Supporting a Successful Transition into Kindergarten for Idaho Children

Introduction

As part of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Birth through Five, Early Learning Collaboratives (ELC) in Idaho are charged with helping their communities engage in transition best practices between early childhood and schools. This document outlines the importance of a smooth transition from early childhood-to-kindergarten and summarizes best practices used by other communities throughout the nation.

Smooth Transitions Matter

A smooth transition between early childhood care and education (birth through age 5) and kindergarten (ages 5-6) promotes a positive school experience for children and sets them up for future academic success. Coordination among education stakeholders before, during, and after the transition is essential because it supports uninterrupted learning and strong relationships among children, families, school administrators, and teachers. Coordination also is shown to increase family involvement, especially among families experiencing poverty. Research supports that well-designed transitions can lead to the following:

- Lower stress levels
- Improved attendance
- Positive social adjustment
- Increased academic progress

Kindergarten Transition in Idaho

In 2019, only 42.3% of Idaho kindergartners scored at grade level on the fall reading test (meaning they arrived at school with the reading skills they need), a decrease from 44.9% in the fall of 2018. Improved transition strategies will help increase student success and adjustment to kindergarten, whether children enter school from home or from a preschool or child care environment. There is a lack of affordable, high-quality early childhood education in Idaho, and many Idaho children start kindergarten far behind their peers.
The state of Idaho maintains minimum standards for preschool that include an assessment tool and using an evidence-based curriculum. In recent years, the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children’s Preschool the Idaho Way initiative helped local communities design and implement creative strategies to prepare young children for kindergarten. Examples include a standard curriculum for all preschools in a community, teacher-to-teacher mentoring to build teacher skills, and designing preschool schedules to mirror those of kindergarteners.

**Best Practices for a Smooth Transition**

There are several strategies that can promote successful coordination among stakeholders to support a smooth transition. The best plans include strategies at all levels to ensure parents, teachers, administrators, and community members are fully vested in helping young children achieve success in school.

**Family-Level Strategies**

These strategies focus on helping children and families prepare for and understand what it will mean to move from preschool or child care to kindergarten.

- Empower parents to play a key role in early literacy well before kindergarten. A partnership between schools and a local organization can offer another opportunity to provide parents with resources about early learning that help them support their child’s kindergarten transition in a customized way.
- Hold events, like workshops and open houses, throughout the year to help parents get to know one another and their child’s future teacher, and to provide parents of rising kindergarteners with information about:
  - How to choose a kindergarten (if relevant)
  - How to register their child for kindergarten
  - Kindergarten logistics (drop-off, pick-up)
  - What they and their child can expect when transitioning to kindergarten
  - The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and how it will be used
  - How to prepare their child for school, such as by taking their child to visit their future kindergarten classroom, practicing new routines a few weeks before the school year, and taking their child shopping for school supplies
- Invite parents to participate in activities at early learning and K-12 settings, such as by setting up “open gyms” at local schools for exercise, creating family resource rooms at child care centers and preschools, and engaging them during schoolwide events.
- Conduct parent-child learning programs at local schools where parents can actively participate in a lesson with their child.
- Host kindergarten orientation sessions the summer before school starts as a final review of key information and logistics.

Young children whose parents read them five books a day enter kindergarten having heard approximately 1.4 million more words than kids whose parents did not read to them.
Teacher-Level Strategies
These strategies require strong collaboration and communication between early learning teachers or caregivers and kindergarten teachers.

► Host preschoolers in the kindergarten classroom so they can become familiar with the setting and meet other students.
► Encourage kindergarten teachers to use earmarked “professional days” (if available) to visit preschools and child care centers to introduce themselves to rising kindergarteners in a familiar setting. In some cases, kindergarten teachers can consider doing home visits to meet and learn about incoming students.
► Kindergarten and preschool teachers can plan activities and outings together.
► Early learning teachers can prepare a transition document for each child in their care that captures observations and milestones aligned with early learning standards to share with their kindergarten teacher. A document like this will be a useful snapshot of a child’s personality, strengths, and areas for improvement that will help the new teacher provide the best possible education to each student. If completed in the spring before kindergarten, this tool also gives parents the opportunity to seek support for addressing any specific challenges their child may have during the summer break. Additionally, this is a great way to get early childhood and K-12 teachers communicating more regularly and speaking a common language. (If using a tool like this, make that parents understand its value and how it will be used, too.)

School-Level Strategies
These strategies emphasize the importance of robust system-level practices and policies.

► Standardize data-sharing processes to ensure kindergarten teachers get the information they need about each child coming into their classroom. As referenced in the Teacher-Level Strategies above, consider developing a transition document/packet that meets the needs of both early learning and K-12 teachers and supports caregivers.
► Create transition teams and transition liaisons in each district and school to support a smooth transition. This teams can comprise teachers, administrators, and parents, and look at the various strategies and tactics used to support successful transition.
► Facilitate opportunities for early learning and kindergarten teachers to interact with each other via face-to-face or voice-to-voice conferences. Strong relationships among teachers will support better communication when there are challenges—and opportunities to share and learn from each other’s successes.
► Offer joint professional development opportunities for early education and teachers in the early grades; this helps ensure they are on the same page when it comes to terminology and best practices. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act includes a provision allowing school districts to use Title II funds for this purpose.
► Implement data-sharing agreements so relevant information can be shared across systems. Where it would be helpful, set up an electronic record transfer system so data can be shared seamlessly to better support families, children, and teachers. Think beyond preschools, child
care centers, and K-12 schools to include human service agencies and community providers who may have valuable information that can support incoming children.

► Create kindergarten discussion groups comprising preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers who meet to discuss common issues.
► Align the instructional components of early learning and kindergarten to create continuous learning and teaching experiences.

**Community-Level Strategies**
These strategies help build and maintain support from the entire community to facilitate a smooth transition between early care and kindergarten for the short- and long-term.

► Create or leverage existing early childhood or kindergarten readiness coalitions comprising kindergarten principals and teachers as well as early education teachers and providers, parents, libraries, and community service agencies.
  - These coalitions can review aggregate data to assess where to focus improvement efforts, build relationships among community organizations that serve kids and families, and identify customized solutions for improving kindergarten transitions.
  - The school district or another district-wide organization can bring leaders from the coalitions together annually to share best practices and resources and further the work.
► Conduct a public education campaign underscoring the importance of smooth transitions for students entering kindergarten and helping all community members understand the role they can play.

**Measuring Success**
Collaboratives should identify a process for understanding whether and how these practices are making a difference for local children. Scores on kindergarten readiness assessments are one way to begin to assess progress. In the longer-term, third-grade reading test scores can be tied back to early learning. Idaho state leaders are currently working to make it easier to tie early learning experiences to third-grade reading test scores to understand the relationship and benefits.

Collaboratives can survey kindergarten teachers to learn if the information they received from preschool/early learning teachers was useful and if any new activities and practices helped them support their students. It may be valuable to survey families about their experience with the kindergarten transition and if they perceive a difference in their child’s learning and well-being.

**Resources**
► U.S. Administration for Children and Families:
Early Childhood National Centers, Leadership Practices for Successful Transitions to Kindergarten:

Early Learning Nation, How To Get the Preschool to Kindergarten Transition Right:

National Association for the Education of Young Children, Transitions to Kindergarten:

National Head Start Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, New Early Childhood Coordination Requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA):

Sources


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