



**Harvard Family
Research Project**



Ready for Success:

Creating Collaborative and Thoughtful Transitions into Kindergarten

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September 2012

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This paper was prepared by the Harvard Family Research Project with support from SEDL for the National PIRC Coordination Center, a project of SEDL in collaboration with the Harvard Family Research Project. It was produced in whole or in part with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-04-CO-0039/0001.

Introduction

The transition from preschool or other early learning settings into kindergarten marks an important event in the lives of more than 3.5 million young learners and their families each year.¹ The transition is associated with challenges and changes for both children and their parents. For children, beginning kindergarten means adjusting to a change from the social and emotional support received from early caregivers and educators to the academic rigor and expectations of a school setting.² This transition also involves new peer-related negotiations as students work to maintain existing friendships and form new relationships,³ and it requires adapting to a new environment with a different (often larger) physical layout, as well as new behavioral boundaries and rules.⁴ For families, meanwhile, the transition is usually accompanied by decreased communication with teachers⁵ and an increased desire to understand the academic expectations of school.⁶ For working parents and families, the transition is also accompanied by challenges in identifying afterschool care and transportation options to meet school schedules, particularly for half-day kindergarten programs.⁷

The challenges that new kindergarten students face during this transition period were highlighted in a national survey administered to kindergarten teachers in 2000. According to these teachers, 48% of their incoming kindergartners experienced a transition marked by “some problems” or “serious concerns.” Difficulty following directions was the most common problem.⁸ Families have similar concerns. In a small 2007 study of 132 parents with children transitioning to kindergarten, 56% expressed concerns about their children attending a new school, while 42% and 55% expressed

concern about their children’s behavior problems and ability to follow directions in kindergarten, respectively.⁹

Given that early social performance and academic achievement are predictors of later school success, ensuring that children get off to a good start in kindergarten is critical. Some problems may be addressed by exposing children to better transition practices and focusing on the development of school readiness skills. In fact, while currently limited in number, research studies suggest that kindergarten transition practices—such as having preschoolers visit a kindergarten

classroom and having kindergarten teachers visit pre-kindergarten classrooms—have a modest positive effect on academic achievement during the kindergarten year,¹⁰ are associated with kindergartners receiving more favorable ratings from teachers on social competencies,¹¹ and are linked to faster skill development from preschool to

kindergarten as transition practices increase in number.¹² These outcomes are all magnified for students from low-income families.

To maximize these outcomes, more widespread use of high-quality transition practices is needed—those that begin before the start of kindergarten, include individualized communication with families and children,¹³ and involve a collaborative effort among and between the different adults (families, teachers, and community providers) and institutions in children’s lives.¹⁴ A collaborative approach, particularly one that engages families, creates a sense of continuity in children’s lives and equips families with the information that they need to help prepare their children for school success.

Unfortunately, however, rather than using these types of collaborative, communication-based

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practices to help prepare children for the transition to kindergarten, schools tend to rely instead on a few group activities implemented after the start of the school year (e.g., back-to-school nights). Parents and teachers both report that their schools offer only low-intensity transition activities such as in-person registration days or parent classroom visits after the start of the school year.¹⁵ Teachers have also noted that a lack of district-wide transition plans, an absence of dedicated funding, and a lack of complete class lists before the start of the school year are among the barriers that prevent them from implementing quality practices.¹⁶

State and Local Approaches to Transitions

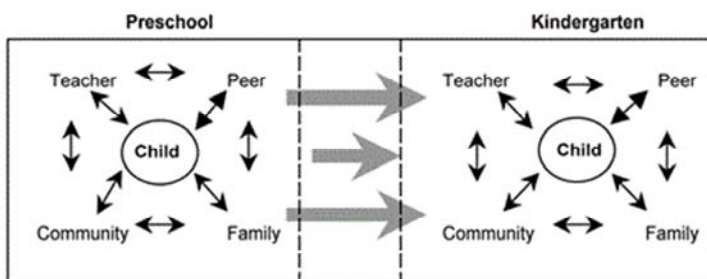
Given the importance of funding and guidance from leadership at the school, district, and state levels to support teachers' use of quality transition practices, understanding how policymakers, administrators, and principals can effectively provide this support is essential. This brief highlights promising practices in six states—New Jersey, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Virginia, and California—that make use of collaborative efforts and rely on local- and state-level leadership. Each of these case studies looks at initiatives in

which state departments of education, advocacy organizations, school districts, early education teachers, kindergarten teachers, families, and community members work together to help kindergartners enter school ready for success. The brief concludes with a set of recommendations for policymakers to help support these innovative practices at the local, state, and federal levels.

This brief is framed around a model of transition that accounts for the influence of multiple learning environments and stakeholders. In Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition,¹⁷ transitions are informed by ongoing and evolving interactions among and between children, families, communities, schools, and classrooms (see Figure 1, below). In this way, the transition becomes a process that is shared and experienced simultaneously by all of these institutions and persons. Each of the case studies presented in this brief, focuses on programs' uses of social connections (preschool–family partnerships, preschool–school partnerships, and preschool–community partnerships) to support children through transitions.

Figure 1

The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition



From Kraft-Sayre, M. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). *Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: Linking children, families, and schools*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Case Studies

In an attempt to promote best practices statewide, the majority of the states profiled in this brief rely on the expertise of the early learning branches of their departments of education to roll out and oversee transition programs and initiatives. Each case first highlights these state-level transition strategies and then focuses on the local-level practices that they support. The six states each illustrate an integrated approach to transition through the use of two or more of the following types of supports:

1. **Aligned assessments, standards, and curriculum.** By using a sequential curriculum combined with aligned assessments and standards, the state is able to coordinate early learning experiences with later academic experiences and establish continuity in children's learning.
2. **Professional development.** States play a key role in supporting collaborative transition practices by offering training opportunities for preschool and kindergarten staff to participate in together. Such shared training fosters a mutual understanding of the work being done in each setting.
3. **Programs for special populations.** To support districts in their efforts to reach special populations, states provide funding for summer programs and high-quality universal preschools to help at-risk preschoolers and young 5-year-olds (those born after September 2) prepare for kindergarten.
4. **Communication and dissemination.** States use ad campaigns and websites to reach out to families to encourage them to access and read information about their children's health, nutritional, and social and cognitive developmental needs.

In addition to highlighting states' efforts to support transitions, the case studies in this brief

also include programs at the district and county levels that have successfully turned their states' transition policies and initiatives into meaningful practices. This brief showcases those collaborative local efforts among preschools, families, schools, and communities. Promising local-level transition practices include:

Articulation and transition teams. Many of the programs lead or are a part of transition and/or articulation¹⁸ teams that involve families, preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and community providers, such as library staff and healthcare workers. Members of these teams meet monthly to plan for the transition of children and their families to kindergarten. They also select, implement, and evaluate transition activities, such as contacting families and connecting children with kindergarten teachers. Unlike transition teams, however, articulation teams also focus on creating and implementing course content that bridges preschool and kindergarten to provide continuity of instruction to help children make a successful transition to kindergarten.

Feedback surveys. To improve future practices and understand transition concerns, programs administer surveys to families and future teachers in order to gather feedback. In this way, planning decisions are informed by multiple stakeholders.

Ongoing/year-round activities. These local programs view transitions as a process, rather than as a one-time event. While some offer events, such as a fairs, registration days, or orientations, as part of their larger plan, their focus is on engaging children and families in ongoing and recurring transition activities.

Methods

To develop the case studies, we conducted interviews with a total of 24 informants

representing families, early care educators and administrators (from both summer programs and academic-year programs), state departments of

education, advocacy organizations, and early childhood foundations.¹⁹

NEW JERSEY

A Systemic Approach to Learning from Preschool to Third Grade

State Supports

The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) within the New Jersey Department of Education is responsible for the development, implementation, and alignment of standards, curricula, and assessment from preschool to third grade (PK3).

For successful transitions to kindergarten, state supports emphasize:

- Professional development that showcases best practices
- 31 school districts (known as *Abbott school districts*) that offer high quality preschool programs in the neediest communities
- Transition plans that engage schools, families, and community agencies

Professional development. To push districts toward a PK3 system, DECE offers voluntary professional development workshops and trainings for administrators and teachers. The three-part *PreK–3rd Leadership Training Series*, for example, now in its third year, provides administrators with strategies and techniques to implement aligned programs in their schools and districts. Additionally, the [High Quality Kindergarten Today](#) video series,²⁰ co-produced with Advocates for Children of New Jersey and based on the newly-released *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines*, explains and showcases best practices in kindergarten classrooms.

Abbott preschool program. In 1998, a series of rulings in a school funding case in the New Jersey Supreme Court established 31 Abbott

preschool districts in the state. The ruling required that all 3- and 4-year-old children in New Jersey's 31 highest-poverty districts have access to a high-quality preschool education—defined by enrollment in a full-day, full-year program with no more than 15 other children per classroom—and that each classroom have both a teacher's aide and a PK3-certified teacher who uses a research-based curriculum. DECE employs program specialists who are assigned to support these and other PK3 programs in the state.

Transition plans. As part of their five-year plan, all district boards of education statewide (including those in Abbott districts) are required to submit a transition plan to the DECE for approval. The plans must include the district's process for collaborating with other preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school administrators; methods for sharing information about individual children with their future teachers; and a process for sharing data with parents. DECE encourages districts to focus on ongoing transition practices, rather than events (e.g., a one-time visit to a kindergarten classroom) in their plans. Every three years, program specialists from DECE visit districts to validate the implementation and fulfillment of the districts' plans.

Local Practices

The Orange Public School District, an Abbott district, serves approximately 800 children in 54 mixed-age preschool classrooms. Each classroom is staffed with both a teacher and a paraprofessional. The district also employs a community and parent involvement specialist, social workers, inclusion teachers, and master teachers. The master teachers have the responsibilities of visiting classrooms, coaching other teachers, and providing feedback on teaching practices. As part of the PK3 initiative, classroom teachers connect their work with that of the elementary school by using a sequential curriculum and aligned assessments. Currently, the curriculum is sequenced from preschool to third grade for reading and math. Assessments are aligned for preschool and kindergarten, and administrators are currently working to align kindergarten and first grade assessments so that by the 2012–2013 academic year, all preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers will be using the same tools. To support this work, Orange’s early childhood education supervisor is attending the *PreK–3rd Leadership Training Series*.

Preschool–family partnerships: Using year-long conversations and orientations to keep families informed. The early childhood administrative team in Orange believes that, in order for children to feel safe and secure in their learning environments, they need to be equipped with information. Parents have the same needs. For seamless, successful transitions to occur, children and their families need to know what is going to happen and how it is going to happen. Throughout the school year, preschool teachers talk to their students and

their parents about kindergarten and invite kindergarten teachers to come and participate in classroom activities. In the early spring, while parents attend an orientation at the elementary school, children spend a half-day in a kindergarten classroom where they have snacks, participate in circle time, and explore the classroom. Leading up to, and also after the

visit, preschool teachers read books about transitions so that the visit is not an isolated event but rather is connected to the preschool day.

The early childhood education supervisor also administers an end-of-year survey to families about the Orange Public School District’s transition practices. Survey items ask families about which practices they liked, which they did not like, and which they

though could be improved. Administrators aggregate the data by school and use this information to improve practices at each site.

Preschool–school partnerships: Co-creating and sharing student portfolios. Preschool and kindergarten teachers co-designed a prototype of a portfolio for each preschool child in the district and developed a checklist of items that should be included in the portfolio. The portfolio is updated throughout the preschool year. Prior to the start of the school year, portfolios are hand-delivered to kindergarten teachers, who use these packets to learn about their incoming students and inform classroom instruction. In the first months of school, master teachers as well as intervention and referral specialists from district preschools follow up with kindergarten teachers to discuss the quality of the portfolios, children’s progress, and any additional needs.

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GEORGIA

Building Longitudinal Data Systems to Follow Students from Preschool to College

State Supports

Created to streamline services for children from birth to age 5, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, dubbed “Bright from the Start,” oversees the state’s universal pre-K program and child care quality improvement initiatives. Over the last several years, Bright from the Start has focused on developing common standards, assessments, and practices that build strong connections between pre-K and kindergarten.

State supports feature the following elements:

- Aligned standards and assessments that include a testing identification initiative to track children’s progress from pre-K to college
- Joint professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers as the new assessments are implemented
- Summer enrichment programs to boost children’s preparation for kindergarten

Aligned standards and assessments. As part of this work, Bright from the Start commissioned a study in 2010 to determine how well the Georgia Early Learning Standards (GELS) aligned with the Georgia Performance Standards for kindergarten through third grade. A new set of aligned early childhood standards will be released in late 2012.

In addition, the state is implementing a testing identification initiative that attaches an ID number to a child’s assessment data, enabling the data to follow the child from pre-K through college. As part of this effort, the state has moved from relying on paper and pencil assessments to using the online Work Sampling System (WSS) for all preschool children. The electronic storage and transfer of assessment data and

demographic information enabled by this system allow smoother transitions for both children and their data, particularly for children who may be in need of social-emotional or cognitive support. The data collected by preschools are easily transferred to the elementary school level, where administrators can refer children for early intervention or remedial programs from the start.

As the new assessments are implemented, preschool and kindergarten teachers receive joint professional development in the areas of standards, assessments, and data-sharing. The effort is meant not only to increase collaboration between teachers, but also to establish a common language between preschool and kindergarten teaching practices.

WORK SAMPLING SYSTEM

The Work Sampling System (WSS), a product of Pearson, is an instructional assessment tool that uses guidelines and checklists to look at personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development and health; portfolios that include samples gathered throughout the year; and summary reports that record progress and communication with parents.*

* Meisels, S. J. (2009). The Work Sampling System: An overview [Webinar]. *Early Childhood Webinar Series*. Retrieved from www.pearsonassessments.com/NR/.../Early_ChildhoodWSSSM.ppt

Summer programs. The state of Georgia funds an 8-week summer transition camp for children who score low on school readiness assessments. The camp focuses on early literacy and provides children with individualized learning plans based on their assessment scores and needs, one-on-one instructional time, and group activities to promote social skills. Statewide, the summer transition camp runs in 60 classrooms in 19 counties, with average class sizes of about 16 students and 2 teachers.

Local Practices

The Scottdale Child Development and Family Resource Center, Inc. believes that kindergarten transitions form an ongoing process that continues throughout the entire school year, and therefore has created a year-long transition plan focused on school readiness. These plans are developed by the Center's director and teachers in partnership with local elementary schools and families.

Preschool–family partnerships: Hosting kindergarten panels to prepare families for the transition. Family partnerships are at the crux of the Center's pre-kindergarten program's transition plans. At the beginning of the preschool year, a center-wide meeting orients families to the upcoming transition process and encourages them to get engaged by expressing their needs, advocating for their children, and taking on leadership positions with the Parents and Teachers as Partners in Education (PTAPE) group. During this time, families are surveyed to gather feedback about family concerns surrounding transitions.

Throughout the school year, families meet with teachers and administrators to discuss different aspects of the transition process and hear various perspectives on the move to kindergarten. For example, in response to parents' questions about the different types of elementary schools available in the county, the Center now organizes a panel for parents in

early spring with presentations from principals and head masters, as well as teachers from traditional neighborhood schools, charter schools, and theme schools. These meetings give families the opportunity to learn about the logistics of school enrollment and the paperwork, screenings, and immunizations that their children will need prior to enrollment. Additionally, two parent workshops are organized, in which families can hear kindergarten teachers describe the typical elementary school day and the social and academic expectations for children in kindergarten. Parents who have previously transitioned children from the Center's pre-kindergarten program into kindergarten are also invited to describe their experiences and offer advice.

Preschool–school partnerships: Familiarizing children with new learning settings. After identifying the kindergartens to which children are likely to transition, the Center's administrators establish partnership agreements with elementary schools. The partnership allows preschoolers to become comfortable with their future school environment by participating in elementary school assemblies, book fairs, and lunch periods while still in preschool. In previous years, families and teachers both identified cafeteria lunchtime as a big, and often frightening, change in routine for incoming kindergartners. In addition to having these children experience the lunchtime routine at a local elementary school, the Center also changes the lunch routine for 4- and 5-year-olds after winter break in order to familiarize them with the kindergarten system. Under these new procedures, rather than continuing with the pre-K program's typical family-style dining, the children are asked to line up to get their own lunches on trays from the preschool kitchen, just as they will have to do in kindergarten.

Additionally, the school partnerships allow the Center's teachers and kindergarten teachers to observe each other's classrooms and collaborate on planning transition strategies.

The Center's educators are currently using the online WSS and are anticipating the electronic transfer of data to kindergarten teachers in the coming year.

MARYLAND

School Readiness through Instruction and Assessment

State Supports

The Division of Early Childhood Development (DECD) at the Maryland State Department of Education is responsible for early child care and education regulations and policies. As a result of its state and local endeavors—including a statewide definition of school readiness, a universal school readiness assessment system, and comprehensive early care and education programs (Judy Centers) in all but two counties—Maryland has been ranked number one in the nation for its transition and alignment efforts for four years in a row by *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" report.²⁰

The state's supports contain the following important features:

- A model of school readiness that promotes the cognitive, social, and physical development of young children through a systemic approach that includes instruction, assessment, family engagement, community collaboration, and professional development
- State-funded comprehensive early care and education programs affiliated with elementary schools

Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR). Each of the 24 local education agencies in Maryland uses the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR), a framework that assists early educators in instructing and assessing young children across seven domains of learning, including language and literacy, mathematical thinking, personal and social

development, scientific thinking, social studies, physical development, and the arts. The five components of the MMSR are (a) classroom instruction, (b) assessment (a modified Work Sampling System), (c) communication with families, (d) coordination with early education programs, and (e) professional development. During the fall, kindergarten teachers use the Work Sampling System to assess their students on 30 performance indicators across the MMSR domains. Kindergarten teachers, who are all trained in the MMSR, report these data to the state and share the results with students' families and first-grade teachers.

Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program. Established in 2000 under a senate bill, Maryland's 25 Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program centers (known as the "Judy Centers") are state-funded early care and education programs whose mission is to provide a comprehensive set of coordinated services for children from birth through age 5 and their families. Judy Centers are located in or affiliated with elementary schools. In these spaces, educational and community-based organizations form partnerships and collaborate under one roof to provide full-day services to children and their families, including adult education classes; dental, hearing, and vision screenings; family engagement activities; case management; and childcare.

To support these Centers, DECD employs a full-time Judy Center Partnerships Specialist

who delivers technical assistance and training to each of the Centers and organizes an annual statewide meeting for local Judy Center coordinators.

Local Practices

The Allegany County Judy Center and the Overlook Judy Center Partnership in Garrett County coordinate a number of the transition activities that occur between early education programs and elementary schools in their respective rural counties. These transition practices connect families, educational systems, and communities.

The between-program connection is most evident in the widespread use of the MMSR. At the Allegany and Overlook Judy Centers, all of the pre-K teachers, including those from childcare programs and Head Start, are trained in the MMSR. Judy Center staff use the information and scores from the MMSR to make decisions across several of their programs—decisions related to the activities for children, programs for parents, and trainings for teachers. Their data-based decision making reflects the approach of other practitioners statewide: as the state MMSR Coordinator said in an interview for this brief, “Most, if not all, of the local school systems have taken the 30 indicators [that children are assessed on] and integrated them into their programs...teachers are looking at the indicators [to make decisions] all year long.” These indicators include such benchmarks as a child’s ability to interact with other children; gain meaning by listening; show understanding of number and quantity; seek information through observation, exploration, and descriptive investigations; and perform self-care tasks competently.

Program–family partnerships: Using surveys to give parents a voice in the transition process. The Allegany County Judy Center administers bi-annual surveys in the fall and spring, to families of kindergarten and pre-K children. The fall survey, administered at the start of the school year, asks families about their needs and about the number and type of family activities that they would like to participate in throughout the year. The spring survey asks families about their satisfaction with these activities. These surveys give parents a voice and drive decisions about topics for training and programs.

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Program–school partnerships: Giving children continuous exposure to the elementary school. The Allegany and Overlook Judy Centers organize a number of activities to orient children to their new elementary schools before the first day of kindergarten. Overlook, for example, hosts one-week kindergarten summer camps at both of its partner elementary schools, where kindergarten teachers serve as the instructors in the camps’ six classrooms. The camp is open to

all students eligible for kindergarten. Other practices include connecting teachers each spring with the teachers in the child’s next grade level to discuss ability level, special interests and needs, allergies or other medical problems, and family concerns. The elementary school also holds lunches and assemblies for preschoolers involving special guests and attractions (e.g., fire trucks and animals). The goal of these practices, as the Contract and Data Quality Manager at Overlook stated in an interview for this brief, is to give children a lot of exposure to the school so that once kindergarten starts, “they have attended so

many activities that they're very familiar with the school and their teacher."

Program–community partnerships: Using a local mall to engage large numbers of families in transition activities. The Allegany County Judy Center hosts a School Readiness Fair at a local mall each spring. While the fair is a one-time event, it is situated within the context of the program's year-long approach to transitions. The fair's booths are staffed with an array of teachers and community partners, including pre-K and kindergarten teachers who

register students and hand out education packets to parents, speech specialists who administer speech tests to incoming students, Lion's Club members who offer free vision screenings, GED Testing Service staff who enroll interested parents, librarians who register children for library cards; and staff from a national bank who talk to families about financial literacy. Allegany uses the informal and public setting of the mall to attract large numbers of families.

MINNESOTA

Creating Preschool–Kindergarten Bridges for Families and Children

State Supports

The Office of Early Learning (OEL), which opened in 2011, coordinates programs and services for young children across the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Department of Human Services. OEL serves as a management and leadership structure in the state. School districts in Minnesota are under local control; however, OEL and the Early Learning Services Division (which the Director of OEL co-directs) provide school readiness and transition leadership, guidance, and support to districts.

The key state supports for transitions include:

- An interactive website for parents that offers information and activities
- Developmental screenings for children
- A School Readiness Program for children ages 3-5 at risk of not being prepared for kindergarten

The Parents Know website. Funded by the 2006 Minnesota Legislature, hosted by MDE and developed with input from parents, the [Parents Know](#) website²¹ is an online resource where parents can access information on child

development, consumer safety, and health and nutrition. To support thoughtful transitions, the website includes a "[Getting School Ready](#)"²² video and [monthly activities](#)²³ for parents to do with their children to prepare for kindergarten. Data collected from parents prior to the website's launch indicated that they wanted information available in their first language and preferred to access the information digitally rather than receive it on paper, so all of the information on the website is presented in multiple languages and is available in multiple formats including text, interactive tools, webinars, videos, and audio podcasts.

To increase the number of parents accessing the webpage, the MDE advertises on billboards and city busses, and uses social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Early Childhood Screening program. The Early Childhood Screening program, introduced in 1977, is a statewide health and development assessment administered at centers in each county and required for all children entering kindergarten in public schools. Used to identify issues that may interfere with learning and growth early on, this

free screening program alerts educators and parents about areas of concern and connects families with community resources that can address those concerns. For example, data from the screening are used to identify children who qualify for such targeted initiatives as the School Readiness program (described below).

School Readiness Program.

Minnesota Department of Education [School Readiness/Kindergarten programs](#)²⁴ are offered in all but one district in Minnesota and aim to prepare at-risk 3- to 5-year-olds for kindergarten by acting as a bridge between preschool and other early learning settings and elementary school. Children are taught by licensed early childhood teachers who expose them to basic academic skills (e.g., letter names and letter sounds) and build their social skills. The programs are delivered by school districts and vary in length and duration across the state: some school districts deliver a half-day, year-round program; some offer a Saturday program; and others run a full-day program in the summer.

Local Practices

The Bridges to Kindergarten program is a School Readiness program in Northfield, Minnesota, that serves the school district's three elementary schools. The free program, which is entirely funded by Northfield Area United Way, runs for three weeks in August at the elementary schools. Each classroom is staffed by a preschool teacher, a kindergarten teacher, and an English Language Learner specialist. By integrating the state's Early Childhood Indicators of Progress into their curriculum and assessments, the program builds

children's pre-academic skills and prepares them for school-day routines, such as sitting in a circle and lining up. These activities help to alleviate stress by familiarizing children with upcoming changes in their daily activities. One mother of a former Bridges student reported that the program took away the surprise element for her son and

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gave him an opportunity to learn the new routines in a safe setting. Another way to ensure continuity and therefore help lessen children's transition anxiety is to suggest that they use the same mode of transportation to get to Bridges and back as they will when they attend kindergarten—whether by being dropped off/picked up by family, by walking, or by taking the bus (Bridges partners with a local bus company to provide busing).

Program–family partnerships: Inviting families into classrooms. Bridges hosts an event for families during each week of its 3-week session. Through an open house during week one, a classroom activity (circle time or center play) and a guest speaker during week two, and an end-of-program celebration during week three, Bridges connects families with the elementary school setting, teaching staff, and classroom activities. To obtain feedback on these family practices and the program as a whole, the coordinator administers a survey to parents at the end of the summer.

Program–school partnerships: Surveying kindergarten teachers to prepare students in the right areas. The coordinator of the Bridges program surveys kindergarten teachers about the school-specific vocabulary that they use in their classrooms and about their classroom management systems. She uses these data to identify classroom practices that her teachers should introduce in the summer program. To

confirm that the Bridges program is preparing its students in the right areas, she also reviews the kindergarten assessments to see what indicators kindergarten teachers are looking for at the beginning of the school year.

Program–community partnerships: Bringing together local leaders to support early childhood education. The Bridges coordinator also belongs to the Northfield Early Childhood Initiative Coalition, a community-based

campaign made up of parents, educators, and community and business leaders, including those from Americorp, the medical community, and the public library. The group meets monthly to mobilize efforts around promoting and piloting early learning programs and projects. These efforts include family outreach, marketing, donations, and event planning. The Bridges Program grew out of one of the Coalition’s meetings in 2005.

VIRGINIA

Building Business and Community Coalitions

State Supports

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation was created in 2005 to partner with state government departments in coordinating kindergarten readiness efforts across local programs. The structure of this public/private foundation allows collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including communities and private businesses. Among its initiatives, the Foundation has funded 29 “Smart Beginnings” communities that set kindergarten readiness goals, established Virginia Job One as an advocacy group of business leaders working toward improved early childhood activities, and piloted a quality rating system called the Virginia Star Quality Initiative.

State supports focus on the following elements:

- Reaching communities through planning and implementation grants that create sustainable early childhood programs
- Measuring outcomes such as the number of community programs participating in the Virginia Star Quality Initiative and the number of children entering kindergarten with the necessary literacy skills

Reaching communities. In 2007, through a program called Smart Beginnings, the

Foundation began offering funding to communities as part of a major initiative to ensure that children were prepared to enter kindergarten. Smart Beginnings communities are awarded a \$50,000 planning grant and up to \$600,000 in additional funding for creating and implementing 3- to 5-year strategic plans focused on one of six sectors of early childhood, including kindergarten transitions. As part of the grant requirements, Smart Beginnings communities form leadership councils—which may include school board members, Head Start directors, business executives, civic leaders, health department staff, and other stakeholders—to help inform and direct the communities’ early learning plans and strategies. The goal is to use the Smart Beginnings grants to create a sustainable, widespread focus on early childhood that shifts the priorities of the community, rather than simply filling a budget gap.

The communities that have chosen to focus on kindergarten transitions work with an approach developed by Kraft-Sayre and Pianta,²⁵ which focuses on connections among and between preschools and kindergarten, families and schools, children and schools, and communities and schools.

Measuring outcomes. In order to track progress, the Foundation measures outcomes across Smart Beginnings communities. Some of the desired outcomes include increasing the percentage of children entering kindergarten with the necessary literacy skills and increasing the number of early care programs participating in the Virginia Star Quality Initiative.

The Virginia Star Quality Initiative is a voluntary assessment and improvement system that provides a quality rating for early childhood programs based on measures of interactions, structure, staff ratios, environment, and instruction. Transition practices, including how schools orient families to kindergarten and whether curricula focus on transitions, are also evaluated in the rating.

Local Practices

With the recent increasing rigor of elementary school curricula, educators in the Chesterfield County public schools began noticing that the 4,000 incoming kindergarteners each year were starting school further behind and less prepared than in previous years. In response to this concern and to the growing statewide attention to kindergarten readiness, the Chesterfield County Pre-kindergarten Program joined Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond and began implementing innovative strategies targeted at transitions and school readiness.

Preschool–family partnerships: Engaging families in learning through at-home activities and donated books. To bridge the school readiness gap for children who have had little exposure to books and language in their homes, the district applied for and won a grant to give each preschooler six books related to the

school curriculum. The books help families start their own libraries and help build a sense of school-to-home continuity.

In addition to providing families with books, teachers use assessment scores to provide them with a snapshot of their children’s development; teachers also suggest targeted activities for building their children’s needed skills. To build on these activities, families and children are invited to a district-wide “Transition Night” prior to kindergarten registration in the spring. Families attending this event can enjoy educational games placed among kiosks throughout the school, and kindergarten teachers and administrators are on hand to answer questions.

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4,000 incoming kindergarteners each year were starting school further behind and less prepared than in previous years.
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Preschool–school partnerships: Sharing curriculum themes to

acquaint children with kindergarten work. All of the district’s pre-K programs, including Head Start, are located within elementary schools and align their curricula and assessments with the kindergarten. For example, when the K–12 programs added a global connections theme to the curriculum, the pre-K program also began focusing on global awareness. The close relationship between the pre-K programs and schools also allows preschool children and their families to get acquainted with the kindergarten curriculum ahead of time.

Preschool–community partnerships: Using a common, district-wide registration day to streamline enrollment. District administrators sit on the board of Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond, along with representatives from other area preschool programs, social services, and health departments in order to better coordinate efforts and services. This partnership committee has developed a common list of readiness skills and resources

for parents so that the community can share the same framework and goals around transitions. The committee also launched a common registration day for the 10 participating school districts to help minimize confusion, streamline the process for incoming kindergarten families, and increase the number of families registering on time. Additionally, the committee has made efforts to improve outreach to parents and

families. For example, the summer of 2011 saw the creation of a television ad campaign and the establishment of a regional 211 telephone number—both designed to alert families about a regional kindergarten registration date and to promote early education. As a result, regional on-time registration numbers increased across the state.

CALIFORNIA

Addressing the Needs of Young Five-Year-Olds

State Supports

The Child Development Division (CDD) at the California Department of Education (CDE) works in partnership with stakeholders in and outside of the CDE to support early education and care programs in their transition and alignment work. The transition to kindergarten is viewed as a shared responsibility of public and private sectors that requires a birth–8 perspective.

Key state supports include:

- Public-private partnerships with a common mission to create high-quality early childhood programs
- Innovative programming that fills gaps in early learning experiences for children

Public-private partnerships. One external partnership that has been instrumental to transition work within the state is with Preschool California, a statewide nonprofit organization whose mission is to increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities for California’s children. As an advocacy organization, Preschool California works collaboratively with CDE to push for an early learning agenda that includes a quality education system for children from birth to age 8—one that ensures that children are striving in

preschool, ready for kindergarten, and successfully learning by third grade.

Innovative programming. One of the key innovative initiatives that Preschool California focuses on is Transitional Kindergarten (TK), the first year of a two-year kindergarten experience for young 5-year-olds (those born after September 2). The initiative was created under the Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 as a bridge from preschool to kindergarten.²⁶ Taught by credentialed teachers, TK classes, as part of the public school system, are free to families. The same broad coalition that supported the passage of Transitional Kindergarten—including policymakers, Preschool California, the CDE, K–12 education advocates, and business leaders—is now working on its implementation by hosting statewide summits and community forums, and by maintaining the [TK California website](#).²⁷

Local Practices

Several districts elected to implement TK prior to the mandated implementation scheduled for 2012–2013. Two early implementers were the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the Kingsburg Elementary Charter School District in Fresno County. Recognizing that the academic demands of kindergarten were not meeting the

developmental needs of their young 5-year-olds, administrators from these districts felt that the program was a good fit and offered it as a voluntary pilot to eligible children in 2010; both districts have had programs in place since that time. In LAUSD, Transitional Kindergarten is offered in 115 schools, while Kingsburg has TK in one of its schools. To create a consistent two-year kindergarten experience, LAUSD and Kingsburg looked to the CDE's Kindergarten Standards and the California Preschool Learning Foundations to create hybrid standards for TK—standards that are developmentally appropriate, yet consistent with kindergarten standards.

School–family partnerships: Empowering families to make decisions for their children and schools. As early implementers of TK, staff from LAUSD and Kingsburg had many opportunities to engage parents in the decision to bring a voluntary TK program to their schools and enroll their children. In LAUSD, parents sat on an advisory group with the Administrative Coordinator for LAUSD Early Childhood Education Division and representatives from the teachers and administrators unions to develop the district's approach to TK. In LAUSD Local District 1, in fact, it was parents who brought the program to the schools: after hearing about TK, parents approached their schools' leadership team and district superintendents to campaign for its early implementation.

In Kingsburg, parents serving on the Washington's School Site Council approved TK as part of the school plan—including its curriculum and expenditures. Parents have remained involved throughout the implementation phase. They serve as volunteers

in the school's two TK classrooms and advocate the program throughout the community and to other parents.

Preschool–school partnerships: Building capacity through monthly meetings. Kingsburg's monthly Kindergarten Articulation Team meetings bring together teachers from local preschools, childcare centers, and kindergarten classrooms. Recent agenda items from these meetings include supporting

programs' implementation of quality preschool classrooms, ensuring seamless kindergarten transitions, and discussing best practices for sharing data between early care and kindergarten programs. Currently, kindergarten teachers have access to children's preschool and TK assessment data and use this information to drive instruction; however, the Team is thinking about ways to share other types of data

(such as the needs of individual children) among programs. Each year, the Team uses an established articulation plan that they share with parents at the beginning of the school year.

At the Washington School in Kingsburg, the principal and teachers are part of a Transitional Kindergarten Professional Learning Community, which is supported by a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and receives guidance from Preschool California. The Learning Community brings together school districts from across the state to discuss best practices in TK programs.

School–community partnerships: Reaching beyond the schools to inform the public about TK. Administrative staff from the LAUSD office partner with Preschool California to run monthly tours of their TK program sites for

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After hearing about Transitional Kindergarten, parents approached their schools' leadership team and district superintendent to campaign for its early implementation.

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California teachers, legislative representatives, and parents. During these tours, staff from both organizations host panel presentations, lead observations of TK classrooms, and field questions about TK.

In Kingsburg, the Washington School has partnered with the public library, doctor's offices, clinics, City Hall, the Chamber of Commerce, and a local grocery store to distribute informational brochures (in English and Spanish) about TK. Librarians created a

space for these brochures in the children's book area, while managers at the local grocery store created a bulletin board that showcased all of the services and programs available at Washington School and included information about how and where to register children for these programs. Kingsburg has also opened its doors for many school districts to come and observe TK and receive technical assistance from the staff.

Policy Implications

Nationwide, significant efforts have been made to encourage, support, and expand transition practices at the local, state, and federal levels. The state-level practices in these six cases illustrate what these efforts can look like in the field. And new directions at the federal level—including the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT–ELC) and Secretary Duncan's announcement of a proposal for an Office for Early Learning²⁸ at the U.S. Department of Education—reflect a heightened awareness of the importance of the education of the youngest students. The continuation of current policies and funding at the federal and state level to support early education work, especially around transitions to elementary school, is critical. Continued funding and support at the state level, meanwhile, is needed to ensure partnerships among key players.

State and federal policies to support collaborative and thoughtful transitions should accomplish the following:

Promote the importance of family and community partnerships during transitions through reporting and accountability systems. Policymakers can encourage relationship-based transitions by ensuring that rating systems like the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, and templates for five-year plans like that mandated by the New Jersey State Department of Education, include sections

about these types of partnerships that districts/programs must address. To support educators in these efforts, resources for engaging families and community members should be made available on state departments of education websites for administrators and educators to learn from and disseminate.

One successful example of support for partnership is the federal Promise Neighborhoods program. This program aims to improve the outcomes of children living in distressed communities by building a coordinated continuum of health, social, and educational supports. Through communities of practice, the Promise Neighborhood grantees engage in peer-to-peer professional learning. They share opportunities and challenges, strategies to leverage federal investments in data systems, and best practices. The transition to kindergarten is one area in which Promise Neighborhoods can create partnerships and use its communities of practice to promote young children's learning, growth, and success.

To promote family and community partnerships, policymakers should also provide educators with guidelines on data sharing with families. Sharing data effectively with families, that is, by being positive and specific about observations and sharing and asking for interpretations of the data,²⁹ will likely help families feel comfortable using data and

empower them to ask for and engage with data in kindergarten and beyond.

Make joint preschool and kindergarten training and professional development opportunities available to increase teachers' knowledge of transition practices. Teachers who have received specialized training in transitions report using more of all types of transition practices than those who have not had such training.³⁰ The states profiled in this brief spoke about a number of different training opportunities—from summits to leadership series—offered around school readiness and transitions. Nationwide, several states have begun to align standards, curricula, and assessments³¹ in early childhood with primary elementary grades.³² However, to build on these efforts, training practices are needed at both the state and local levels so that administrators and teachers can learn about state requirements and so that local efforts can be made to implement these practices. For local education agencies (LEAs) receiving Title I funds, existing funds can be used to organize joint transition training.

Build capacity for continued statewide and regional sharing of promising practices. Several of the educators and administrators interviewed for this study described the importance of their memberships in state, regional, and local coalitions and learning communities. These groups allow teachers to prepare for the implementation of new initiatives, share lessons learned about different transition practices, and discuss how best to share data with families and each other. However, a lack of cross-learning within, between, and among states also suggests the need for a national space for sharing ideas, tools, and promising practices. This issue may be addressed effectively by using digital technologies to promote inter-state communities of practice to accelerate learning and scale up successful

family–preschool–school–community partnerships. The U.S. Department of Education is working to create an Early Learning Network for this purpose.

Provide districts with funding opportunities to support their transition practices. Many of the local programs profiled in this brief noted that they leveraged external funds to run and support their transition programs and practices. Policymakers can create competitive or needs-based grant programs that allow programs to extend their current transition efforts. Some existing relevant grant competitions include Promise Neighborhoods and the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3). To help districts identify funding sources outside of state departments of education, advocacy organizations can provide districts with lists of organizations that support early childhood education. Several of the local programs profiled here, for example, are supported by local United Ways, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which all offer grant programs that support children, families, and communities.

DATA.ED.GOV

The Early Learning page on data.ed.gov* features a list of grant names and an interactive U.S. map spotlighting individual discretionary grant programs that focus on or include early learning. For additional resources on transitions, see the [Transition to Kindergarten Wiki](http://transitionwiki.pbworks.com)** from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement and the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning.

* <http://data.ed.gov/early-learning>

** <http://transitionwiki.pbworks.com>

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Anna Hinton, Monique Toussaint, Steven Hicks, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg for their insights in reviewing this paper. We also want to thank all of our interviewees for sharing their perspectives and their institutions' transition practices and policies.

About Harvard Family Research Project

Since 1983, we have helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well-being of children, youth, families, and communities. Our work focuses primarily on three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education.

Building on our knowledge that schools alone cannot meet the learning needs of our children, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed. Underpinning all our work is our commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.

Notes

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- ¹⁸ Articulation is the coordination of curriculum and instruction from school to school and grade to grade.
- ¹⁹ The interview protocol was structured around the topics of statewide transition policies and practices, use of data to assess the success of transition practices, and collaborative efforts to transition children. In addition to these topics, the protocol for educators and administrators included questions about children served, the impetus for the

program, specific local transition practices used, and successes and challenges in using these practices. Supplemental information for each state was obtained on websites and from resources that the interviewees provided.

²⁰ Watch the videos online at <http://www.youtube.com/user/acnjforkids#p/c/D7B337CBA5613B79>

²¹ *Education Week*. (2012). Report awards grades for education performance, policy; Nation earns a C, Maryland ranks first for fourth straight year[Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/media/qualitycounts2012_release.pdf

²² Visit the website online at <http://parentsknow.state.mn.us>

²³ Watch video online at http://parentsknow.state.mn.us/parentsknow/age3_5/tips/VL/PKDEV_000919

²⁴ View the activities online at <http://parentsknow.state.mn.us/parentsknowstellentprod/groups/parentsknow/documents/presentation/001814.pdf>

²⁵ Learn more online: <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EarlyLearn/SchReadiK/index.html>

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³¹ Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001.

³² States that have aligned pre-K to 3rd grade standards include Rhode Island, Minnesota, Maryland, and New Jersey.

³³ Council of Chief State School Officers (2012). *Confronting the quiet crisis: How chief state school officers are advancing early childhood opportunities*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.

Appendix: Transition Practices by State

	California 	Georgia 	Maryland 	Minnesota 	New Jersey 	Virginia 
Use of family surveys		Parent survey about child's K readiness	Judy Center family surveys	Transition survey at the end of Bridges to Kindergarten	Family survey on transitions	
Transition team	Kindergarten Articulation Team	Center-based transition team		Northfield Early Childhood Initiative Coalition	District-wide transition team	Smart Beginnings Coalition
Summer transition program		8-week transition camp	Judy Center 1-week camp	Bridges to Kindergarten		5-week summer school readiness program
Transition plans		Local practice			Required by state for all preschool programs	Part of Smart Beginnings plan
Parent education component		8-month Total Development Series		Parents Know website		
Statewide data/assessment system		Georgia Testing Identification	Work Sampling System			Voluntary Star Quality rating system
Aligned professional development	K teachers trained on Preschool Foundations	Joint pre-K and kindergarten trainings on standards and assessments	Maryland Model for School Readiness		PreK-3rd Leadership Series	
Aligned standards/curriculum	Hybrid standards for TK	To be released in 2012			PK3 System	