

# PATHWAY THREE: TRANSITIONS

A transition can be defined as a life change or moving from one environment or experience to another. Most children experience multiple transitions during their early years, typically including home to formal care arrangement, PreK to kindergarten, home to kindergarten, grade to grade, and school to school. Children experience transitions into and out of services.

Ideally, all Ready Schools' efforts include accountability for the education of young children from birth to age 8, and most certainly between ages 3-8. Thus, Ready Schools is an approach to school reform that focuses on smoothing the transitions among the settings and services for young children and their families (Ritchie, Clifford, Malloy, Cobb, & Crawford, 2009) by aligning environments, curriculum, programs, and practices across settings.

When thinking about transitions, keep these things in mind:

- ▶ Transitions are more than one-time or short-term activity-focused events.
- ▶ Early care and education programs and schools must share responsibility for planning and implementing effective transitions.
- ▶ Effective transitions help children succeed in school, while poor transitions can have negative short- and long-term effects on later learning (Howard, 2009).

**T**he most important strategy for addressing school readiness is to prepare the school to be responsive to the wide range of experiences, backgrounds, and needs of the children who are starting school.

– Katz, 1991



## Key Understandings

### *Transition and Alignment: Defining Terms*

"Transition" is defined as something(s) that children experience; "alignment" refers to the activities that adults carry out to create smooth transition experiences for children (Kagan, 2009). Alignment across all educational programs and practices should result in a continuum of learning and increased consistency of children's experiences through integrated educational curriculum, programs, and practices across home, childcare, preschool, and school. The implementation of transitional supports should begin well before and continue well after the transitional event to ensure that children and families can make necessary adjustments.

### *Dimensions of Transition and Transition Efforts*

Transition work needs to create links between and across early education (preschool) and early elementary grades, as well as define the characteristics of an elementary school that has the capacity to sustain and increase children's learning in the early grades. Some PreK-3 work focuses on structural and policy components of schooling. Critical features include a focus on instructional and human resources that better ensure coordination, alignment, and quality across the grades (e.g.,



appropriate school environments, curriculum and instruction alignment, increased collaboration and shared leadership, and family and community partnerships).

Because effective transitions are so important, many state and national education programs and support services are mandated to provide transition services to the families and children they serve. For example, Title I, IDEA (legislation for children with disabilities), More at Four (North Carolina's PreK program), and Head Start all require transition planning. These mandated transition activities are especially important as children transition to kindergarten. Before engaging in the planning process, check Federal, State, and Local guidelines.

### ***Goals of Effective Transition Planning***

The goal of transition planning is to build a seamless continuum of learning and experiences for children across ages, settings, programs, and grades. Specifically, transition planning positions:

- ▶ Parents to be able to understand and to practice increased ways of supporting their child's development and education; and
- ▶ Teachers and all school staff to recognize and accept each child's accomplishments so that instruction can begin and continue based on the child's level of development.



### **Assessing the Pathway: A Closer Look**

Schools and communities may wish to reflect upon the following questions as they engage in the Ready Schools Assessment Process:

- ▶ What transition strategies are currently implemented for children birth to age 8?
- ▶ Are families asked what transition practices work for them?
- ▶ Who is typically involved in developing transition plans? Have families, school representatives, child care community, previous service providers, community resources, etc. been considered?
- ▶ Does the district have a community-wide transition plan or process? If no,
  - » How does that hinder optimal transition?
  - » How do schools move forward in a comprehensive manner?
- ▶ What specific practices are in place to smooth the transition for children into preschool, into kindergarten, from grade to grade, and into and out of special settings?
- ▶ For children who have had an educational experience outside of their current setting, what steps are in place to 1) build upon and honor the child's previous learning, and 2) benefit from the knowledge of the previous caregiver or teacher?



## Taking Action

### *School Level Factors that Facilitate Transitions (Ritchie et al, 2009)*

- ▶ Physical and cognitive environments need to change along a seamless continuum to meet the developmental and learning needs of children as they grow. For example, the time children spend in whole group settings in one grade should not dramatically shift as they enter the next grade. Other examples of shifts in experiences could include outside time, rest time, centers, choice, and independent work. Children, who are accustomed to a variety of experiences one year, may experience difficult transitions if they are faced with limited experiences in the next year.
- ▶ Social environments should attend to children's need for skills to negotiate pro-social relationships across and between their learning environments. For example, children who have had support in developing self-regulation and peer interaction skills one year should continue to encounter appropriate support for their emerging social skills in the following year.
- ▶ Environments need to support the social/emotional needs of the children. These environments should support children's strong sense of themselves no matter where they are. For example, there should be a common set of rules and expectations for children across school environments (cafeteria, specials, classrooms, and bus).
- ▶ School attitudes towards families and family involvement need to be receptive of family input on existing traditions, policies, and procedures as it concerns transitions.
- ▶ The goal of coordinating children's transitions is to make the experiences of children, family members, and educators positive and productive. When the gulf between experiences is too great for children, family members, and educators to navigate successfully, a Ready School recognizes the challenge and makes adaptations as needed.

Of the many factors that contribute to an effective, coherent PreK-3rd experience, some may include: time allocation, support services, collaborative structures, grouping, curriculum alignment, and family engagement.





### **Ready Schools in Action: Catawba County Reaches Out to Child Care Community**

Catawba County in North Carolina has three school districts, all of whom work together on the Ready Schools Task Force towards a common goal of transitioning children into kindergarten smoothly and successfully.

The group organized an effort to obtain lists from community child care centers of 4 year-old children. These lists were shared with local elementary schools to help them establish relationships with their feeder child care programs and students.

All three districts pooled resources to fund billboards across the county to announce kindergarten registration information.

The local Ready Schools Task Force also developed a brochure that is given to families with 4 year-old children, announcing the screening days, beginner's days, and parent orientation days for each elementary school, as well as additional information about the purpose and process of screening.

#### **Time:**

How many times have we heard or said, "We don't have time!?" School professionals often don't have enough time for planning, meeting with colleagues, working with individual students, and engaging with families. In order to optimize relationship building, communication, and coordination, the allocation of time must value meaningful participation opportunities at all levels.

For students this may involve teachers re-designing the classroom to provide more time and opportunities for peer involvement. For educators this might mean expanding the time allocated for horizontal and vertical planning. At the administrative level this might mean increasing the time needed for collaborative program development that requires representation from all members of the school community. For families and teachers this might mean prioritizing opportunities to discuss a child's progress and needs, and developing meaningful partnerships that promote increased roles for parents in shared decision making.

#### **Support Services:**

We have known for many years that children do not reach their academic potential if they are hungry, abused, neglected, or homeless. This fact highlights the need for providing a supportive service system within schools, between schools, and between schools and human service agencies to address the needs of children and their families. Student support services also can assist students as they transition from one service setting or program to another when special needs are identified.

Student support services can be provided by a number of individuals including counselors, psychologists, social workers, therapists (e.g., speech, occupational, and physical), health care professionals, special educators, remedial educators, classroom teachers, and itinerant teachers.

Support service providers should have the knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to work with preschool and school-age children within a culturally sensitive environment, including the perspectives and values of family members, and supporting teachers in helping children make transitions.

#### **Collaborative Structures:**

In order to develop and sustain collaborative work, it is essential to commit to re-examining school structures with the aim of prioritizing time for communication and the development and maintenance of relationships and partnerships between teachers and children, family members, and other professional staff. Examples of collaborative structures that support communication and generate multiple perspectives include vertical and horizontal teams, professional learning communities, mental health teams, study groups, child study teams, and team teaching. A collaborative process enables the people working together to co-construct ideas and strategies using the best available scientific research as well as the wisdom and values of the varied partners.



### Grouping:

The terms ungraded, non-graded, continuous progress, and mixed- or multi-age grouping are often used interchangeably. Regardless of the term, these terms generally refer to grouping children so that the age span of the class is greater than one year. Such classes:

- ▶ Employ a teaching philosophy and curriculum practices that maximize the benefits of interaction and cooperation among children of various ages;
- ▶ Provide for more than one year of contact between a group of children and their teacher;
- ▶ Allow children with different experiences and stages of development to turn to each other for help with all aspects of classroom activity, including mastery and application of basic literacy and numeracy skills.

When and how children develop varies by individual and thus early childhood programs and schools need to focus more on developmental processes than on test scores and age when making decisions about grouping.

### Curriculum Alignment:

It is essential that schools focus on aligning children's experiences to support a developmental sequence of growth and learning. This means working both within and across grade levels. The more cohesive the alignment of children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional experiences along a developmental continuum, the greater the school's capacity for achieving successful transitions for children and families. Professional Learning Communities are structures schools have successfully used to examine curricula and instructional approaches.

### Family Engagement:

Families want to support their children's success in school, but they do not always know how to go about offering that support. Often, their own school experience carries over subtly into their children's interactions at school and influences the ways in which they think they can or cannot help their children succeed.

Recognizing that family members need a variety of gentle and specific suggestions for how they could provide support for positive outcomes for their children is a trademark of a Ready School. Asking family members for their ideas, with the intent of using them, helps establish feelings of mutual trust and appreciation. Plus, it shares responsibility for action, relieving the school of the burden of taking all the initiative.

This strengths-based approach ensures that the best a family member has to offer is what will be accepted and utilized by the school. It begins to pave the way to committed and ongoing involvement and support of family members in the education of their children.

## ***Transitioning Children with Special Needs***

Children with disabilities, children with limited English Proficiency and other special needs may transition to school starting at age 3. Districts and schools should have clear and thoughtful policies and practices that not only meet regulatory requirements but also meet the changing needs of children and their families. As children with special needs move through the school experience, their placement in grades and other settings should be carefully thought through. Ensuring that all the appropriate people are at the Individual Education Program meetings (including the receiving teacher) is an important aspect of transitioning children.

## ***Creating a Community-Wide or School-Based Transition Plan***

Both the Community/District-Wide and Schools-Based transition plans play an important role in ensuring effective transition practices for children, families, and educators. Things to consider:

Transition Planning Process: (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000)

1. Invite all the relevant stakeholders:

- ▶ Teachers and administrators from both public schools and early care settings,
- ▶ Family members, and
- ▶ Representatives from other community agencies and programs (e.g. child care programs, Head Start, Even Start, More at Four, Smart Start, Parent-Teacher Association, and parenting programs).

2. Make sure that the transition team is representative of the community with special attention to race, age, geographic location, and socio-economic considerations.

3. Identify a team coordinator who will:

- ▶ Arrange and facilitate meetings;
- ▶ Establish a timeline when activities will occur;
- ▶ Organize activities throughout the year; and
- ▶ Explore possible funding streams for strategy implementation and opportunities for collaboration.

4. Implement transition practices.

5. Evaluate – Monitor – Revise.



## Start Early and Provide Multiple Approaches

One key to creating positive and effective transitions for children and families is starting early and implementing a variety of strategies varying in duration and intensity. Selected examples include:

- ▶ Developing a district-wide registration plan (common days) to identify incoming kindergarten children earlier and make class lists sooner (sharing the information with teachers and families).
- ▶ Sneak-a-peek days (providing opportunities for student to experience the next grade level).
- ▶ Engaging families with infants and toddlers, inviting them during the years preceding school enrollment to participate in school functions and family strengthening programs.
- ▶ Developing portfolios or a common form to share information about children entering kindergarten from PreK programs and homes.
- ▶ Providing staggered entry at PreK and K so that children have time to adjust to the new classrooms and teachers get to know their children better.
- ▶ Conducting home visits (including beyond the PreK year) as a way to better understand both the children and their families and introduce them to their new teachers in a non-threatening environment.

Effective transition plans should reflect the multiple settings and connections that could be affected during a transition period. These include teachers, neighborhoods, peers, and families (National Center for Early Development and Learning, 2002). Examples of transition strategies targeting the different relationships include:

- ▶ **Child-Teacher relationship:** Provide opportunities for the child to interact with their new teacher prior to school entry.
- ▶ **Family-School relationship:** Provide parent orientation before the start of the school year and follow-up with additional involvement opportunities (offer at various or unconventional times to allow for all families to participate, e.g., weekends). Consider parent surveys as a way to determine which transition strategies families find most helpful and to identify any needs families may have during the transition period.
- ▶ **Peer relationship (child-child):** Provide opportunities for future classmates to interact with each other prior to school entry.
- ▶ **Child-Community relationship:** Create a team of community stakeholders who coordinate services to best meet the needs of all children entering school and transitioning through school.





### ***Transition Activities Beyond Kindergarten***

Careful attention to transitions across all grade levels is equally important as the PreK to K transition. There should be evidence of ongoing planning, communication, and alignment for learning and development across grade levels. Vertical teams may be one way to ensure that this kind of planning occurs. Following children across grades is a key part of ensuring their success, and any school or community transition plan should include this component. Professional Learning Communities can be important in planning the transition process across grades, ensuring a smooth instructional continuum for individuals and groups of students, selecting of appropriate teachers, etc. They can also look at teachers' strengths as classes are created.

### ***Recommendations for Kindergarten Orientation***

The ultimate goal of "kindergarten orientation" should be to serve as a tool to familiarize parents and children with the school setting and to help alleviate parent or child fears about the first few days of kindergarten. Ideally, any orientation to the kindergarten program should begin at minimum the year before kindergarten entry and focus on developmental readiness, including elements addressing academic, social, and emotional domains.

Kindergarten orientation activities can be successful when they are designed based on needs identified by parents and the children that are entering kindergarten. Kindergarten orientation programs should serve to:

- ▶ Provide opportunities for parent orientation to the school and for parents to ask questions and gather information (ex: forms to be filled out, carpool/bus procedures, school policies, etc.);
- ▶ Provide opportunities for children to enjoy positive school experiences (e.g., riding the school bus, playing in the kindergarten classroom and the outdoor settings, having lunch in the cafeteria, learning about the daily routine at school, and talking about appropriate social behaviors for school, etc.); and
- ▶ Provide an opportunity for the kindergarten teacher to better get to know and communicate with the parents and children.



## **Practices to be Used Carefully and with Reflection**

The following strategies and activities are sometimes implemented within communities as part of their transition plans. In some cases, they are used as "gatekeepers" for kindergarten entry. It is important that schools, school districts, and communities remember that children's development varies widely at age five. Thus, we should not expect all children to reach a common "standard" of readiness. *"Children from various cultures and with various experiences will express their competencies differently and should be expected to show different patterns of development. The same is true for children with disabilities"* (Ready for Schools Goal Team, 2000). It is the hope that communities and schools who are interested in employing these strategies demonstrate a willingness to use them appropriately.

### **Kindergarten Camps:**

A practice occasionally used before children enter kindergarten is called "kindergarten camp." If used to introduce children to school routines and to experience the activities and interactions they can expect, this orientation practice may be appropriate. If it is used to try to drill academic skills (letters, math concepts, etc.) for children who are not deemed "ready," then it is not an appropriate practice. Kindergarten teachers should be "ready" for all children. While it may be helpful for children to have PreK experiences, trying to distill these experiences over a short time period is not an effective practice.

### **Developmental Screenings:**

Developmental screening, typically for PreK or kindergarten, is a brief, relatively inexpensive, standardized procedure designed to quickly evaluate a large number of children. In general, screening is not an end in itself. Ready Schools encourages schools to evaluate their use of screenings, and provides the following guidelines (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2005 & NAEYC, 2003):

- ▶ Screening tools must meet technical standards for test construction and be culturally and linguistically relevant.
- ▶ Only staff with appropriate training should conduct screening.
- ▶ Families should contribute information about their child including any screening information completed by the child's physician and/or health department personnel.
- ▶ Children and families should be as familiar as possible with personnel completing screening in order to obtain a true picture of the child's abilities.
- ▶ Use screening instruments only for their intended purpose. If potential concerns are identified, consult with the family or parent/guardian to determine appropriate next steps.
- ▶ Common screening instruments should be adopted to ensure consistency within counties and school districts. These common screening instruments should correlate and coordinate when possible with the tools utilized within the early childhood community (PreK or early childhood setting).



## Questionable Transition Practices

### Academic Red-Shirting

The eligibility age for kindergarten is legislated and the school system should not deny access or recommend delayed school entry. “All children are ready for school when they reach the age of eligibility! Ready Schools believe that children entering kindergarten come with a variety of skills and abilities. Because of children’s individual differences, Ready Schools respond to this uniqueness by initially assessing each child’s experiential base and individualizing curriculum and teaching practices” rather than expecting all children to meet a common standard of readiness at kindergarten entry (Ready for Schools Goals Team, 2000). The term academic red-shirting refers to the practice of delaying the entry of age-eligible children into kindergarten to allow additional time for physical, cognitive, or socio-emotional growth. This practice is most often used for children whose birthday is close to the kindergarten age-eligibility cut-off date. The research on red-shirting has been inconclusive and has failed to provide substantial evidence of its short and long-term effects.

### Transitional Grades

Like grade retention, use of transitional grades (grades inserted between the “official” grade: e.g., transitional K, transitional First) has not been shown to be more effective than promoting children and using targeted intervention. While some children need more time to learn than others, this need could be addressed by 1) finding time within the regular school year to provide additional opportunities for learning, and 2) changing our expectations that every child needs to be at the same point on the learning continuum at the same time. Some children make leaps in their learning earlier, some later, and others may learn at a steady pace.