



Of Primary Interest

Fostering Positive Transitions for School Success

Jayma Ferguson McGann
and Patricia Clark

It is the week before school starts, and Ridgeview Elementary is holding a Popsicle Night for children entering kindergarten and their families. As families arrive in the school cafeteria, the principal and a kindergarten teacher welcome each kindergarten child with a T-shirt bearing the school name and logo.

The children excitedly greet their former preschool teachers, who also attend. With their families, the children choose from the variety of activities prepared by the preschool and kindergarten teachers. At an appointed time, the principal gathers the children and reads to them a story about going to kindergarten. Afterward, the families follow the kindergarten teachers to the children's new classrooms for a visit and short talk about kindergarten. The evening ends with Popsicles for everyone.

WHY IS IT THAT FEWER THAN 20 PERCENT of U.S. schools have transition practices in place to support children entering kindergarten and welcome their families (Love et al. 1992)? This is an important transition for young children, and its success has a lasting effect on children's school success in later years (Alexander & Entwisle 1988; Ensminger & Slusarcick 1992; Early, Pianta, & Cox 1999; Ramey et al. 2000).

Clearly, educators, schools, and communities must work together to ensure that young children's entry into kindergarten and elementary school is a smooth passage rather than a rocky road. It seems well worth the effort to find ways to support children and families during this crucial transition.

Indiana steps up to the challenge

The Indiana Department of Education, through the Ready Schools Initiative, works with 12 communities across the state to help local elementary schools support children's transitions to kindergarten. The communities range from large cities with dozens of elementary schools to small towns and rural areas with one school serving an entire county.

The guiding question has been, "What can we do—in early childhood programs, in elementary schools, with families, and in the community—to facilitate children's successful transition into kindergarten and the elementary grades?" While each community addresses the issue differently based on its resources and needs, in Indiana we have pinpointed some common concerns and found a number of ways to address the transition process.

Jayma Ferguson McGann is director of the Division of Prime Time in the Indiana Department of Education, where she has worked for 10 years. She is responsible for the state's early childhood pre-K to grade 3 initiatives, including Foundations for Young Children and Ready Schools, and issues related to kindergarten and early intervention. E-mail: jferguso@doe.state.in.us.

Patricia Clark, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. She has worked for the past four years with the Indiana Department of Education on the Ready Schools Initiative and is currently researching its impact. E-mail: pclark@bsu.edu.

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) works to improve instruction, curriculum, and administration in education programs for young children and their families. **Of Primary Interest** is written by members of NAECS/SDE for kindergarten and primary teachers. The column appears in March, July, and November issues of *Beyond the Journal*, following its publication in *Young Children* in the same months.

Encouraging successful transitions

Activities for improving children's transitions to school fall into two broad categories: (1) improving connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools, and (2) reaching out to children and families before children enter kindergarten.

Connections between early childhood programs and schools

Preschool programs and elementary schools need to find ways to communicate. Kindergarten teachers need to know about the early childhood programs their new kindergartners attended, and preschool teachers need to know about kindergarten teachers' expectations for the children. Here are some of the ways the Indiana Ready Schools communities encourage connections:

- Kindergarten teachers visit early childhood programs to get a better idea about the programs, their curricula, and the children.
- Preschool teachers visit kindergarten classrooms, often with the children who will be going to the kindergarten.
- Kindergarten and preschool teachers share dinner and conversation to discuss issues important to both.
- Elementary school districts incorporate procedures for obtaining records from the variety of programs children attend. Schools prepare and distribute to early childhood programs parent permission forms to allow the programs to transfer children's records to the school.
- Communities provide families with a pamphlet that they can read and complete to communicate personal information about their child. These pamphlets are distributed at community fairs, through prekindergarten programs, and at kindergarten registration, and then are returned to the kindergarten teacher.
- School districts involve early childhood teachers who work in programs outside the schools, as well as those within the schools, and kindergarten teachers in joint professional development experiences.

Connections between schools and families

The extent to which families are involved in their children's education is a strong predictor of children's academic success (Henderson & Berla 1994). To facilitate family-school communication and linkages, ready schools reach out to families, establish links *before* the first day of school, and make personal contacts (Pianta & Walsh 1996). However, typical elementary school transition practices often involve experiences taking place *after* the start of school and/or making contact through flyers, brochures, and group open houses.

Here are some of the things that the Indiana Ready Schools communities do to reach out to families before kindergarten:

- Special events held before the school year begins welcome incoming kindergarten children and families. The events often happen in the evening and include a light supper, activities for children and families together, an opportunity to meet the kindergarten teachers and visit the classrooms, and the principal reading a story aloud (see "A Read-Aloud for Families").
- Elementary schools invite preschoolers and their families to Family Night during the school year before the children's kindergarten entry.

A Read-Aloud for Families

A number of principals read *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn, at family-welcoming events in Indiana. Parents with tears in their eyes have attested to the power of this story about a young raccoon preparing to go to kindergarten.

Remember, a child going off to kindergarten can be as big a step for the family as it is for the child.

- Teachers make home visits before school begins to the families whose children will be starting kindergarten in the fall.
- Communities distribute brochures, videos, and home activity calendars to children and families at community events, through pediatricians and libraries, and with the help of community agencies that work with families (housing authority, social service agencies, etc.). The resources emphasize the importance of the early years and encourage families to contact their local elementary school before their child enters kindergarten.

Conclusion

Nearly half of all kindergarten teachers nationally report that 50 percent of children experience some degree of difficulty in the transition to formal schooling and 16 percent face serious adjustment problems (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox 2000). Strategies to prepare children for change and address the challenges of adjustment can help ensure that children's transitions to school are positive.

The transition to kindergarten is a process among partners rather than an event happening to a child. According to Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, "most important for the transition process are the relationships—those between children and teachers, parents and teachers, children and their peers, and children and their parents" (1999, 52). Effective practices are planned locally, taking into consideration children's cultural backgrounds and the multiple characteristics of the community, including family income levels, cultures, physical location and resources. Using what we know about young children and transitions, teachers, schools, and communities can adapt strategies to local needs and resources to promote children's successful transition to kindergarten and school success in the years after.

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