

What Principals and Administrators Can Do To Ready Their Schools To Support Kindergarten Transitions

The Research Basis for Effective Leadership

When children come to school from a wide range of early learning experiences and at different levels of readiness for kindergarten, what can principals and other administrators do to ensure their schools offer smooth transitions for all incoming kindergarten children and their families?

Research shows that children who are academically, socially, and emotionally prepared to enter kindergarten are more likely to do better down the road in school and in life (Patton & Wang, 2012). Therefore, it's increasingly imperative to support children's transition to kindergarten from varied early learning experiences including preschool, daycare, family child care, and at-home settings with family members.

There's also evidence that effective school leadership influences early childhood achievement, as leaders play a critical role in improving classroom instruction—the most important factor related to the success of young students (Szekely, 2013).

This white paper looks at what research tells us in five specific—and sometimes overlapping—areas on which principals and other administrators can focus to support smoother kindergarten transitions.

1. Involve families and the community in the transition to kindergarten

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2014), effective school leaders communicate and collaborate with families, early childhood learning providers, and community organizations. Parent-teacher relationships also have a positive effect on incoming kindergarteners (Pianta, 2004). Building these links can smooth the transition for children entering kindergarten, as well as create a welcoming school culture and encourage all the adults in a student's life to form a child's learning network. It's also important for principals to share information with families about kindergarten transitions, what the school expects



children to know and be able to do, and how families can help (Caspe, Lopez, & Chattrabhuti, 2015).

While meaningfully involving families takes time and resources, the benefits are substantial: Researchers have found connections between greater family involvement during a child's early school years and higher grades, better attendance, positive attitudes and behaviors, increased graduation rates, and higher post-secondary educational enrollment (Berlin, Dunning, & Dodge, 2011).

2. Create professional development opportunities specific to teaching young children

According to the NAESP (2014), early childhood brain-development research shows that through the age of eight, a child's learning relies on a wide array of educational experiences and that the most effective and supportive learning environments provide children with physical and emotional environments that are welcoming, safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate.

To ensure that classroom instruction and curricula are high quality, school leaders can focus on building an eagerness to learn in their young students and developing foundational early literacy and numeracy skills (NAESP, 2005). Ongoing professional development that provides teachers and others in the school community with the knowledge and skills to create developmentally appropriate classroom practices and curricula can also help a school ensure successful learning experiences once children start kindergarten. Scheduling professional development for preschool and kindergarten teachers

together promotes collaboration and helps create smooth transitions for children (Patton & Wang, 2012). One approach to create this type of classroom is to draw from the concept of personalized learning and tailor instruction to individual students with different needs, skills, and interests and who learn and master skills at different rates (NAESP, 2014).

3. Align standards, curriculum, and instruction

School systems can set up children for success by creating clearly defined guidelines for what children should know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten. This means aligning preschool and kindergarten curricula and providing standards that ensure all children build a strong foundation not only in academic areas such as literacy and math, but also in areas such as language development, social-emotional skills, and approaches to learning.

A brief prepared by the Harvard Family Research Project provides case studies from six states—New Jersey, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Virginia, and California—where local and state-level leaders support several initiatives promoting successful kindergarten transitions, including the implementation of aligned assessments, standards, and curriculum. These initiatives facilitate teacher collaboration, the use of research-based best practices, and lesson development based on student data, which helps schools provide a more consistent curriculum within and across grade levels. Describing different states' approaches that employ a wide variety of early childhood education initiatives, the case studies show that aligned

assessments and standards and a sequential curriculum can help states provide continuity and consistency as children move through grade levels (Patton & Wang, 2012).

4. Review, use, and share data

With more ways to gather high-quality student data than ever before, there are emerging opportunities for schools to use data to benefit children during and after the transition to kindergarten.

Principals can help support teachers in the effective use of data to guide class planning and decisionmaking. For example, schools can use kindergarten entry assessments (KEAs) to learn more about the academic abilities of their incoming kindergarten students. However, since these assessments cannot reflect the full range of a child's pre-K educational experiences, it's best not to rely on KEAs alone. Ongoing, comprehensive assessments (including observational measures) provide teachers a better sense of their students' abilities and can guide teachers toward instructional approaches best suited for individual student learning needs (Snow, 2011).

According to the NAESP (2014), effective principals also create opportunities for teachers to share student data across grade levels as another way to address the academic needs of individual students. They also share student assessment data with families and hold open and collaborative discussions with parents and guardians on how to address specific student academic needs.

5. Make sure children come to school

Missing a lot of school days, at any stage of a student's academic career, hinders future educational success. The research on the effect of chronic absence (i.e., students missing 10 percent or more school days per year) shows an association between absenteeism and lower academic performance in first grade with more negative consequences for students from low-income families (Chang & Romero, 2008). Based on national data, chronically absent kindergarten students gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills than children with average attendance; by first grade, poor attenders gained 15 percent fewer literacy skills and 12 percent fewer math skills (Ready, 2010). Research also shows that chronic absenteeism starts in kindergarten and worsens through high school, often reaching its highest rate in grade 12 (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Several strategies and programs—supported by research and evidence—are available to help schools combat chronic absenteeism. For example, Check & Connect serves as an intervention to reduce dropping out of school through monitoring student performance, mentoring, case management, and other supports. Other resources include a set of case studies from successful schools in the Children's Institute publication *Showing Up, Staying In* and an attendance toolkit available on the Ready Freddy website (www.readyfreddy.org). ■





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