the project along with a brief synopsis of the literature regarding transitions, highlighting the importance of the family's role in effective transitions. We then asked families to reflect on their own experiences with early learning transitions.

We divided participants into small groups to record ideas of what families want to see more frequently in supporting relationships and sharing information, and what should take place less frequently. Interpreters from the local community were situated in each small group to help the transitions team to hear and document the stories of all participants. 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. Materials including invitations, agendas, resources and presentation slides were available in English and in Spanish.

MOST FREQUENT CURRENT PRACTICE THEMES
Parent-child communication
Bridging physical boundaries/family connection to school
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships

MOST FREQUENT BARRIERS THEMES
Meals at school
Attending to child's physical needs
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships

MOST FREQUENT PROPOSED PRACTICES THEMES
Technology to facilitate conversations
Meals at school
Family - teacher/admin communication/relationships

Table 2: Family listening session responses by code

Current Study: Discussion

Data from multiple surveys and listening sessions highlights common practices, barriers to effective transitions, and desired or best practices, which we have categorized within the principles of this research. Survey respondents and participants in listening sessions representing stakeholders across various roles in early education agreed on the primacy of universal practices. We found powerful connections in similar comments generated by early learning providers, kindergarten teachers, administrators, and families.

Current Practices

Early Learning Staff Surveys

Early learning staff throughout the state were asked to participate in surveys from November 2019 to early January 2020. Surveys included participation from a total of 155 Head Start Directors, Family Support staff, and Coaches, ECEAP Family Support and Coaches, and Early Achievers coaches.

The early learning staff surveys asked participants to identify their level of engagement in supporting children and families in effective transitions. Responses to this question varied predictably. ECEAP and Head Start Family Support staff have a primary role in supporting families in transition to kindergarten. Directors typically work less closely with individual families. Coaches are often further removed from families in that they generally support several sites through the quality of learning environment and pedagogy.

These data should not in any way 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.

While the most frequently cited transition practice ("Sending flyers home with children about kindergarten orientation and/or registration") is primarily informational, the next four most common practices mentioned by survey respondents are more relational in nature. Early learning program staff identified many relational practices across every survey group. Notably,

ECEAP coaches indicate their programs send more children to spring orientations. Head Start family support staff indicate frequent use of strategies that support families in advocating for their children.

The least frequently-cited practices include PreK to kindergarten program alignment, cross-sector professional learning communities, collaborative planning and aligned pedagogy. These specific practices require intentional, coordinated systems with a high-level of engagement from program and school staff. Interestingly, respondents indicated a strong interest in improving practices (see Improving Practice) in these areas to strengthen effective transitions. Less common practices reported by participants in all roles include staggered kindergarten start dates to provide children shorter days with fewer children in a group in the first week(s) and home visits by kindergarten teachers with families of incoming kindergarteners.

Practitioner Listening Sessions

Listening session participants identified a range of current practices to support effective transitions. Frequently mentioned practices facilitate information sharing between early learning and kindergarten programs such as sending written records, "move-up cards" and transition forms to kindergarten teachers. Early learning programs and elementary schools share connections through utilization of GOLD® MyTeachingStrategies, WaKIDS conferences and SharePoint sites. Several districts have begun using GOLD® for kindergarten report cards. Practitioners are finding ways to work around some of the systemic challenges of information and data sharing, such as printing reports to meet with the kindergarten teachers who do not have access to the same data.

Attention to culturally responsive transition practices is evident in communities who have developed strong relationships with local tribes. Examples of effective practices include tribes and a local elementary school holding family reading nights. In addition, tribal early learning programs invite current kindergarten families to join the families of four-year-old's for a final family engagement event. At this event, early learning staff provide support as PreK families tackle paperwork to enroll in kindergarten. These practices provide opportunities for PreK families to know someone going into kindergarten and know whom to contact with questions. Another tribal community brings elementary principals and superintendents to visit the tribal museum. In one community, a tribal member is represented on the school board. An example of a larger system practice is the requirement of "Since Time Immemorial" curriculum in Western Washington University's P–3 Certification teacher preparation program.

Common practices that engage families and children in effective transitions include supporting registration by providing transportation, language services, food, flexible scheduling and child care. Jump Start (an early start short session of kindergarten) provides incoming kindergarteners the opportunity to begin in a setting with fewer children prior to the start of the school year. Parent Teacher Organizations PTOs engage families early in their new schools through family nights with STEM activities (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) or other make-and-take opportunities. PreK classrooms and classrooms at the start of kindergarten adopt similar schedules to help children's adjustment. Districts also utilize the WaKIDS family connection meetings in the first days of school to provide opportunities for children to share things they love, enable kindergarten teachers to build this information into the classroom environment.

Transition practices specific to children receiving special services vary widely. One district aims for full inclusion by transitioning developmental preschool students into general education classroom. While this can be a daunting process for families and teachers, the district is committed to providing the least restrictive environment for these young learners, affording them all of the opportunities of their typically developing peers. General education teachers provide clear expectations with lots of support. Families of preschoolers with disabilities tour kindergarten placement options from self-contained to inclusive classrooms to meet the individual child's needs. When meeting with families, the district commonly pushes for transition into general education kindergarten as the default with the possibility to provide more interventions or transition to a self-contained classroom if needed.

One developmental center convenes families to come and talk about what kindergarten is like and ask questions such as, "Who will be meeting my child at the school bus?" The school district sends a flyer home

with the preschoolers and posts it at the center. The early learning center also emails this flyer because there are families who never receive the paper registration form. Child care has been offered for the past five years, and a Spanish interpreter is available every year. Most years no Spanish speaking families have attended, and therefore, no interpreter is needed. The family liaison helps families understand that the individual elementary school is going to take care of them, to begin to develop the family relationship with the new school.

An elementary school hosts a family engagement component that provides tours of the school, information on curriculum, and what to expect in kindergarten. The principal invites all families to access the school before the kindergarten experience starts. At an Ice Cream Social, kindergarten families arrive an hour before everyone else. The kindergarteners and families complete a scavenger hunt when they meet the principal, the office staff, all kindergarten staff, see the cafeteria and tour the school. Inviting the kindergarten families early takes away the pressure of navigating crowded hallways, competing for parking and feeling overwhelmed by an unfamiliar building.

Several school districts and early learning programs cited their efforts to align professional learning and curriculum from PreK to kindergarten. One district hosts professional learning communities with grade level planning. Quarterly the district hosts vertical teaming nights where they bring in early learning teachers. This district also collaborates with their Educational Service District (ESD) to provide shared professional development with special education and ECEAP teachers. The ESD also offers professional development for early learning providers twice a month with an activity to make and take materials home.

Kindergarten Teacher Survey

Kindergarten teachers reported their own involvement in transitions activities as well as those of their school and district. More than 80% of respondents were involved in facilitating open two-way communication with families and meeting individually with incoming kindergarteners and their families in the first weeks of school, participating in kindergarten registration events, developmental screening and attending kindergarten open house. The least common practices included visiting families of incoming kindergarteners and visiting preschool classrooms.

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

When asked what the best aspects of transition practices were, 77% of kindergarten teachers cited the opportunity to meet parents and family.

Kindergarten Family Survey

The kindergarten family survey did not ask about specific transition practices, but rather about the family's experience with kindergarten transition overall.

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

Overall, families who participated in the survey reported a positive view of their child's kindergarten experience. 85.9% of families surveyed 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.

Family Listening Sessions

Families cultivate their child's learning and support smooth transitions by providing experiences suited to the child's interests and strengths. Families scaffold support to equip the child to cope with transitions. Families relayed strategies to support their children's transitions with open-ended conversations, attending to their social-emotional growth, and ensuring that children retain a sense of agency in their choices about how to adapt to school transitions.

Many comments made during family listening sessions articulated powerful transitions practices in which families support young children in preparation for transitions:

> "We acknowledge feelings of our 17-month-old. I tell him 'Feelings are all okay' and 'You'll be happy again.'"

> "[Mom] lets kids know that life will be different every day. Attitude is important and [the quality of] your life will depend on your attitude."

> "Family dinnertime conversations with kids help with transitions."

> "Developing trust with the teacher, the father and the student helps everyone feel at ease in a new school."

> "Transitions become easier as trust builds among teachers, parents and students."

Barriers to Effective Transitions

Daunting barriers to effective kindergarten transitions are frequently identified as systems challenges: divergent program requirements funding sources, staff salaries, educational requirements and locations. Since school attendance boundaries and early learning service areas rarely align, feeder patterns from early learning programs into kindergarten classrooms can seem untenable. In urban areas, early learning settings transfer children to multiple elementary schools and districts. The siloed nature of Washington's mixed delivery early learning system — family child care, center-based programs, developmental preschool, ECEAP, Head Start and family, friend and neighbor care — adds a layer of complexity that can overwhelm efforts to strengthen transition practices. These challenges weigh heavily on study participants. Awareness of existing barriers also serves to catalyze effective responses and solutions that are within the reach of schools and programs.

Early Learning Staff Surveys

Fostering relationships among children, teachers and families is essential. Survey data revealed that relationships among PreK and kindergarten teachers were a high priority for early learning staff. Respondents emphasized the need to develop those relationships as well as build relationships between the school and families to establish meaningful connections. Early learning staff cited the need to foster cross-sector relationships among the child, family, teachers and administrators. Respondents identified the need to create opportunities to build genuine relationships through multiple activities and practices.

Early learning staff respondents voiced their concerns over many barriers to meeting the individual needs of children, especially coordinating Special Education services. Respondents identified an insufficient capacity to meet the need for language services including interpreters and translation services, as well as underrepresentation of children's languages and cultures in their own teachers and staff. The early learning staff survey also revealed a concern for the loss of family support when transitioning out of comprehensive early learning programs into elementary schools.

Early learning survey respondents voiced concerns regarding capacity to promote continuity from PreK to kindergarten. Participants value aligning classroom practices, pedagogy, social-emotional learning, behavior practices and/or curriculum. Early learning staff recognize that many programs and schools lack the structure to share resources, participate in shared professional learning, and collaborative planning.

Early learning staff also expressed concerns about an apparent disconnect in kindergarten readiness expectations. Respondents felt pressure to ensure that children were prepared to meet expectations in kindergarten while expressing apprehension about the appropriateness of those expectations and the transition to a more academic environment. Pedagogy was also a concern— specifically the notion that PreK is driven by a developmental approach and kindergarten is driven by an academic approach. Though clearly this is an over-simplification of a range of practices across systems, this supposition poses challenges for meaningful connections between PreK and kindergarten.

Several comments from early learning staff indicated a perception that elementary staff lack respect for the field of education of children birth to five and a lack of understanding of the importance of their work. This perceived difference in status accompanied by relative low salaries (as compared to elementary teachers) and high turnover are barriers to elementary schools seeing PreK providers as peers and experts.

Practitioner Listening Sessions

Listening session participants expressed concerns about the need to develop relationships among early learning and kindergarten teachers to support effective transitions. Specifically, many participants indicated a barrier to transitions in that teachers do not meet regularly and often struggle to share data and information.

Like survey respondents, practitioner listening session participants also cited the perception that early learning teachers are "not professionals" because they are not certificated. Similarly, participants saw a lack of understanding that preschool data is valuable information. One participant illustrated this point when she relayed a conversation with a reference to "real teachers" as opposed to early learning teachers, even though early learning teachers face similar standards and expectations of what is required for their work with children.

In every listening session, practitioners expressed concern over the barrier of how to connect with families in their community whose children are not enrolled in a licensed or district early learning program. Children who are cared for by family, friends or neighbors, a family child care home or community-based child care center are difficult to connect with.

> "We are not a massive community, but we are a very diverse community. It's a struggle to get parents in the door in the spring. We have to figure out how to reach the families."

Participants shared their frustrations of attempting multiple strategies to reach out to families with very little success. "We just don't get the families in." In deeper discussions, several participants ventured to identify some of the reasons behind this challenge including trust:

> "We find a lot of families where school wasn't pleasant for their parents."

> "Trust of the system is a huge barrier. The relational side is huge."

Listening session participants also cited challenges to sharing data and aligning data collection and usage practices. Early learning programs and the K–12 system struggle to articulate how to move data smoothly between systems. Schools and programs attempting to use Statewide Student Identifiers (SSIDs) are often thwarted by a disconnect between systems. Participants acknowledged potential for aligning curriculum and data through Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies GOLD®, though many spoke to lingering frustrations over logistical challenges.

The challenge of supporting effective transitions for children receiving special services was a frequently cited barrier. The transition to kindergarten for a child on an IEP necessitates including all of the important adults in that child's life to make decisions about her future education. However, practitioners from districts, schools and early learning programs cited concerns about "inefficient IEP meetings" and were universally disheartened by child outcomes in this area. Similar frustrations were expressed in transitions from Part C to part B, birth to three programs into early learning services. Early learning practitioners as well as school district staff voiced a sense of urgency to increase inclusive practices and improve outcomes for children receiving special services.

Practitioners identified profound barriers to supporting effective transitions for children and families from culturally specific communities. One district shared the challenge of providing appropriate services for children from families speaking over 100 different home languages. Districts even struggle to know who their students are. Participants in one listening session referred to the challenge of supporting American Indian/Alaska Native children when the "federal system misidentifies American Indian and Alaska Native children's race if two or more races are entered."

Kindergarten Teacher Survey

Kindergarten teachers responded that the biggest barriers were 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%).

Kindergarten Family Survey

Kindergarten families expressed their desire for more information earlier in the year prior to kindergarten about their child's teacher, the school's approach to social-emotional learning and behavioral guidance, school schedules, and transportation prior to the start of school:

> "Getting our final details i.e. finding [out] who our assigned teacher is, meeting with [the] teacher, touring school, school times, etc. as soon as possible."

> "A basic daily schedule sent to us so we could see when lunch was held. A supply list sent during summer not a week before school started."

> "How to help my child cope with bullying."

> "It would have been helpful to know that the conference before school started was supposed to include our child. We didn't know and thought it was only for parents."

Families relayed concern over the rushed schedule with lack of time for five-year-old children to eat and enjoy meals. Families also expressed a desire for more support at school such as paraeducators in the classroom, interpreters to support home languages, school nurses to attend to student health issues, and more family gatherings at school.[iv]

Family Listening Sessions

Families desire opportunities to be more involved in their children's learning. Families expressed desire for stronger relationships and more frequent communication with their child's teacher, whether in person at school, in a home visit or through technology such as text messages or Class Dojo (a cell phone application for family-teacher communication described in Recommendations).

Family Access to Birth to Five Programs

Families face barriers to affording and finding space in birth to five programs, especially culturally sustaining programs and programs in rural areas. Families with lower middle incomes may not qualify for ECEAP, Head Start, or Working Connections Child Care (Child Care and Development Fund federal subsidies), but they do not earn enough to pay the full cost of early care and education. Washington State has been designated one of the ten most costly states for early learning (Child Care Aware of America, 2018).

The high cost of childcare makes it difficult for many families to access services. Child Care Aware of America estimates that, as a national average, the annual cost of child care is $9,000 to $9,600 — more than 10.6% of the national median income for married couples with children under 18 years. For a single parent with one infant, the cost is prohibitive: 51.6% of average annual income. For a married family with two children who live at the poverty line, the cost is impossible: 101.6% of annual income.

In Washington State, the annual cost of high-quality full-time care for a single infant in a licensed child care center ranges from $9,240 to $16,200, more than the annual cost of tuition at Washington's public universities (Child Care Aware Washington, 2018).

Washington continues to be ranked among the least affordable state for child care in the nation (all rankings are from 2017):

- Ranked 6th least affordable for center-based infant care.
- Ranked 4th least affordable for family child care of an infant.
- Ranked 10th least affordable for center-based toddler care.
- Ranked 5th least affordable for family child care of a toddler.
- Ranked 10th least affordable for center-based care of a four-year-old.
- Ranked 7th least affordable for family child care for a four-year-old.

Costs of child care are highest for infants and decrease with age — though remaining unaffordable for almost all families (Child Care Aware America, 2019).

The high cost of child care is also distributed disproportionately across regions within Washington State. Smaller counties experience more instability in costs, because changes in the availability of child care (for example, when a facility closes) have a greater impact on the relationship between supply and demand. Urban centers with larger populations have more stable costs, but also higher costs. For a detailed report of regional variation in child care costs, see the 2018 Data Report by Child Care Aware of Washington.

Improving Practice

Early Learning Surveys

The most frequent comments generated from early learning staff surveys involve forming collaborative relationships. In open text fields, survey respondents identified collaborative relationships as a high priority (nearly 39% of total responses). Participants recommended practices such as regular communication between kindergarten teachers and PreK teachers, facilitating shared professional learning opportunities, collaborative planning, and establishing professional learning communities across grade teams.

Fostering relationships among students, teachers and families is essential. Survey data revealed that PreK to kindergarten teacher relationships were a high priority in strengthening kindergarten transitions. Respondents proposed practices that emphasize the importance of those relationships such as preschool to kindergarten transition meetings, as well as building relationships between the school and families to establish meaningful connections. Several respondents recommended hiring a transition coordinator, preschool-kindergarten liaison and/or family support staff at the elementary level. Respondents also recommended earlier identification of placement for incoming kindergartners and more frequent and varied opportunities for children and families to participate in the school community prior to the start of kindergarten.

Survey respondents articulated the importance of promoting continuity through aligning classroom practices and pedagogy, providing developmentally appropriate settings, and aligning behavioral expectations and supports. Some proposed strategies include refining and aligning the meaning of **"Kindergarten Readiness".** Respondents also recommended strategies for aligning systems to decrease perceived disparities in status among educators working with children birth to five versus certificated elementary teachers.

Focused transition practices also included strategies to strengthen transitions for culturally specific communities such as expanding support for language services, hiring diverse multi-lingual staff, adopting trauma informed and culturally responsive approaches and improving the coordination of special education services.

Practitioner Listening Sessions

Listening session participants emphasized improving practices to foster relationships as resources including providing culturally responsive learning environments and cultivating parent leadership. Participants suggested improving practice with earlier opportunities to form relationships with children and families. Getting to know a child and her family prior to the start of kindergarten provides a teacher with invaluable insight in how best to serve that child in the kindergarten classroom. Authentic relationships with families also create pathways to provide culturally responsive learning environments, cultivate parent leadership and help a child to feel connected as a member of the elementary school community.

Children and families transition to kindergarten with strengths and lived experiences that are entirely their own. While many transition approaches universally support children, there will always be a need to recognize and accommodate specific circumstances of individual children. Participants identified many ways to attend to children's individual needs including the coordination of special services, the use of face-to-face transition meetings and extending family support services into kindergarten. Tailoring practices to meet individual needs of children and families will help to scaffold children's skills and increase their likelihood of success. Proposed practices include use of transition forms, improving coordination of special education services, in-person meetings among families and teachers and family support in both preschool and kindergarten.

Other examples participants shared include school board, superintendent and administrative support of and commitment to high-quality, developmentally aligned early learning practices, strengths-based approach and developmentally appropriate kindergarten classroom environments.

Kindergarten Teacher Survey

Suggestions for improving kindergarten transitions and WaKIDS ranged widely for teachers surveyed. The most common suggestions included increasing paraprofessional support (38.5%), increasing 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 one fifth of respondents wanted help understanding how to use WaKIDS data and more time to complete it, or a simplified version.

Kindergarten Family Survey

The most common suggestion from families for improving children's kindergarten experience was more developmentally appropriate learning. The most common write-in request for what would have helped families feel more prepared for the start of kindergarten was better and/or earlier access to information on teachers and classroom placement.

Family Listening Sessions

Family listening session participants suggested strategies to engage families in the transition to kindergarten such as inviting parents to volunteer at the new school, using flexible communication tools such as Dojo and hosting monthly classroom meetings for families to get to know each other.

Families suggested frequent and earlier opportunities to get to know the teacher and school in advance of the start of kindergarten, increasing home visits by teachers and more appropriate meal practices at school, including giving children ample time to eat lunch.

Limitations and Strengths of Data

This study was conducted over a period of six months utilizing strategies and methods that included surveys, interviews and listening sessions both in person and via remote video.

Listening sessions: While the data we gathered is a rich representation of participants' perspectives on kindergarten transitions, participants were not randomly selected, and sample sizes are too small to generalize responses to represent kindergarten transitions across Washington. Additionally, DCYF and OSPI must invest in developing relationships to understand and respond to the experiences of indigenous families in sovereign nations, immigrant communities and migrant communities. In family sessions and surveys, language and cultural barriers required interpreters and translators, which likely affects depiction and interpretation of participants' responses.

Surveys: OSPI invited districts to forward electronic survey links to kindergarten families and teachers. However, these districts were not randomly selected, and depending on the bias of district administrators and principals toward these surveys, the responses could be skewed. Initially, OSPI invited districts with the highest percentages of full-day kindergarteners eligible for free- and reduced-priced lunch (as proxy for poverty), English language learners, migrant students, special education students and schools in regions with the highest percentages of child welfare cases. However, other schools also volunteered to participate. Since the survey results were anonymous we cannot identify which schools participated, how many families from each school participated or the response rate per school. Open-ended questions resulted in a wide range of responses, not all of which answered the questions.

In addition, OSPI received few responses in Spanish and no responses in Somali. This result reinforced the need to build relationships and conduct more in-person listening sessions than surveys to be attuned to cultural values.

The strength of this methodology is the mixed methods study. The quantitative data provides a snapshot of which transition practices are most common in communities surveyed. The qualitative data provides insight into the early learning community's perspectives that the quantitative data may otherwise not show.

Recommendations: Goals and Strategies

The integrated findings across all data sources lead easily to goals and strategies.

We identified a lack of evidence of culturally specific transition practices and few examples of building on parent/family strengths in learning environments. Therefore, we recommend goals and strategies with a focus on families for the next stage of the Preschool Development Grant in 2020–2022.

We categorize the learning strategies with the five Principles of Effective Transitions (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, 2003):

1. Foster relationships as resources
2. Promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten
3. Focus on family strengths
4. Tailor practices to individual needs
5. Form collaborative relationships

Foster Relationships as Resources

We identify the need for building trusting, collaborative relationships among all of 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 age eight.

Relationships as Resources: Communication. We recommend a universal goal of increasing the quality and frequency of communication among families, ECEAP and Head Start staff, Early Achievers staff and elementary school staff (especially kindergarten teachers) in the spring and summer prior to kindergarten.

Here are a few examples of specific strategies to reach this goal.

- A kindergarten teacher responded in the survey that their school conducts home visits for WaKIDS Family Connection.

- West Valley School District #208 (Yakima) currently partners with Head Start and ECEAP to pilot shared home visiting in two elementary schools, which builds on their current family engagement practices.

  – Entering kindergartners receive their classroom placement and information about their kindergarten teacher in January prior to kindergarten entry.

  – Kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers conduct family conferences together in February/March.

  – Kindergarten teachers join the Head Start Family Support Staff on home visits in May prior to kindergarten entry.

  – The district continues to conduct home visits with families with 3 and 4-year-olds not enrolled in ECEAP and Head Start twice a week over a two-year period using the Parent Child Plus model available online at **www.parentchildplus.org**. Home visitors bring a book or educational toy with learning activities.

  – In addition, West Valley hosts family engagement evenings, parent education classes and Kaleidoscope Play and Learn groups avaliable online at **www.childcare.org/family-services/find-care-kaleidoscope.aspx** for family, friends and neighbor caregivers.

  – West Valley will evaluate the results of the earlier kindergarten placement, shared Head Start conferences and shared home visits using WaKIDS whole child assessment available online at **www.k12.wa.us/student-success/testing/state-testing-overview/washington-kindergarten-inventory-developing-skills-wakids/whole-child-assessment**.

Relationships as Resources: Technology to Connect Parents and Educators

- Ready Rosie (**www.readyrosie.com**) allows educators to send video clips and resources to families for teaching moments outside of the classroom. In addition, Teaching Strategies recently purchased Ready Rosie (**www.readyrosie.com/blog/2019-9-04-a-new-chapter**), and the parenting moments now align to GOLD®.

- Class Dojo (**www.classdojo.com/classstory**) is a mobile phone application that connects teachers, students and family members. Teachers post classroom updates, send photos and send private texts to family members. Students post their electronic portfolio for family members. Family members send private texts to the teacher or encourage their student with positive feedback on the electronic portfolio.

- Teaching Strategies *LearningGames*® (**www.teachingstrategies.com/solutions/family**) provides families with activities for teachable moments.

Relationships as Resources: Building Trust with Families. The 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)(US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2015). For more information, go to **www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/development-of-a-measure-of-family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq**. If used in a Head Start and elementary school partnership, the surveys could offer families the opportunity to share feedback on their level of trust in the child's early learning program and elementary school. These survey instruments could help programs and elementary schools measure the impact of new approaches to family leadership, communication and engagement in the child's learning over time.

Relationships as Resources: WaKIDS Family Connection. State law requires school districts that offer full-day kindergarten to invite all families (including families of children in special education) to meet with the kindergarten teacher in the first weeks of school, as one of three required components of WaKIDS (**www.k12.wa.us/student-success/testing/state-testing-overview/washington-kindergarten-inventory-developing-skills-wakids/wakids-family-connection**). Kindergarten family survey results indicate that not all families have been invited or accept the invitation to meet with the kindergarten teacher. As a universal goal, we would like to help teachers increase the possibility that all families feel welcome and accommodated. In addition, we aim to support teachers to build on these conversations with increased family participation during the academic year. As a learning strategy, we would like to understand more about the barriers to making these conversations possible.

Relationships as Resources: Family Liaisons at Elementary Schools. To ease families' access and navigation of school culture, a few districts have 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. As a specific strategy to build trust in a cultural community, principals and superintendents could hire more family liaisons and interpreters from specific cultural communities.

Promote Continuity from Preschool to Kindergarten

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Classroom Visits. Host cross-sector classroom visits among preschool and kindergarten teachers to improve teachers' awareness of developmentally appropriate practice and the continuum of growth.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Memoranda of Understanding. Head Start programs and Title 1, Part A elementary schools have program requirements to enter into Memoranda of Understanding. OSPI and DCYF seek to understand how many Title 1, Part A and Head Start programs comply with these requirements, and other best practices to support children's transitions.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Partnerships between Head Start and Elementary Schools. In the next stage of the Preschool Development Grant, DCYF Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) and OSPI will expand the number of Office of Head Start/HSCO Demonstration

Projects. Eleven partnerships across the nation started pursuing "Wildly Important Goals" in 2019. In 2020, Office of Head Start aims to create 100 new partnerships nationally, with 10 in Washington State. DCYF and OSPI will partner to support the 10 new cross-sector teams.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Dual Credit Programs. West Valley School District #208 and Toppenish School Disctric also created pathways for Running Start classes partnered with local community colleges. High school students earn credit for their paraeducator certificates building a more diverse educator work force in K–5 schools. As children leave the more diverse settings found in Head Start and ECEAP, they lack adequate representation in adult role models that reflect the race, ethnicity and culture of students in full-day kindergarten. These dual credit programs bear promise to address this workforce issue.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Early Assignment to Kindergarten. 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 early notification of their child's teacher and guidance to register in the spring prior to kindergarten entry. Districts can begin to build classes in the spring leaving space for families who register closer to the start of the year.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Early Information about the Kindergarten Teacher. Families highlighted their need for more information about the child's new teacher and classroom to be able to facilitate their child's transition. Understanding more about the new learning environment, being able to visit and experience kindergarten activities, and making new friends before the first day of school all build the child's confidence and decrease unnecessary anxiety about this stage of growth.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Jump Start and Extended Transitions. 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.

PreK to Kindergarten Continuity: Adult: Child Ratios and Home Languages. 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.

Focus on Family Strengths

Family Strengths: Family Leadership and Advocacy for Healing Reparation. Build a listening, healing co-design team of family leaders, Early Achievers, ECEAP, Head Start staff and elementary school family liaisons to co-create new family engagement strategies and work toward healing families' traumatic school experiences. Consider using tools such as the National Equity Project's "**Liberatory Design Card Deck**" available online at **www.nationalequityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Liberatory-Design-Card-Deck-Oct2019.pdf** .

Family Strengths: Family Leadership and Engagement. To create family leadership and engagement based upon research on the highest-leverage approaches. The Global Family Research Project recently released its report summarizing what we have learned over the past 50 years available online at **www.globalfrp.org/content/download/421/3844/file/GFRP_ExecutiveSummary.pdf** . Key recommendations include:

- Change mindsets to build understanding about the context in which families live and to demonstrate empathy.

- Renew focus to resolve racial inequities in extended learning opportunities. "A commitment to all families and communities, not just the higher economic ones, can build pathways that include high-quality schools as well as extended learning opportunities."

- The report identifies a 6,000-hour learning gap among sixth graders depending on their family's ability to pay for learning opportunities outside their K–6 classroom. Implement five high-leverage approaches:

  – Consistent attendance. Partner with community-based organizations and family services to encourage consistent attendance in early learning and elementary schools.

- Data sharing with emphasis on mixed methods blending quantitative and qualitative information across early learning and elementary schools.
- Academic and social development everywhere and all the time.
- Digital media to increase connections and information, such as the examples provided above.
- Supported transitions into kindergarten, middle school, and high school, with blended funding.[v]
- Braiding high-leverage strategies to increase the cumulative effect on outcomes.
- Learn from local communities (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2020)

Family Strengths: Home Languages and Interpreters. Engage families in their home languages at school events. Schools could prioritize interpreters for every family conversation and gathering.

Family Strengths: Support Families with Homework and Volunteer Opportunities. Provide meaningful opportunities for families to engage their children in learning.

Family Strengths: Affordable Extended Learning. Create extended learning opportunities for families of all income levels for children from birth through high school.

Tailor Practices to Individual Needs

Individualize Transition: Welcome Each Family to School. 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 kindergarteners and families on the school playground in summer.
- Host a game night with kindergartners and families in spring.
- Open the school library evenings, during school breaks and in summer to check out books together, either with the preschool or family.

Individualize Transition: Children with Disabilities. Provide families with viable choices for their children with disabilities to increase opportunities for the child's growth across all areas of learning and development. To increase families' access to inclusive learning settings, 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 most children exiting Part C from enrolling in Head Start or ECEAP.

Individualize Transition: Family as First Teacher. Partner with 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 Guidelines, Vroom, Ready Rosie, Getting School Ready and math and literacy resources that support families' understanding of child development. Seeking input and measuring family awareness and experiences with these activities informs future investment, especially regarding how culturally sustaining these activities are in the children's learning.

Individualize Transition: Family as First Teacher. Ask families how the transition felt to their child. In conducting the family survey, we learned that only parents of children with disabilities receive the opportunity to provide regular feedback on their child's transition. Districts need to build continuous feedback loops into their planning process for transitions. In addition, districts could adopt the planning team approach with preschool and kindergarten teachers represented in reviewing parent feedback.

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

> "I think it's a good school and a good teacher. I really think she has been given a lot of time to practice her letters and numbers and I see improvements. I believe her time could be spent developing her amazing brain better, however, like practicing to levitate, creating the solution to pollution or overpopulation. Let's just say we underestimate the kindergarten brilliance ... We have these young impressionable, practically geniuses and we dumb down the food, what they do, how they do it .... More outdoor time!! Gardening, walks, plant and tree identification. Anything! All I want is for my daughter to be ... Feet rooted in the earth, mind in the universe, and heart full of love."

Form Collaborative Relationships

Relationships are at the core of building a comprehensive approach to effective kindergarten transition practices (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Establishing relationships with children and families early brings knowledge, expertise and support to bear to boost kindergarten readiness for every child, more so for children further from opportunity (Loughlin-Presnal & Bierman, 2017)

The quality of interactions between teachers and children facilitates learning and the interactions that make a difference are not merely instructional (Society for Research in Child Development, 2013). Learning for young children takes place within the context of responsive, positive relationships (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2019). Likewise, strong relationships with families support teachers to better serve their students. When teachers have the time and tools to build relationships with children and families, outcomes for children improve (Caspe, Lopez, Chattrabhuti, 2015; Sandilos, Goble, Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, 2018).

Effective kindergarten transitions create a bridge from prior knowledge and skills to new learning and facilitate the development of key relationships among children and adults. Effective transitions matter because (1) we learn by connecting new information to something we already understand, and (2) learning takes place in the context of relationships.

Collaborative Relationships: Shared Enrollment. We recommend that school districts partner with neighboring Head Start, ECEAP and community-based early childhood programs 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.

Collaborative Relationships: Innovative Tailored Community Strategies. Individual communities are best equipped to understand the strengths, culture and priorities of their own children and families. For example, the Toppenish Community aims to better support indigenous children who are citizens of the Yakama Nation. A Yakama Nation elder serves as an advisor and regularly attends Toppenish board meetings. He promoted shared messaging of the importance of

school attendance at Yakama Tribal Council. Authentic relationships based on shared values and genuine collaboration generate the most effective transition practices for that community (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; USDHHS, 2016).

Collaborative Relationships: Preschool and Kindergarten Alignment. 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. High-quality early care and education experiences provide families with daily reports, interaction at pick-up and drop-off, small class sizes, structured family support and child-focused approaches based on developmental science may end abruptly when a child enters kindergarten. Kindergarten families merit the same attentive communication.

Collaborative Relationships: Elementary Schools Ready for All Five-year-old Children. The single eligibility requirement for children entering kindergarten in Washington is that the child has reached five years of age by August 31. The range of typical development for a five-year-old — and over the course of a child's fifth year — is vast. When we consider the range of experiences and cultural perspectives of historically underserved children, highly-attuned approaches to effective kindergarten transition become imperative. Elementary schools that offer play-based, developmentally appropriate instruction as required by the state full-day kindergarten statutes, build on children's strengths and facilitate growth through transition.

Collaborative Relationships: Build a Community of Learners. Children transition into kindergarten supported by their families, cultures and communities. In this new classroom community, children need to feel a sense of belonging and see their culture reflected in learning environments.

Collaborative Relationships: Reframe the Concept of Readiness. The WaKIDS Whole Child Assessment is only one way to understand each cohort of entering kindergartners. The WaKIDS assessment is not a way to measure the "success" of early learning programs. Each kindergartner enters with a unique early learning experience. The adults and systems are responsible to

be prepared to welcome each kindergartner and build on the child's strengths. A complete perspective of "readiness" encompasses more than just characteristics of a child at the point of entering kindergarten.

Readiness applies also to families, schools, and communities (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1996). We recommend a universal goal of adding multiple measures of the systems that support continuous growth of children birth to age eight.

Conclusion

Strengthening kindergarten transitions in Washington presents both complicated and complex challenges. Complicated challenges require technical solutions; complex challenges require multifaceted, relational solutions that are informed by the context of the challenges. While systems change and aligning institutional practices are critical, this phase of research was intentionally focused on approaches and practices. The knowledge that families and practitioners shared in this inquiry begs for more depth, more breadth and greater scope of inquiry in the next phase of the Preschool Development Grant.

In the next stage of the Preschool Development Grant, DCYF and OSPI will initiate a shift in mindset about the concept of "readiness," putting families and community-based organizations in the lead to create culturally specific approaches to transition, especially for migrant and refugee families, children with disabilities, Black or African American children and American Indian Alaskan Native families. We will partner with community-based organizations to engage in multiple ways of knowing from culturally specific communities before building new approaches.

In addition, OSPI and DCYF will support cross-sector teams who aim to establish "Wildly Important Goals" and test out new solutions, measuring the impact with feedback and data centered on children and families. Cohorts of cross-sector teams will develop and apply a range of strategies including the following:

- Aligned enrollment of preschoolers to ensure the most appropriate fit for the child,

- Increased prevalence of inclusive early learning classrooms for birth through elementary school,

- Formal partnerships with Memoranda of Understanding among Head Start contractors, other early learning settings and elementary schools (including American Indian Alaskan Native Head Start and Migrant Head Start)

- Increased use of GOLD® data to align developmentally appropriate practice across settings for children birth through third grade

- Increased use of formative measures in family and educator communication to support children's comprehensive growth

Systems are effective only to the extent that children and families see, hear, and experience the benefit. Families deserve a greater role in leading and advocating for their children's well-being. Washington's children deserve more equitable transitions, and the Preschool Development Grant offers a valuable window to improve accountability in our systems.

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Endnotes

[i] Kindergarten teacher survey appears in Appendix 2, and Kindergarten Family Surveys appears in Appendix 2-4 (English, Spanish, and Somali).

[ii] OSPI initially invited 29 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 solid evidence of the potential number of responses.

[iii] OSPI sent invitations to 29 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.

[iv] Sample sizes were small and do not fully represent their early learning program participants. See *Learning Strategies* for a stronger sense of family transition practices and desired approaches.

[v] See OSPI's recent brief Unlocking Federal and State Program Funds, February 23, 2020 online at **www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/esea/ pubdocs/Unlocking_State_Federal_Program_Funds.pdf**