

Systems-Level Strategies to Facilitate Kindergarten Transitions

Key Study Findings and Examples from Case Studies of Head Start & K-12 Partnerships

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Background and Purpose

- The *Understanding Children's Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten* (HS2K) project is a joint research venture between NORC at the University of Chicago, Child Trends, and the National P-3 Center at University of Colorado Denver. This project seeks to better understand how to best support children and families during the transition from Head Start programs to elementary schools.
- The project team reviewed the knowledge base, conducted secondary analyses of national surveys and Head Start and K-12 written partnership agreements, and carried out a HS2K comparative multi-case study to learn about how programs and schools work together to support Head Start-to-kindergarten transitions.
- The strategies presented here stem from the HS2K project's collective work and provide real-life examples of how Head Start programs and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) work together to support kindergarten transitions.

KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION LANDSCAPE

TWO SYSTEMS, TWO APPROACHES



Transitions are fundamentally two-sided: A sending side (Head Start) and a receiving side (K-12).

- Both sides influence how a child experiences this critical transition.



Each side contains multiple levels of actors who influence the transition.

- Classroom teachers are essential to effective transitions, but they are not the only ones who play an important role.
- Site and school administrators, organization leaders, regional entities, state agency personnel, and federal policymakers all influence aspects of the kindergarten transition.



Each side has its own governance structure influencing policy and practice.

- Head Start provides federal funding directly to programs with a single set of regulations (the Head Start Program Performance Standards). Head Start's federal-to-local governance can lead to more consistent use of standards across states and locales.
- Individual states and localities have significant power within the K-12 system. Therefore, approaches in K-12 can vary widely in scope and intensity by state and school district.



There are many possible connection points between Head Start and elementary schools.

- Head Start programs can send children to multiple elementary schools.

The 4Ps of Kindergarten Transitions

Activities and practices experienced by children and families are just one piece of the transition puzzle. **Policies, perspectives, and professional supports** all feed into and provide the structure for **practices**. Together, we call these the 4Ps. All 4Ps exist at every level—governing agency, administration, building, and classroom—of both the Head Start and K-12 hierarchies.¹ A systems approach recognizes that these organizational conditions set the stage for the scale and success of transitional practices in both systems.



Findings

LEADERSHIP

Research suggests that coordinated efforts across systems—including essential leadership by policymakers and administrators—can help improve the outcomes of children experiencing the transition to kindergarten. Those outcomes include better short-term initial school adjustment, long-term social and emotional development, and academic outcomes.¹

Collaboration Between Administrators Is Critical. By working together, leaders support consistent and sustained implementation of transition practices. Most importantly, such collaboration lifts the burden from individual teachers and family service staff.

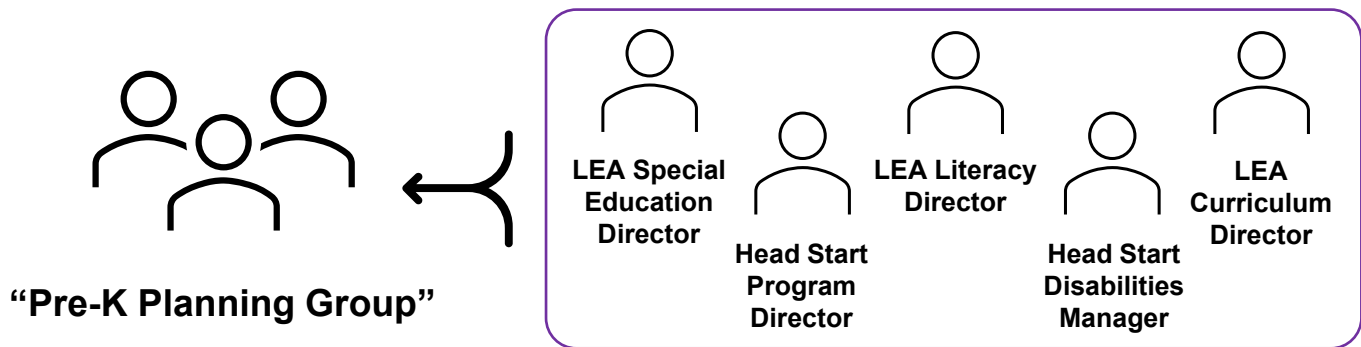
In one HS2K case, administrators from both the Head Start and K-12 systems brought together leaders in charge of special education, curriculum, and enrollment to form a “pre-k planning group.” Together, they worked on placing all transitioning Head Start children

with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) into high-quality, full-day kindergarten classrooms across the district. Each child received support that was tailored to their specific needs and followed them from their Head Start learning environment to their kindergarten classroom. The pre-k planning group also prepared specific supports for children who needed them but did not have IEPs. This demonstrated how transition efforts targeting one group of children can benefit others.

Transitions Take More Than Teachers.

While teachers play an essential role in the jump to pre-k, it takes administrators and policymakers working in tandem to provide some less-common practices and policies linked to positive transitions. These efforts include sharing professional development (PD), data practices, and learning standards and assessments; and housing Head Start/pre-k in the same school or campus as kindergarten (co-location).¹ Administrators can and have successfully set up cross-system practices—such as teacher meetings, data

“We worked in silos...early childhood was one silo. Special Ed was one silo. Curriculum was a silo...we weren’t working collaboratively together...we should be doing this together!”



exchanges, and shared PD—to align curricula, assessments, and transition practices between the Head Start and K-12 systems. In some cases, state and federal initiatives or requirements played a significant role in enabling these to happen.

In one HS2K Case, teachers in blended Head Start and state pre-k classrooms administered a required state pre-k assessment. They then shared summaries of positive findings related to children’s development with their upcoming kindergarten teachers. Administrators used state grants to pay for teacher trainings and meeting time to support this assessment and data exchange. State policy and financial support, combined with regular communication opportunities arranged by administrators, contributed to positive outcomes for teachers. Head Start teachers felt validated as educators because they were able to share specific ways that their program’s play-based curriculum prepared children for kindergarten in key developmental domains. On the K-12 side, kindergarten teachers reported receiving helpful and actionable information about how each child was progressing.

There is emerging evidence that increased administrator involvement and cross-system collaboration leads to more practices that can ease the transition for children and families. For example, our secondary data analyses revealed that a collaboration between the directors of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs and their partners in K-12 Migrant Education was associated with a

greater number of family- and teacher-centered transition practices.ⁱⁱ

Leadership Buy-In Strengthens Partnership Bonds.

Creating positive relationships between people in different roles both within and across systems is crucial to supporting children and families through the move to kindergarten.ⁱ Leadership can set up structures and supports to help launch and maintain cross-system relationships. These efforts can include establishing staff requirements, offering to pay for time spent in transition meetings and on planning, organizing events, and reserving time to collaborate. Case studies show that the more leaders and collaborators define partnership roles and responsibilities, the stronger the relationships. Research suggests that strong relationships help create communication and trust, both of which are important to aligning perspectives.ⁱ

In one HS2K case an LEA early learning administrator and a Head Start manager worked in the same office (due to co-location of the programs). By splitting the role of early education administrator, and jointly planning shared PD activities, they brought greater alignment to Head Start and pre-k programming. This included hosting biweekly professional learning communities, weekly meetings on curriculum and teaching strategies, and trainings on standards and assessments for Head Start and pre-k teachers. Through this collaboration, they also promoted alignment between combined early

education programming and kindergarten through such activities as data exchanges and teacher meetings between Head Start/pre-k and kindergarten teachers, during which participants worked to coordinate perspectives on kindergarten readiness.

GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY

Developing strong and positive relationships is easier when people are in close physical proximity.

Co-Location of Head Start in Schools Supports Alignment and Relationships.

Half of our case study partners had at least some Head Start classrooms co-located with kindergarten in elementary schools.

Respondents across cases talked about how co-location and general geographic proximity helped create both spontaneous and scheduled connections.

In one HS2K case, staff said that having Head Start and kindergarten teachers in a single location led to informal interactions and classroom observations. This in turn created greater alignment regarding what makes children “ready” for kindergarten. For example, Head Start teachers began including more activities that incorporated scissors after kindergarten teachers requested that children come to their classrooms with more advanced cutting skills.

In another HS2K case, a Head Start program and its partner elementary school shared special education and speech teachers. Head

Start program staff reported that this overlap was the key to developing the type of close relationship needed to improve special education experiences for children transitioning to kindergarten. Co-location can spark resource sharing and process agreements, but the first step is to bring staff from both systems together, uniting them in the pursuit of a common goal.

STRUCTURES, GUIDANCE, AND EXPECTATIONS

Intentional planning, dedicated funding, and written policies and processes that are known by all are important to easing the Head Start-to-kindergarten transition.

Actively Sharing Written Guidance and Expectations Can Promote Collaboration.

The federal government requires agreements between Head Start programs and K-12 systems (LEAs) that receive Title I funds. These agreements promote adherence to transition-specific perspectives, policies, professional supports, and practices—the 4Ps. Our examination of several agreements found many examples of how the 4Ps helped align expectations, resources, and key transition activities.ⁱⁱⁱ We analyzed five cases, each of which had a written agreement in place.

In one HS2K case, after agreeing to a set of transition strategies and practices, Head Start and K-12 partners developed explicit expectations around activities, roles, and shared learning spaces. Their agreement

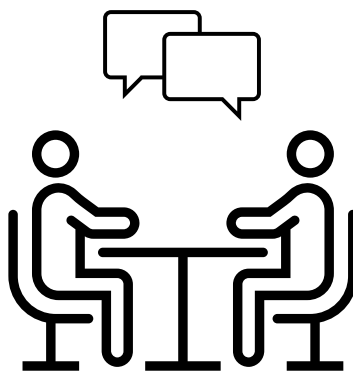
Meeting Structures Across Cases

Teacher-to-Teacher

Aligning Learning Expectations

Sharing Strength-Based Assessments

Discussing Child Needs



Admin-to-Admin

Managing Co-Location

Aligning Institutional Priorities

Negotiating Partnership

included the following:

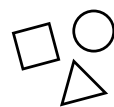
- Making kindergarten teachers available for transition-team meetings.
- Inviting/encouraging Head Start staff to attend open houses at the elementary school.
- Allowing LEA staff to observe prospective kindergarten students while they are in Head Start.
- Inviting Head Start caregivers to LEA transition trainings, workshops, and events.
- Providing Head Start children with disabilities, and their families, a chance to visit kindergarten classrooms before the beginning of the school year.
- Having Head Start share information about its transitioning students with the LEA.
- Scheduling meetings between LEA and Head Start staffs to specifically discuss the transition of students with disabilities.
- Having Head Start schedule classroom visits or meetings with kindergarten teachers
- Conducting joint planning meetings between Head Start and kindergarten teachers.

Aligned or Shared Professional Supports Foster Relationships and Coordination.

One way that systems can align perspectives, create complementary policies, and adopt shared practices is to create joint professional supports. Unfortunately, research on how many joint professional opportunities exist is limited. However, activities such as shared PD, opportunities for pre-k educators to observe kindergarten teachers, and transition summits attended by staff from multiple levels of both the Head Start and elementary school systems seem to foster trust, aligned perspectives, and connections across systems.ⁱ

What we learned from our literature review, analyses of interagency agreements, and even many of our case study partnerships was that staff across the systems experience very little or no joint PD on transitions to kindergarten despite engaging in it on other topics. This makes joint PD an important area of future cross-system alignment efforts.^{i, iii}

Fostering Alignment Across Cases



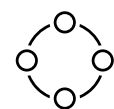
Shared Curricula



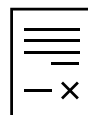
Shared Assessments



Shared Professional Development



Co-Location



Written Agreements

In one HS2K case, which was unique among our cases, respondents provided several examples of the following shared professional supports that supported better alignment between Head Start and kindergarten:

- The same state-sponsored training and coaching on a required pre-k assessment for both Head Start and kindergarten teachers.
- Monthly, state-sponsored conventions on general P-3 (preschool to third grade) alignment, which brought together principals, site managers, family advocates, and teachers from both systems.
- Joint PD opportunities for teachers on math instruction and supporting multi-lingual learners, which one LEA administrator identified as important to aligning practices and building relationships with Head Start staff.

Aligning Early Childhood Education (ECE) Programs Offers a Path to Greater Head Start and K-12 Alignment. Two of the Cases we studied focused heavily on aligning Head Start and state-funded pre-k learning standards and assessments. We found that alignment across ECE programs offers the Head Start and K-12 systems a chance to collaborate on the creation of common standards. When different ECE programs are more aligned in their instructional approaches, there may be more consistency in children’s kindergarten readiness. For kindergarten teachers, this means receiving children with more similar prior experiences and more consistent readiness skills. Once new relationships are established between Head Start and K-12 pre-k staff, the work may then extend to aligning approaches between the more unified ECE system and kindergarten. This is an exciting space for future experimentation and research.

and expertise to help reduce the complexity of cross-system coordination and collaboration.

In one HS2K case located in a county where Head Start children transitioned to many different LEAs, some activities between the Head Start and K-12 partners were mediated by an influential regional government education agency. The agency not only helped foster cross-system P-3 alignment, organized a teacher-to-teacher data exchange, and facilitated shared PD, it used its own funding to implement and enhance state-supported transition initiatives beyond what was required of or funded through the systems. This agency is unique in that its funding and priorities covered both ECE and K-12 landscapes, leading to cross-system educational services and programming.

Community Partners Can Amplify Family Engagement Strategies. Community organizations—such as public libraries and non-profit service organizations—can help families prepare for kindergarten by supplementing Head Start or LEA programming or offering their own services.

In one HS2K case, Head Start and LEA partners collaborated with local organizations, including their local library, to plan and host transition events. The library hosted kindergarten orientations for families during which they learned about classroom routines and expectations. It also offered these families other community resources while they were at these events, such as counseling services offered by the local mental health agency, a key support required by Head Start.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

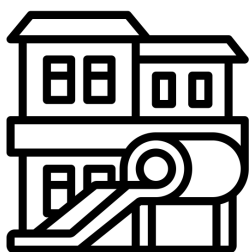
By encouraging coordination, providing resources, and amplifying messages to families about the kindergarten transition, community organizations can play an important role in supporting cross-system relationships and activities. The following are some benefits of such partnerships:

Intermediaries Can Remove Resource Barriers to Cross-System Collaboration.

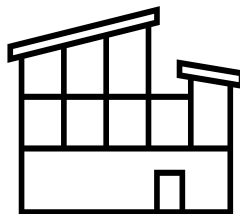
Third parties can bring their own staff, funding,

Roles of an Intermediary

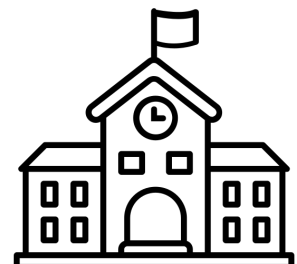
Shared Professional Development | P-3 Alignment | Data Exchanges | Teacher Meetings | Coaching



Head Start
Program / Center



Intermediary
Agency



K-12
LEA / Elementary School

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