

Payoffs Seen in Smooth Transition to Kindergarten



Assistant Teacher Kimberly Fisher talks with a student preparing for kindergarten at the Prairie Mountain School in Eugene, OR.

Easing the transition to this early grade can yield dividends later on

By [Christina A. Samuels](#)
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The kindergartners are coming. And these children, nearly 4 million strong in the 2017-18 class, are more likely than any other grade to be a blank slate to their teachers. But states, districts, and individual schools are working to change that, by creating transition programs to ease children's entry into school.

In some areas with publicly funded pre-K, teachers are huddling to share information about children's strengths and weaknesses with the kindergarten teachers who will educate them next. In other areas, some districts have created their own programs, such as short-term summer classes that give young children a taste of what kindergarten will be like or home visits that allow teachers, parents, and children to connect in a familiar environment.

These programs do more than calm first-day jitters or ease the minds of anxious parents. Research demonstrates that children and teachers reap tangible benefits when schools engage in more transition activities. Parents initiate more involvement in school during the kindergarten year, and children end the year with measurably higher academic achievement.

The same research, however, has shown that the pupils for whom this impact is strongest—children from low socioeconomic backgrounds—tend to attend schools that are the least likely to offer transition activities.

That is not true everywhere, however. At Maconce Elementary in rural Ira, Mich., where about 75 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, the principal and the kindergarten teachers have made an effort to conduct home visits with every incoming child. It's challenging to do some years—this year, for example, the 300-student school is still down one kindergarten teacher—but it has been a worthwhile practice in creating a positive relationship with students and parents right away, said Principal Sherri Milton-Hoffman.

The positive feelings "are kind of like a bank. You draw on it later," Milton-Hoffman said.

In Eugene, Ore., a transition program that gives children a chance to practice kindergarten-level social skills has been a boon for 5-year-old Lyla Hendershot, said her mother, Lacey Hendershot. Lyla will start kindergarten in the Bethel district, where more than 50 percent of the children are eligible for free-and-reduced price lunches, and most children, like Lyla, did not attend preschool. The transition activities help children learn about skills such as sharing and taking turns. While the children work with the teachers, the parents have their own sessions.

"I'd say it's helped me about as much as it's helped her," Hendershot said. "It's getting me used to not being in constant control of her all the time and seeing that she will excel no matter who's in charge."

Boosting Readiness

Programs to ease children's entry into school have been around for decades, with varying levels of policy attention. In 1998, the National Education Goals Panel, made up of governors, congressional members, school leaders, and researchers, drafted a report called ["Ready Schools"](#) with the ambitious goal of having all children starting school ready to learn.



Autumn Edwards and her mother, Lindsey Edwards, walk toward Prairie Mountain School in Eugene, OR.

In that document, panel members said that ready schools "smooth the transition between home and school," and they "strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools."

In 2005, a group of researchers [used a federal longitudinal database](#) to see if they could connect how well children performed in kindergarten to how many transition activities they had gone through.

The federal database, which followed a sample of kindergartners who started school in 1998-99, asked school administrators if they had engaged in one or more of several different types of transition activities, such as sharing information about kindergarten with parents in print or by phone; allowing parents and children to visit the classroom prior to the start of the school year; or hosting orientation sessions for parents before the school year kicks off.

The study found that such practices were widespread, but that educators at lower-income schools reported a higher rate of impersonal "low intensity" practices, such as sending a letter home, or holding an open house.

Amy B. Schulting, a research scientist at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the lead author of the 2005 report, launched a home-visiting program that links kindergarten teachers and families before the start of the school year. She was prompted by the findings that suggested at-risk pupils could benefit from more intensive outreach early on.

Teachers and parents have reported overwhelmingly that the home-visiting program is worthwhile, Schulting said. In particular, teachers say that the investment of time before the school year saves them time during the school year. The positive relationships developed during the home visits make home-school communication and collaboration easier and more comfortable for parents and teachers. And, while difficult to quantify, this is a real benefit for participants, Schulting said.

Milton-Hoffman, whose Michigan school is one of those participating in the pilot program organized by Schulting and JoAnne Elkin of the Macomb Intermediate School District, said that even if the grant-supported program went away, she would want to continue it on her own.

"I think that the big whole-group transition activities are wonderful, but they're not personal," she said. "When you're in their home, it's personal, it's about that one child who you're sitting there reading with." Other transition programs help children prepare for school by teaching them the so-called soft skills they'll need to be successful when they start school.

That's the goal behind [Kids in Transition to School](#), a project of the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene. During 24 sessions held during the summer and the first month of school, both parents and children learn what's expected of them. The program operates in 13 school districts in Lane County, Ore. two to three days a week, for two hours per session. The program is financed through the United Way, as well as through other grants and the participating districts.



Tyler Johnson, center, is picked to choose the next lesson. He and his classmates take part in the Kids in Transition to School program, which focuses on school readiness, social skills, and literacy

The program is less of a time commitment than some programs might be, such as full-time preschool. That's intentional, said Katherine C. Pears, a senior research scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center.

"We were thinking, how do we make it effective and efficient for families and teachers, and can we do it with a lighter touch than some of the other programs, if we're focused on what we want to do?" Pears said.

That means early literacy and numeracy, while a part of the program, are not the primary focus, Pears said, because they will get that in kindergarten. However, they may not explicitly be taught social-emotional skills, and the program homes in on those topics, with a different theme every week.

Applying the Skills

For example, "we work on really talking about what sharing is and what it looks like," Pears said. The teachers talk about how to transition from one activity to another and how to handle disappointment.

Chris Parra, the superintendent of the 5,600-student Bethel district, said she can't just spot a KITS student—she can hear them.

"You can hear them using terms they use in KITS. If they're not the line leader, if they didn't get called on, you hear them saying, 'Oh well. Maybe next time,' " she said.

Some places have statewide transition programs. West Virginia, for example, requires prekindergarten teachers in its state-funded program to meet with kindergarten teachers to share transition reports.

LaDonna Rosencrance, the pre-K liaison for West Virginia's Randolph County district, said that the school system also has events to allow preschoolers to visit the kindergarten classroom, see the lunchroom, and sit on a bus.

"It's wonderful to have this backing from the state to make sure everything is developmentally appropriate," Rosencrance said.

But nationally, new studies suggest that transition activities appear to still be more at the discretion of a school or district leader than systematic.

Michael H. Little, a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, [used a federal database](#) to compare the transition activities reported for the kindergarten class of 1998-99 with those of the kindergarten class of 2010-11. A moderate increase in activities has been reported but only on relatively low-intensity practices: sending information home, holding parent orientations, and encouraging parent and child visits before the start of the school year.

Little cautioned, however, that the federal survey may not be capturing all the activities that may be in place. And the impact of the Every Student Succeeds Act: [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), which

requires districts receiving Title I funds for disadvantaged students to increase coordination with early-childhood programs, is still to be determined.

"ESSA gives states some opportunities to think creatively about ways to do this," said Aaron Loewenberg, a former kindergarten-teacher-turned-program-associate for the think tank New America. "As students and families enter the formal K-12 school system, it's important to establish these close connections."