

Easing the Transition from PreK to Kindergarten: What Schools and Families Can Do to Address Child Readiness

By Chris Ferguson and Lacy Wood

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Because it is right, because it is wise, and because, for the first time in our history, it is possible to conquer poverty. . . (Lyndon B. Johnson, Speech to Congress, March 1964)

With these words President Johnson created Head Start, the first large-scale program to address child readiness. Over the next 40 years, researchers and practitioners continued to build on this work. They have shown that those early programs were a step in the right direction to ensure the transition of each child into school and from grade to grade throughout the early years of school. Through these efforts, we have learned the importance of preparing young children to enter school, for it is the educational foundation set in their early lives that determines the tone and the pace for their long-term educational experience and academic success.

Family involvement is a viable strategy to address transition issues related to readiness (Boethel, 2004). The school-family connection can help ensure that the potential of each child is fulfilled as well as bridge the achievement gap. As illustrated in the School Snapshot, with careful planning, schools can engage families in helping children get ready for school and transition from grade to grade.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Mr. Basheer is the kindergarten lead teacher at a small preK–4 elementary school in the Northeast. In this school, there are approximately 125 students at each grade level with the preK students attending half day, and the K–4 students attending full day. In the spring of the school year, Mr. Basheer is asked to organize a summer program for the students transitioning from preK to kindergarten to help them “get ready” for the next school year. The administration hopes that addressing readiness issues during the summer will result in increased achievement for these students not only at their current grade-level transition, but as they continue through school.

Though he is very aware of the importance of preparing students for the transition from grade to grade, Mr. Basheer does not feel that he knows enough about transition to lead this effort without some investigation. Therefore, before jumping into the planning work, he begins by reviewing his professional journals and magazines for topical articles on the latest strategies in this area. As he reviews these articles, he lists other references that appear to have promising information on the latest research in this area. Since he has no way to access some of the journals referenced, he asks a colleague who is in graduate school to use her college library privileges to obtain copies of some articles for him.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT *Continued*

Based on his study, Mr. Basheer finds that numerous programs reported successful outcomes by including a component or a complete focus on family involvement strategies. These programs create a strong collaborative partnership between the school and families that is ideal for enabling schools to gain additional resources to support and address child readiness issues.

Since he had never been personally involved with a family-school program in which families were a significant part of the school improvement process, he decides to consult his principal, Ms. Blair. This is her first year at his school, but he has been very impressed with her leadership. After telling Ms. Blair what he has discovered through his research, he asks her what she thinks of involving families in a program to ease children's transition from home to preK and from preK to kindergarten.

Ms. Blair shares her experiences from her previous school with him. That faculty had fostered extensive collaborative efforts between home and school and had good results. She says that she would strongly support the inclusion of family involvement in the program. However, she also notes the importance of not limiting this type of program to the summer once families feel comfortable with this type of involvement. She expects that if the program is successful, it will lead to more family involvement at the school. Both Mr. Basheer and Ms. Blair agree that they would welcome more family involvement at the school and this effort will be a great first step. She asks him what he needs to get started.

Mr. Basheer asks her, "Based on your experiences, where would you begin?" She responds, "With the data." She suggests that he set up an exploratory task force with several teachers, the central office staff member in charge of assessment, and four or five of the students' family members. At their meeting, they should work to identify the content or skill areas in which the students have not been achieving as expected. She suggests this exploratory task force focus the project.

The next week, Mr. Basheer and the exploratory task force waded into the data. After a 3-hour session, they find that when students begin kindergarten, they

are successful in general phoneme awareness but are not demonstrating mastery in phonic recognition; additionally, they have very low levels of vocabulary. One of the parents on the task force speaks up and asks what can be done to address these problems.

One of the teachers says that she thinks they should see what other schools are doing and adopt one of their programs. A parent says that her cousin told her about a reading readiness program at her daughter's school where parents participated in a program where school staff help parents learn to support reading at home. Her cousin really enjoys working with her daughter and the school staff, and her daughter's grades have improved greatly. Mr. Basheer says he also thinks this might be a good solution, but suggests they should investigate the benefits and potential problems more before making a decision.

Mr. Basheer suggests that the group break into pairs. Some pairs will find and call schools with successful reading readiness programs and talk to both staff and families about what made these efforts successful. The others will look at the research in this area. They all agree to the action plan.

Before leaving, one of the parents, Mr. Havlin, says, "I really enjoyed this meeting. I think we should involve others in the process—staff and parents." Everyone agrees with this statement. They decide that each pair will invite two more people to join their efforts. The group adjourns after setting a meeting date for reports.

Mr. Basheer and Ms. Blair meet later to talk about the meeting and the concept of home-based reading support. They both feel the meeting was productive. Mr. Basheer is amazed and enthusiastic about the reaction of the staff to the inquiries and perspectives of the families. Everyone seems to be looking at the problem through a wider lens. Ms. Blair, who was actually a member of a home-based reading support team earlier in her career, is pleased that the group has chosen to investigate a quality, research-based process. However, she cautions Mr. Basheer that just because the two of them felt the strategy is a solid solution, they are a long way from implementation. Mr. Basheer agrees, but he is pleased with the progress and ready to continue the work.

What to Consider

Easing the Transition from PreK to Kindergarten

As shown in the School Snapshot, families are interested in participating in their children's education and can make significant contributions to support their learning. When schools and families collaborate to help young children transition from home to preK to kindergarten, the result can be measurable dividends for students (Rathbun & Germino-Hausken, 2001). In fact, the period of transition to kindergarten provides an optimal opportunity for school staff to capitalize on the higher levels of family-school connections common in preK and early child care programs.

However, if families are to be involved, school staff have to reach out to families and invite them to participate. According to Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (1999), research “emphasizes the important role that principals, policies, and school attributes play in predicting family involvement” (p. 27). Moreover, in urban schools and schools with high populations of low-income and racial or ethnic minority students, school administrators should make these activities a priority and work to provide the necessary supports for these transition practices, for these efforts help to bridge the achievement gap (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001; Rathbun & Germino-Hausken, 2001). Although families commonly “cede” control of their children's education to schools when they begin formal education, schools can change this tendency by creating structures that encourage active family involvement.

Even though we commonly assume that the work to transition a child into school begins once the child starts school, utilizing specific transition activities before children start kindergarten or between lower grade levels can help boost families' at-school involvement and create expectations for continued family-school connections for the future. This requires school staff to make direct contact with parents before a child enters school and maintain that contact throughout the child's education.

In several of their studies Pianta et al. describe this process as a reaching-out effort: to families and preschools, backward in time to establish links with families before the first day of school, and intensively through personal contacts and home visits. It is through direct contact and home visits that school staff have an opportunity to introduce themselves to families, start to get acquainted, and help orient children and families to the school's routines and expectations (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999).

Meetings, like the one Mr. Basheer held, are a first step in establishing productive relationships among all stakeholders. The four syntheses (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003, 2004), created by SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, have explored a large number of studies about programs that have sought to develop family and community involvement as a strategy to support student learning. Within the studies, the Center has found common characteristics in effective family and community connections with schools programs: Staff in these schools deliberately create a culture that promotes

- **relationships** among family, community members, and school staff that foster trust and collaboration,
- **recognition** of families' needs and class and cultural differences that lead to greater understanding and respect among all involved, and
- **involvement** of all stakeholders in a shared partnership of mutual responsibility for student learning.

What to Consider *continued*

For these characteristics to emerge, school staff have to actively work, over a lengthy period of time, to

- **prepare** all of those involved—staff and families—to do the work,
- **focus** the work on meaningful outcomes and purposes that relate directly to what students are expected to learn, and
- **advocate** an inclusive educational culture that involves all stakeholders in the work to support students in their academic pursuits.

The question for school staff like Mr. Basheer is, **what actions can school leaders take to involve families in efforts to support student transition from home to preK to kindergarten?**



Putting It Into Practice

In each of the four syntheses created by SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, the authors include recommendations for building effective programs, based on the studies included. In the 2004 synthesis, *Readiness: Family and Community Connections with Schools*, Boethel recommends the following strategies to help school staff develop effective family and community connections with schools.

1 **Recruitment and organizational activities that school staff can use to initiate the involvement of all stakeholders:**

- *Invite families and school staff to participate in focus groups to explore families' and the school's expectations for students, families' needs in supporting their children's transition to school, or other related topics.*
- *Hold informational sessions with community members and families to share the school's approach to meeting the needs of all students and the school's goals for students and staff.*
- *Ask family members of older elementary school students to participate in discussion groups that will provide the families of preK and kindergarten students with insight into how to prepare the children for school, including ways that families can support classroom instruction.*
- *Involve families of 3 and 4 year olds in No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-mandated School-Parent Compact initiatives.*

2 **Transition activities that schools can initiate before children start kindergarten:**

- *Make direct contact with families by phone or at community activities in order to share grade-level expectations and school contact information.*
- *Visit students at home before they enter school, to help establish a positive relationship with families.*
- *Host open houses or pre-enrollment classroom visits for parents and children in order for them to gain experience in what the school day is like.*
- *Host parent orientation sessions off the school grounds at community centers or local churches to provide family members with forms and insights to help children transition to the next grade level.*
- *Provide helpful pamphlets for families on what the school will expect of them and tips on things they can do at home to prepare their children for school.*

3

Professional development activities that school leaders can initiate to provide specific supports to facilitate and increase teachers' use of in-depth transition activities:

- Provide training to instructional staff on helpful strategies to engage families or create opportunities for role-playing to help staff learn to interact with families about family concerns and student needs as they transition to the next grade. This can be done during the school year or during the summer.
- Supply teachers with class lists as early as possible before the start of school, so they can begin their efforts to contact the families of their students before the school year begins.

4

Policy decisions that district and school staff can enact to provide support for these efforts:

- Provide supplemental funds for teachers to participate in transition- and readiness-related training.
- Fund family liaisons or coordinators for school campuses who will reach out to parents and ensure that their questions are answered and concerns are addressed.
- Invite families to participate in focus or small discussion groups about student performance, expectations, curriculum, and other areas where the perspectives of all stakeholders is important.

For More Ideas on This Strategy:

The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG), located at the University of North Carolina, is one of the nation's largest multidisciplinary centers devoted to the study of children. One of its many projects, the **National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL)**, focuses on enhancing the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children from birth through age 8 and is a national early childhood research project supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). NCEDL is a collaboration with the University of Virginia and University of California, Los Angeles. NCEDL has numerous documents and other helpful resources on its Web site that can be used as professional development tools or as information sources for school staff, family members, or other interested groups. The following two documents provide research findings and recommendations that schools will find valuable as they work to improve student performance by involving families in child readiness efforts.

Early Developments: This product is published three times a year, and each issue is dedicated to a prominent theme in early childhood education. Each issue includes a detailed explanation of the selected topic, descriptions of teachers and schools who are attempting to address the topic, and explanations of current research on specific interventions for the topic. The Spring 2005 issue is dedicated to a recent NCEDL study on preK children. It is available in an easily downloaded PDF file.

Fact Sheets: This series of one-page briefs provide concise explanations and research analysis of key issues in early childhood education. These *Sheets* not only provide useful information on important early childhood topics, they provide insight into possible structures and content for fact sheets that a school staff might develop to communicate this type of information. These *Fact Sheets* are available in an easily downloaded PDF file.

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For More Ideas on This Strategy, *continued*:

The **Harvard Family Research Project** has developed various research reports and other helpful documents to assist private organizations and communities as they promote child development, student achievement, healthy family functioning, and community development. The following study report provides additional information on the topic of transition and family involvement that can be used to explore the most current research on this topic.

The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families (2004) – A report from the Harvard Family Research Project by Marielle Bohan-Baker and Priscilla M. D. Little. Available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/bohan.html>

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Related Research

There are numerous studies on the more general topic of school readiness. While there have been randomized control trial studies on change and intervention strategies for transition practices and their impact on children's early success in schools, research on the specific topic of readiness and transition has primarily been descriptive. These descriptive studies focus on the exploration of issues rather than intervention success. Though the studies reported here are rich in description about issues and factors influencing readiness and transition and family involvement, they do not provide empirical evidence as to what interventions can produce the most effective practices in family involvement as it relates to readiness and transition. The studies described below utilize either survey or correlational designs. Additionally, the studies described in this section not only present information on current research, they also help to define what is known about effective family and community connections with schools efforts.

As part of a study for the National Center for Early Development & Learning's Kindergarten Transition Project, LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, and Pianta (2003) present descriptive findings on the Kindergarten Transition Project, a 2-year intervention in which family workers and teachers implemented transition activities at a high minority school. Transition activities included parent orientations, newsletters, and teacher-parent interactions. During the first project year, researchers collected interview and teacher questionnaire data on 95 preschool children and their families and their 10 teachers; in the second year, data were collected on 86 of these children, their families, and their 10 kindergarten teachers. The study found that more than 50 percent of families reported participating in almost all of the transition activities that were offered to them, and most characterized these activities as helpful in supporting their child's transition.

LaParo, K. M., Kraft-Sayre, M., & Pianta, R. C. (2003). Preschool to kindergarten transition activities:

Involvement and satisfaction of families and teachers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 17*, 147–158.

Rathbun and Germino-Hausken (2001) used teacher and administrator questionnaires from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS–K) to examine the extent to which transitional activities offered by teachers or their schools are associated with various school characteristics and with levels of parent involvement. Based on the responses of 3,243 kindergarten teachers, the researchers reported that the number and type of transition activities differed by school characteristics. Teachers in schools with low proportions of at-risk children used a greater number of transition practices and practices that were more interactive with individual families, compared with teachers in schools with higher proportions of at-risk children. In terms of parental involvement, the study found that teacher-reported levels

of parental involvement were higher in private school kindergartens than in public school kindergartens. In addition, several transition practices were associated with teacher reports of greater parental involvement. These included calling families, sending information home about the kindergarten program, hosting pre-enrollment visits, providing parent orientations, and having preschoolers spend some time in the kindergarten classroom. The researchers stated that increased efforts to work with families to ease transition for young students were correlated to successful schools.

Rathbun, A. H., & Germino-Hausken, E. (2001, April). *How are transition-to-kindergarten activities associated with parent involvement during kindergarten?* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.

The following three studies provide related findings that help practitioners in understanding more about building positive relationships with families in order to support student learning and transition in the early grades. In their study, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, (1999) described characteristics of and changes in teacher-family contact in 2 preschools (1 Head Start) and 1 kindergarten over a 2-year period. Participating children were from low-income families. In Year 1, preschool and kindergarten teachers kept family involvement logs describing contact with families of 290 children; in Year 2, kindergarten teachers kept family-school contact logs on 82 of the children who had participated in the Year 1 study. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses showed that teacher-family contact occurred more frequently in both preschool programs than in kindergarten. The types of contact and sources of initiation of the contact also changed from preschool to kindergarten: Home visits, conversations during pickup and drop-off, and phone calls were more common in preschool than kindergarten, whereas notes were more typical in kindergarten. Contacts shifted from being typically home-initiated while children were in preschool to school-initiated while children were in kindergarten. Positive topics were discussed a greater percentage of time in preschool than kindergarten, whereas family support, academic problems, and behavioral

problems were discussed more frequently in kindergarten (p. 433).

Extending these findings, Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gerke, and Higgins (2001) studied 110 children enrolled in 10 classrooms in 2 different preschool programs. Children were grouped by the school they would be attending in kindergarten. Though the study used a variety of data collection methods, including surveys and interviews, this report focuses solely on a subset of data collected on collaborative relationships among those involved. Much of this subset of data targeted communication strategies used by the teachers to create a "support network" (pp. 123–124) for student learning. The authors state that the "process is complex, and at times idiosyncratic"; however, the data reveal that when there is a positive respect for the roles of all involved, the outcome can be a collaborative relationship between families and school staff that can support student needs.

Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, and Bradley (2003) added to the two earlier studies in their observation-based study of 223 kindergarten children, their mothers, and their teachers. They found that when families are actively involved in their children's education at this level, the collaborative relationships established between the teacher and the family members will create a more substantial support system for student learning and will "bolster children's achievement" (p. 193).

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Pianta, R. C. (1999). Patterns of family-school contact in preschool and kindergarten. *School Psychology Review, 28*(3), 426–438.

Pianta, R. C., Kraft-Sayre, M.; Rimm-Kaufman, S., Gercke, N., & Higgins, T. (2001). Collaboration in building partnerships between families and schools: The National Center for Early Development and Learning's Kindergarten Transition Intervention. *Early Childhood Quarterly, 16*, 117–132.

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Within this document, the descriptions of concepts and recommendations come from both long-standing foundational research as well as more current studies. The references included in this section reflect both types of literature.

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Find Research Related to This Strategy

You can find more information and research on this topic by searching the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools' publications database, *The Connection Collection: School–Family–Community Publications Database*, at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/bibsearch.html>. If you are looking for information about easing transition to school in the early grades, useful keywords to help narrow your search are readiness, transitions, preschool, and early childhood.



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