

Center Tracks Kindergarten Transition Progress

In 1996, the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) surveyed 3,600 kindergarten teachers all over America. The study's findings painted an uncomplimentary portrait of the nation's preschool to kindergarten transition practices.

Among 23 transition practices outlined in the survey, the least commonly used were calling the child before or after the beginning of the school year and visiting the child's home or preschool program. The majority of teachers relied upon just a letter and/or a brochure sent home to parents and an open house. Worse, those activities were being conducted, by the majority of teachers, after the school year had commenced. "The most commonly used transition practices...can be characterized...as too little, too late," noted NCEDL. "Commonly used transition activities...do little to involve families and build partnerships prior to entering school."

When the Connecticut Center for School Change, in collaboration with the State Department of Education and the Commission on Children, conducted its own survey last year, the findings bore out that assertion. The survey of kindergarten teachers in 11 priority school districts produced "distressing findings," says Andrew Lachman, executive director of the Center. "We found that only 38 percent of kindergarten teachers reported that their school had any kind of transition policy, guidelines or planned activities."



Bridges for Success

Most transition strategies fail to take into account that "children face enormous discontinuities between preschool and kindergarten as (children) enter elementary school for the first time," write Robert C. Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre in *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families & Schools*. Children entering elementary school suddenly encounter "more formal academic demands, a more complex social environment, less family support and connection, and less time with teachers due to larger class size and more transitions during the school year."

To help youngsters successfully deal with those changes, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre recommend a transition model that emphasizes collaboration and calls developing productive relationships between young children and four groups – teachers, peers, the family, and the community – essential for successful transition.

"Kindergarten transition is about connections," says Lachman. "It's about connecting children to children, children to schools, families to schools, schools to schools and communities to schools. The more connections, the more successful the transition. The earlier schools begin the transition, the more successful.

The more personal the contacts and connections are, the more successful."

Championing this model, the Center is promoting productive kindergarten transition on a number of fronts, in both policy and practice. And the efforts are paying off.

"A much higher comfort level"

In September, 2003, LaDora Wade-Twitty became the new principal of Prendergast School, which houses all 11 of Ansonia's

kindergarten classrooms and a total enrollment of 700 students. She immediately discovered an example of "too little, too late."

Many Ansonia parents were still registering their children for kindergarten on the first day of the new school year. Often the parents lacked important information needed to complete registration, delaying the process further. Children who registered late had missed important opportunities to prepare for kindergarten during the previous summer, and thus were already behind their peers. And the registration process was being handled in the principal's main office, which only added stress on the first day of a new school year.

With support from the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and technical assistance from Center for School Change Program Coordinator Carolyn Hazard, Wade-Twitty created a committee to tackle the problem. Embracing multiple perspectives, the committee included Early Childhood Coordinator Diana Brancato; Lynn Pawluk, secretary of Prendergast School; school nurse MaryAnn Ahearn; kindergarten teacher Karey Elorriaga; Ada Merrill, a parent; school social

A Message from the Executive Director

Andrew Lachman

A Formula for System and Student Success



As states, districts and schools focus on closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all students perform at high standards, they need to begin at the beginning. Increasingly, policymakers, educators and communities are focused on school readiness and transition to kindergarten. That makes good educational and organizational sense. Early investments have a direct payoff in improved student achievement in subsequent years.

National studies indicate that half the children entering kindergarten make the transition successfully. About a third have some problems and almost 20 percent experience serious difficulties that affect both them and their teachers. Researchers reviewing the alignment of standards, curricula and assessments

find a lack of coordination between early care/education and K-12 education in most states, which might explain some of the difficulties.

Finally, the most common transition activities employed by teachers are low-intensity, group-oriented techniques often scheduled after the start of kindergarten. They are not powerful enough to improve children's experiences.

Transition planning is all about communication and collaboration. The development of good plans is a way to foster alignment and coherence between preschools and elementary schools. According to the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), successful transition practices build on five guiding principles:

1. Foster Relationships as Resources

Supportive, effective relationships are resources for children. When a child is involved in and surrounded by supportive relationships, the transition to kindergarten occurs more smoothly.

2. Promote Continuity from Preschool to Kindergarten

Fundamental to a smooth transition are relationships that serve as a bridge between the family and school and provide continuity from preschool to kindergarten.

3. Focus on Family Strengths

Relationships between schools and families, reflecting the strengths of families, can be developed through supportive, positive interactions initiated by the school.

4. Tailor Practices to Individual Needs

The transition practices used with a given family or classroom must be based on the needs and strengths of that child, family, teacher, school and community. The best approach is menu-driven and designed to be flexibly applied.

5. Form Collaborative Relationships

Collaboration among the key players – teachers, principals, outreach workers, families – is fundamental in developing and implementing successful transition practices.

Kindergarten transitions grounded on those five principles acknowledge not only the importance of a child's skill readiness across all developmental domains – social/emotional, cognitive, linguistic and physical – but also how important “ready” schools and communities are to transition. One important component involves communication between kindergarten and preschool teachers about expectations, standards, curricula, teaching methods and students. Ideally it includes inter-visitations, joint staff development and sharing of materials. Another component requires good communication between parents and schools, schools and communities, students and teachers, and children and their peers. Improved communication and coordination help foster pre-schools that provide high-quality, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities. They help ensure that students enter the

kindergarten door with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed and that elementary schools provide a welcoming, supportive and stimulating classroom environment.

The Center for School Change is concerned with kindergarten transition policy and practice because of their direct connection to student performance and because they further our mission to improve teaching and learning. The Center has disseminated the national expertise on kindergarten transition; provided technical assistance to school districts; facilitated forums for sharing best practices and strategies; supported research and advocated for policy changes.

On behalf of the Center, I testified before the Commission on Children and the Education Committee to put transition to kindergarten on the General Assembly's agenda as part of the enhancement of the state's school readiness program. *An Act Concerning School Readiness*, HB 6949 includes language defining “transition to school” as a planned collaboration and communication system among preschool and kindergarten teachers, families, and schools. The bill authorizes the State Department of Education to include transition guidelines in its school readiness program standards.

Policy – state legislation, local boards of education resolutions, and superintendents' administrative directives – is one vehicle for institutionalizing effective transition practices. Other ways to ensure sustainability are to use continuous improvement cycles to review and revise procedures and to build community support and constituencies to advocate for best practices.

The bottom line is that effective transitions to kindergarten make good sense. At their best, they are another example of community collaboration focused on improving outcomes for students. And that's a formula for both system success and student success.

Early investments have a direct payoff in improved student achievement.

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worker Sandy Qerim; Denise DiCenso, school psychologist; and Michele Holovach of Valley Even Start, a social service agency that works with non-English speaking families in the Naugatuck Valley.

The committee designed a wide-ranging package of activities to enhance kindergarten transition for everyone involved – students, parents and school personnel. They

moved registration from the main office to the school media center and established regular registration hours, every Tuesday, 9:30 to 11:30, from March through June.

With a grant from the State Department of Social Services, Brancato developed a Family Resource Fair to kick off kindergarten registration. A multi-faceted communications effort supported the program. Brancato produced a packet of information about both the Fair and the registration process and distributed it throughout Ansonia. Directors of the community's pre-schools met with parents to help explain the packet's contents. Information was provided to local print and broadcast news media and included in a monthly school newsletter. And promotional flyers were posted throughout the community.

Held at Prendergast, on a Saturday in March, the fair brought together all of the key players parents might need to interact with during registration, creating opportunities to gather information, ask questions and actually register new students. For many youngsters, it was a first opportunity to see kindergarten classrooms and meet teachers. Nearly 60 children were registered that day.

In June, the school hosted a three-day kindergarten orientation to which all new students and their parents were invited. Students and parents met in the school cafeteria, where half of the room was devoted to activities for the youngsters while parents met with Wade-Twitty, teachers, the school nurse, a social worker and school personnel in the other half. Youngsters also had an opportunity to visit the classrooms they would attend and ride on a school bus, often for the first time.

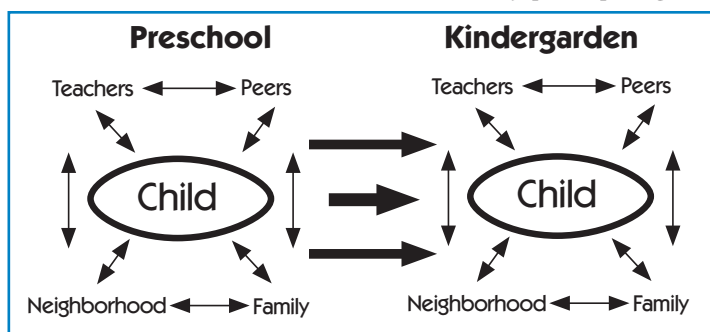
By June registration for nearly half of the incoming students was completed, exceeding the previous year's September results. "In the past, the registration process was neither welcoming for children nor warm for parents," says Wade-Twitty. "We've changed that. This school year began with a much higher comfort level." Refinement and improvement of the kindergarten registration process continues at Prendergast. Now the committee is also focusing on other aspects of kindergarten transition, including aligning curriculum and instruction between pre-schools and kindergarten through inter-connections and shared staff development.

Spreading the Word

Best practice models, like Prendergast School, need to be shared, so that others can learn from them and replicate the success. One of the ways the Center is doing that is by providing technical assistance about kindergarten transition to Discovery communities, the 49 Connecticut towns and cities that are partnering with the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund (GMF) to improve the lives of young children.

Since 2003, at GMF's request, Lachman and Program Coordinator Patrice Nelson have facilitated five networking sessions designed to disseminate information and encourage sharing of ideas. Because Pianta's "keys to a successful transition" serve as the framework for the sessions, GMF has provided a copy of *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families & Schools* for each Discovery community.

Each session focused on a different aspect of transition. One, for instance, covered promising practices and guiding principles. Another looked at how to institutionalize policies and practices. A materials fair, at the December 9, 2004 event, showcased brochures, mailers, and other materials used by participating



Pianta's developmental model of transition emphasizes multiple connections. (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, & Schools, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2003).

communities to facilitate transition. The programs gave participants an opportunity to share ideas and jointly solve problems. They also served as forums to talk about strategies for overcoming barriers to effective transitions. And the sessions exemplified the strengthening of connections that is central to Pianta's model.

A cluster of recurring themes that are essential to the success of kindergarten transition emerged from the technical assistance sessions:

- Development of a uniform, system-wide approach to the process.
- Identification of a point person who can take the lead on implementation.
- Sharing student information from pre-school through kindergarten.
- Joint pre-school and kindergarten professional development.
- Use of consistent, easy-to-read materials for parents.
- Special events to build positive family-school connections.
- Sustainability through policy.

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To date, 25 communities have sent representatives to at least one of the sessions. Typical of participants are Rosemary Scullane, kindergarten transition coordinator for the Norwalk Public Schools, and Mary Alice Petrucelli-Timek, school readiness grant manager for Bristol. Both say the workshops have been useful.

“I was able to bring principals from our kindergarten schools to one of the workshops,” says Petrucelli-Timek, who has played a lead role in the development of transition folders, packed with information, that are provided to parents of kindergarten students well in advance of each school year. Discussion sparked by the workshop led to enhancements of Bristol’s information packets which, she says, get high marks from 84 percent of parents surveyed.

“We’re always looking for new ideas,” says Scullane. “The importance of kindergarten transition clearly came across at the workshops. There were lots of good ideas in the discussions, as well as the materials presented.”

In the work at Prendergast School and in the networking sessions conducted for GMF, the Center has helped communities develop useful transition ideas and strategies. “These creative approaches to kindergarten transition are not simply good practice,” says Lachman. “They are proven to help children succeed.”

As Pianta and Kraft-Sayre point out, “Children’s early schooling can be considered a critical period that sets the trajectory for their future school adjustment.” Since kindergarten transition is a key to kindergarten success, it is in the best interests of schools and districts everywhere to adopt more effective transition approaches.

Eight Steps to Better Transition

Robert Pianta suggests the following eight-step plan for improving kindergarten transition.

1. Establish collaborative teams to address the issue.
2. Identify a transition coordinator to keep the process on track.
3. Facilitate regular meetings and conduct a needs assessment.
4. Generate ideas for transition activities.
5. Create a transition timeline.
6. Anticipate barriers to the process.
7. Revise the ideas and timeline accordingly.

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