

Building Strong Foundations: Oregon's Family-Centered Approach to Kindergarten Transition

A smooth, welcoming transition into kindergarten lays the foundation for long-term school success. When families feel seen, heard, and valued from the very beginning—and when children experience joy and curiosity during their early interactions with school—they are more likely to develop a strong sense of belonging and a desire to return each day. These early experiences shape how families and children view school for years to come.¹

Supportive Kindergarten Transition Strategies

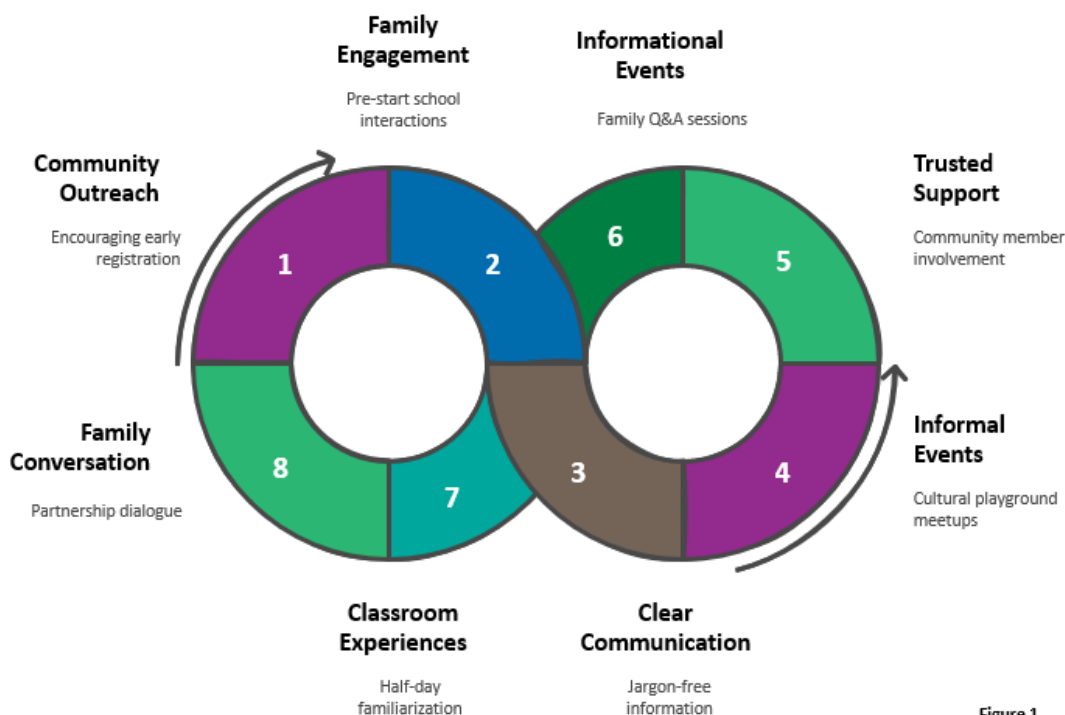


Figure 1

¹ Walsh, B. (2015, March 31). *The kindergarten milestone*. Usable Knowledge, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/15/03/kindergarten-milestone>

It is Oregon’s vision that all children and families experience a seamless, supportive, and inclusive educational journey. In this vision, early learning and K-12 education systems honor family voices, support coherence, and enact culturally responsive and identity-affirming practices.²

Creating a strong start requires education systems to engage in early, intentional planning and a set of coordinated efforts, outlined below and illustrated in Figure 1. Together, these actions support a smooth transition into kindergarten.

- **Community Outreach:** Encourage early kindergarten registration
- **Family Engagement:** Opportunities for families to engage with school staff or school community prior to the first day
- **Clear Communication:** Clear, jargon-free communication in families’ home languages
- **Informal Events:** Informal, low-stress events like playground meetups and family nights that reflect and honor families’ cultures
- **Trusted Support:** Involvement of trusted community members and early learning providers to support “warm hand-offs”
- **Informational Events:** Welcoming informational events where families can ask questions and learn what to expect
- **Classroom Experiences:** Half-day classroom experiences that allow children to become familiar with routines, classrooms, and staff before the official start
- **Family Conversation:** A structured two-way conversation between kindergarten families and educators to learn about experiences and begin to develop relationships.

These strategies are essential for building confidence and connection. They create the conditions for meaningful dialogue during the Family Conversation, a key element of Oregon’s transition strategy.

The Family Conversation: Centering Relationships and Respecting Family Knowledge

The Family Conversation is not an interview—it is a relationship-building activity that affirms families and honors the knowledge they hold about their children. It is meant to learn as much contextual information about children and focus less on a child’s readiness for school and more on learning about families so our systems can be ready to support them. See Figure 2 above.

² Oregon Department of Education. (2024). *JumpStart Kindergarten: ESSER III Investments Supporting Strong Transitions to Kindergarten*. <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/transitioning-to-kindergarten/pages/esser3jumpstartk.aspx>

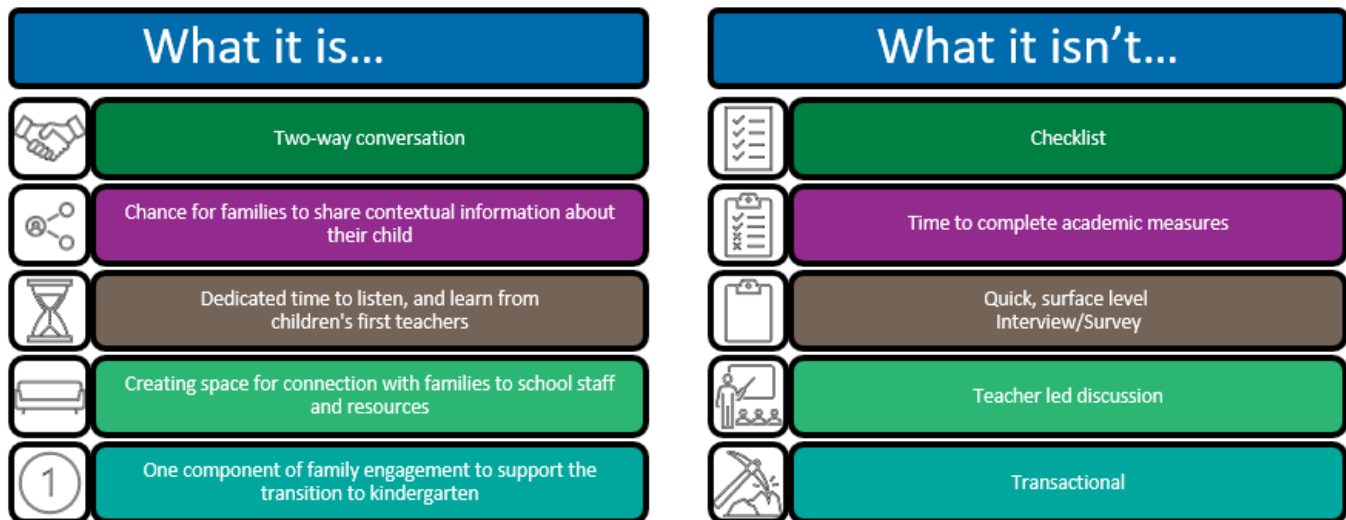


Figure 2

When paired with other transition activities such as summer learning programs, school tours, or playdates, the Family Conversation fosters belonging, trust and early engagement—especially for families who have experienced barriers to participation.

At its core, the Family Conversation serves two primary purposes:

- To help educators connect with and learn about the children and families entering their classroom
- To inform the Department of Early Learning and Care (DELIC) and the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) about families' experiences, strengths, and needs prior to the start of kindergarten

This work is especially critical for Native and Indigenous families, immigrant and refugee communities, and those who have experienced systemic barriers or historical harm. For these families, positive, affirming early experiences can help rebuild trust and shift long-standing concerns about public education.

Feedback gathered in partnership with Oregon's Kitchen Table (OKT) as part of the Early Learning Transition Check-in (ELTC) community engagement effort highlighted several elements that make the Family Conversation effective³:

- Low-stress, informal events that precede the conversation (e.g., school tours, scavenger hunts)




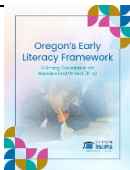
³ Oregon's Kitchen Table. (n.d.). *Early Learning Transition Check-In*. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from Oregon's Kitchen Table website: <https://www.oregonskitchentable.org/engagements/early-learning-transition-check>




- The involvement of trusted early learning partners and community members
- Clear, welcoming communication—especially from the child’s future teacher—that addresses common family questions

Families consistently shared that they value early opportunities to build relationships, particularly when those interactions include both personal connection and practical information—such as how to communicate with school staff, what to bring, and what a typical school day looks like.

Systems Alignment and Statewide Initiatives

The Family Conversation efforts are closely aligned with Oregon’s statewide goals and strategic initiatives, including:

Oregon’s Initiative	Alignment to the Family Conversation
 STUDENT SUCCESS ACT Student Success Plans	Key objectives in all plans around culturally responsive pedagogy, practices, and authentic family engagement K-12; specific reference to Early Learning Transition Check-In in American Indian/Alaska Native Plan, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Immigrant and Refugee Plans.
 DEL C’s Strategic Plan: Growing Oregon Together	Ensures families have access to high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities; The ELTC would provide a snapshot of data to support the implementation of this plan.
 Raise Up Oregon 2.0	In RUO 2.0 there is specific alignment to Objective 16 that support transitions and continuity of services across early learning and care and public education (K-12) settings. The ELTC will also provide a snapshot of data related to several objectives by offering information about families’ access to services prior to kindergarten.
 Early Literacy Framework	<p>Section 1: Student belonging: Children learn best in caring, culturally responsive school environments that prioritize social and emotional learning, fostering identity, agency, belonging, and voice—especially during early literacy instruction.</p> <p>Section 2: Family and Community Partnerships: Early literacy begins at birth through nurturing</p>

Oregon's Initiative	Alignment to the Family Conversation
	interactions with families, and is best supported by developmentally appropriate, play-based learning and strong partnerships with parents, tribes, and communities that honor their strengths and roles as essential partners in children's literacy development.
 <p><u>Birth to 5 Literacy Plan</u></p>	The information families share as part of this effort will immediately help educators adjust instruction. It will also inform early learning and care programs by collecting information about a child's and families' experience prior to kindergarten—information that is vital to those in local, regional, and state systems who need to evaluate program successes as well as identify opportunities for investments in programs and services that support young children.
 <p><u>Reimagining Accountability Framework</u></p>	The ELTC is highlighted as a System Health Measurement in the Accountability Framework, serving as one component that evaluates the overall strength, transparency, and responsiveness of the education system. These measures focus on system-level indicators—rather than individual student outcomes—that are aligned with student success priorities and guide improvement efforts across multiple levels.
 <p><u>Summer Learning</u></p>	Family Engagement that respects, honors and values families while fostering joy and curiosity to promote student participation and engagement.

Looking Ahead: A Collective Commitment to Belonging and Success

When embedded in a broader, coordinated transition strategy into kindergarten, the Family Conversation becomes more than a tool for gathering information—it becomes a powerful act of partnership that reflects a meaningful family engagement strategy. It affirms families' hopes, addresses concerns and invites them to become integral partners in their child's educational journey. As Dr. Karen Mapp emphasizes, authentic family engagement must be woven into the fabric of a school's culture and infrastructure, with all departments—classrooms, IT, human

resources—working in collaboration with families, not doing things *to* them but *with* them, especially in communities where trust has been historically broken.⁴

Across Oregon, districts are already implementing practices that support strong kindergarten transitions and reflect true partnerships with Oregon families. Examples include:

- [Adrian School District: Little Lopes](#)
- [Eugene 4J: Pathway to Kindergarten](#) and [Kindergarten Transition and Alignment Plan \(KTP\)](#)
- [Hood River: Community resources that connect families to support services](#)
- [Hillsboro: Family Connections and Transitions \(all grades\)](#)
- [Portland Public Schools: Ramp Up to Kindergarten \(Scott Elementary\)](#)
- [Sherwood: Kindergarten Special Edition Newsletter at Hawks View Elementary](#)

Does the Family Conversation Lead to Better Attendance for Kindergarteners?

While quantitative data on outcomes like attendance are still emerging, existing research and input from families underscore the importance of warm, relationship-centered transition practices. As *Attendance Works* notes:

“Early outreach can incorporate a warm welcome, family-friendly informational materials, introduce the kindergarten setting and establish a caring reciprocal relationship with families. These actions can have a strong influence on family and student sense of belonging, increased attendance and improved student outcomes.”⁵

Similarly, researchers and educators emphasize that creating a true sense of belonging—especially in early childhood settings—requires more than friendly gestures. It demands intentional structures, systems, and adult mindsets that reflect children’s lived experiences and cultural identities. As highlighted in the *Harvard Graduate School of Education* (2024) article, creating a sense of belonging for students means deeply embedding equity and inclusion into school systems—ensuring that children’s lived experiences, cultures, and identities are reflected

⁴ McArdle, E. (2024, May 8). *Um... Where Is Everybody? Families may be the key to ending chronic absenteeism, a pandemic-era problem that has only gotten worse*. Ed. Magazine, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/ed-magazine/24/05/um-where-everybody>

⁵ Attendance Works. (n.d.). Reach out to families before kindergarten. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/integrating-attendance-into-kindergarten-transition/reach-out-to-families-before-kindergarten/>

in both classroom practice and school culture.⁶ These concepts are foundational to Oregon’s approach: to create environments where all children and families—especially those from historically marginalized communities—feel seen, affirmed, and empowered from the very beginning. The Family Conversation is one of many coordinated transition activities that foster a sense of belonging and, when implemented collectively with other events, may contribute to improved attendance and engagement in kindergarten.

Oregon’s vision for seamless kindergarten transitions calls for collective responsibility across early learning, K–12, and community systems. Sustained collaboration, grounded in authentic partnership with families, ensures that every child enters school feeling known, welcomed, and supported. The Family Conversation and related transition activities represent more than procedural steps; they are expressions of Oregon’s broader commitment to equity, belonging, and educational continuity. By centering relationships, honoring family wisdom, and aligning systems around shared values, Oregon continues to build a foundation where every child’s first experience of school reflects the promise of inclusion and the power of community.

⁶ McArdle, E. (2024, May 8). *Um... Where Is Everybody? Families may be the key to ending chronic absenteeism, a pandemic-era problem that has only gotten worse*. Ed. Magazine, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/ed-magazine/24/05/um-where-everybody>