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# Making the Connections

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## Building an Early Learning System Beyond the Schoolhouse Walls

Children are learning long before they enter kindergarten, and often, in multiple environments. Where they spend their time as infants, toddlers and preschoolers is frequently a mix of child care, Head Start, preschool, child care provided in a home setting or with a parent or family member.



Not only do young children spend time in these different environments, but the quality of those settings can vary significantly. While all children, particularly those from low-income families, benefit from high-quality early learning experiences, lack of access and the high cost of quality programs often make them out of reach for thousands of families with young children.

For these reasons, on the first day of kindergarten, children begin school with different experiences and skill-levels. Good policy and practice must recognize that a child's success in school is connected to his or her past experiences in these different settings.

Elementary schools can be better prepared to address the diverse needs of young children when they have established relationships with those programs and places that have played a role in shaping the experiences of their new students. This policy brief outlines the importance of collaboration and cooperation among school districts and those formal and informal settings that provide care and learning to their future students.

### Preschool and K-3: The Status of its "Connectedness"

Providing children with both high-quality early learning and elementary experiences is the best way to ensure they will achieve long-term educational success. One in six children who are not reading proficiently by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade do not

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graduate high school on time. This rate is four times higher than that of proficient readers.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this connection between these two experiences remains critical in providing children with the foundation for educational success.

Yet in both policy and practice, “pre-school” and the elementary years are often viewed as separate and different, rather than as a single continuum of early learning. Even now, with more than 50 years of research demonstrating the link between quality preschool and student improvement, state and national early childhood groups must continue to convince Congress to include early childhood education in the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* or *No Child Left Behind*.<sup>2</sup>

This “separateness” also exists at the district level. Districts that have preschool programs often consider them “add-ons,” rather than viewing them as an integral part of each child’s early learning education. Those that have no preschool program often pay little attention to where future students spend their time prior to entering their schoolhouse doors.

### **New Jersey’s Schools and Community Programs: Weak Connections For the Same Students**

In New Jersey, the connection between schools and early childhood programs often depends on the district. In those lowest-income districts, which receive state aid for high-quality preschool, a stronger connection exists because most preschool classrooms are located in community-

based and Head Start programs, not in the districts’ schools.

This “mixed delivery system” for providing preschool is a national model, as all classrooms, regardless of location, must meet the same high standards. This collaborative model, however, only applies to preschools in these districts and rarely extends to infant/toddler or family care programs.

Yet state supported preschool does not exist everywhere in New Jersey and neither does this critical connection. Adequate funding to support such high quality classrooms remains elusive to thousands of other young children who, regardless of family income, do not live in those designated communities.

Because these districts receive little or no state funding to support the same quality program being administered in the poorest districts, it is up to each district as to whether or not they will provide preschool. For those that have locally-funded preschool, few are working collaboratively with private provider and Head Start programs in their communities, and even fewer are making those connections in infant/toddler settings.

This was confirmed in a recent survey of New Jersey school district administrators who participated in a leadership training series on PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> issues. The survey attempted to elicit the status of the relationship among school districts and the preschools in their communities. When asked whether they communicated with the preschools, nearly half (48%) stated that they communicated “very little” or “not at all,”

highlighting the disconnect between the schools and those community preschools preparing young children for kindergarten.<sup>3</sup>

The survey also highlighted the varied types of “connections” that districts made with community preschools. Administrators in districts that received state-aid for preschool indicated a stronger connection, as they have been collaborating with these programs for more than a decade.

For those districts that did not have state-supported preschool, their connections were often minimal. The disconnect was most apparent in districts with no public preschool. A few of the responses indicated that because their district had no preschool, they felt that they did not need to communicate with community preschools.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Benefits of Making the Connection: A “Win-Win” All Around**

While school leaders face a myriad of demands, developing a system of early learning within a school or a district must be a top priority to attain the goal of having children read proficiently by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. For most districts, this means developing a system that extends beyond the schoolhouse doors and includes the different types of early learning settings.

This can improve education for children in two critical ways. First, district administrators will have a better understanding of the students’ needs and be better positioned to respond to them. Second, districts can help community

programs to develop higher quality classrooms that can provide the foundation children will need later in their academic career.

For districts, this will mean a different way of doing business. While this will require some efforts, there are significant benefits in building a system that embraces programs within the community.

### **It’s good for kids.**

As expressed in the survey responses, because administrators frequently have minimal relationships with early childhood programs in their community, they know little about their incoming kindergartners. By building relationships with these programs, districts will have access to richer and more comprehensive information about these children before school begins.

These stronger relationships will pave the way for a more effective process to address early on, the individual needs of young children, such as implementing more effective ways to provide individual instruction and/or addressing students’ potential developmental challenges. Such relationships will strengthen the ability for schools to be prepared to educate these children.

Cultivating these relationships can also lead to the development of more meaningful transition experiences for children. Evidence continues to mount demonstrating the importance of creating strong transitions practices that support and build on children’s social, emotional and academic strengths.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, there is a shared responsibility among several individuals and institutions—teachers, administrators, community program staff and families -- for effective transitioning children from early learning to kindergarten. Transition however, is often seen as an *event*, rather than a *process*.<sup>6</sup> Districts and schools that build relationships with their early learning communities can create a process that helps children make successful transitions from preschool to kindergarten.

**It's good for building relationships with families.**

Early care and education programs are often successful in engaging and involving families in their programs. This level of involvement often decreases once the child enters school. Keeping families engaged is key.

Entering kindergarten is a point of significant change and transition for not only children, but for their families. By collaborating with preschools outside the schools, districts will develop relationships with families long before the children enter kindergarten. These early connections can result in families staying more active in their children's formal education, as well as becoming more involved in the broader school community.

Early connections to families are even more important in uncertain economic times. Developing relationships before children enter kindergarten can provide families with information and a better understanding of how districts meet student needs. They can also benefit districts in the development of stronger

and more positive support from families. For instance, parents whose children have yet to enter the public schools are an important constituency in school budget elections. Developing positive early partnerships between schools and families can contribute to the long-term sustainability of quality education.

**It provides an opportunity for consistency and higher quality programs in the community.**

The quality of community infant/toddler and preschool programs often vary. When strong relationships exist between these programs and elementary schools, important discussions can take place. This can include preschool/ kindergarten transitions, early elementary curricula and district expectations of incoming kindergarteners. This provides each entity with a greater understanding of each others' work.

Moreover, when administrators in community programs have a clearer understanding of a district's expectations, they can modify and strengthen their programs so students are better prepared for kindergarten.

Having such relationships can also mean partnering in professional development opportunities for teachers both in and out of the public schools. Inviting staff from community early learning programs to participate in district trainings will ensure there is a better understanding of district practices and expectations and provide opportunities for community programs to improve their own classroom practices.

**It provides district administrators and teachers with information about future students.**

Kindergarten teachers are at a unique disadvantage, as they frequently know little about their incoming students. This lack of student information does not exist in other grades, even when a student is transferring from another district. Developing a system in which student information is shared between a community program and the school district will provide kindergarten teachers with valuable information on children’s development across all domains of learning over a number of years, which in turn, will allow them to provide more meaningful instruction.

Such information will give district administrators a better understanding of the range of development of its entering kindergarten children. The earlier districts can identify children’s “developmental red flags,” the more effective they will be in addressing those needs.

**How to Begin Building the Connections**

In the beginning, developing the much-needed relationships between elementary schools and community programs may take a bit of leg-work. Once those bonds have been forged, the benefits to the system and, most importantly, the children is significant. Below are steps district can take to build a strong “front-end” of its coordinated early learning system.

★ **Find out who they are.** Depending on the size of the district, this may be easier said than

done. Each county’s Resource and Referral Agency has a list of licensed centers in individual communities. Getting that list is a first step, but it may not be a complete picture of where all the children spend their days prior to entering kindergarten.

Identifying all “feeder” programs is a next step. Often because of geography, certain programs will “feed” into certain schools. Partnering with local municipalities to hold meetings with families and children new to the schools is a way of strengthening bonds with both the town and the families. Identifying these programs either informally through conversations with kindergarten parents or by asking for this information through a district’s kindergarten registration process is a way of obtaining a more complete picture of the programs in the community.

★ **Reach out to them all.** Developing a stronger system will mean trying to bring all groups to the table so that everyone has an opportunity to be on the “same page” on such issues as transition, curriculum, expectations and better family engagement. While this is no easy task, engaging as many community colleagues in the process will maximize the opportunity of building a stronger system, all to the benefit of young children.

★ **Set up a regular meeting schedule—and stick to it!** With many new partners involved, predictability will be important, and sticking to a planned schedule is critical to maximum participation.

★ **Include community staff in district professional development opportunities.**

Most community programs do not have the funding to provide the level of professional development enjoyed by school district staff. Engaging their staff in district professional development programs will open the doors to learning opportunities not often experienced by them. This inclusion can provide a catalyst to strengthen the quality of the varied programs within the community.

★ **Be open to learning from the new**

**partners.** The early learning community has a lot to offer school districts as they have been in the “early learning” business for a long time. For example, many providers’ effective approach in meeting the needs of the “whole child” has resulted in strong examples of family engagement. District staff can learn from these new partners.

★ **Share your successes with colleagues and other key stakeholders.**

Developing these relationships will be a “new frontier” for many district administrators. Sharing successful examples on how to begin the process can be very beneficial to those individuals -- both in and out of the district. Moreover, recent proposed federal policy is focusing on the need for stronger community/district collaborations in the areas of early learning curricular objectives, developmental expectations and shared professional development. Providing information on successful collaborations to state education officials and legislators can provide the framework for strengthening education policy statewide.

## Conclusion

The stakes have never been higher for ensuring that all children achieve long-term educational success. In order for children to attain such success, all of the environments in which they spend their first years of life must recognize the critical need to work together. Through effective collaboration and support, school districts and community programs can provide every young student with the much-needed foundation key for being successful in school and in life.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hernandez, D.J. (2011) *Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> P.L. 107-110.

<sup>3</sup> Rice, C., Costanza, V. (2011) *Building Early Learning Leaders: New Jersey's PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Leadership Training*. Newark, NJ: Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bohan-Baker, M., Little, P.M.D. (2002) *The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

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