

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN: Findings From Recent Research

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This report was prepared as part of technical assistance provided to five states working to strengthen the transition to kindergarten. It draws on current research and state examples to highlight actionable takeaways for policymakers.

For decades, the **transition to kindergarten** (TTK) has been a priority topic for practitioners and policymakers alike. TTK strategies are intended to support children's entrance into, and success in, kindergarten, which includes a smooth end to the prior-to-kindergarten year. Ineffective transitions can result in **higher stress levels** for children and families, with lasting consequences for children's adjustment to school. In contrast, **effective transition supports** help students and families productively engage in new school environments, contributing to children's growth both academically and socially.

By definition, transition includes movement from one stage to another. As such, there are two sides to the transition. First, the "sending side" includes the programs, teachers and experiences that support children and families in the year prior to kindergarten. From an organizational standpoint, the sending side includes state- and locally-funded pre-K programs, Head Start, and child care (center- and home-based). Some children transition into kindergarten having not attended a formal program, but from home with family, friend or neighbor care. We use the term ECE (early care and education) to refer to the sending side of TTK. Second, the "receiving side" includes the elementary schools, classrooms, teachers and experiences that support children and families in kindergarten. Even when children have a preschool experience that is co-located within an elementary school, there are two sides to the transition.

The Changing Context for TTK

Some of the most influential research on TTK dates back more than 20 years (see, for example, Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Since then, much has changed related to the prevalence of and attention to ECE programs, as well as to the nature of kindergarten. In 2001-02, state-funded pre-K programs existed in 38 states which, together, served approximately 700,000 4-year-olds (NIEER, 2003). During the 2019-20 school year, 44 states had publicly funded pre-K programs, enrolling almost 1.37 million 4-year-olds, or 34% of the country's 4-year-old population (NIEER, 2021). This accounts for over half of the roughly 60% of 4-year-olds who participate in classroom or group-based preschool programs nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). These include Head Start, preschool special education, locally funded pre-K programs, and private child care or preschool programs. With more children attending more formal pre-K programs, the opportunities to implement intentional and systematic transition strategies have increased.

No matter what program type children attend in the year prior to kindergarten, the vast majority of children enter a public kindergarten program as 5-year-olds. Kindergarten has changed in the past 20 years, too. Bassok, Latham, & Roem (2016) found major changes to kindergarten since the late 1990s, including:

- 1 Increased attendance in full-day versus part-day classrooms.
- 2 Increased focus on academic content and decreased time spent on art, music and science.
- 3 Increased use of standardized tests.

These changes were most pervasive in schools serving high percentages of children from low-income households and children of color. The goals, demands, classroom structures and instructional practices in kindergarten are often different than those promoted in high-quality ECE classrooms, making TTK efforts even more important.

Over the past 20 years, TTK efforts have also changed. Using data from two nationally representative cohorts in the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten](#), researchers found a modest increase in the overall use of transition activities by elementary schools. The three most common practices used are sending information home about kindergarten, using child/parent visits prior to the start of the school year, and hosting a parent orientation before school starts (Little et al., 2016). Importantly, this study also found that schools located in districts with higher percentages of students living in poverty, students of color and/or students classified as English language learners provide *fewer* transition activities. Recent research estimates that 72% of children may experience challenges with TTK, underscoring the critical importance of supporting children and families during this vulnerable period (Jiang et al., 2021).

Finally, the political context for transitions to kindergarten has changed. Since No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001, some have argued that the intense pressures felt by elementary principals and teachers to ensure students perform well on standardized tests has led to the “educationalization of early care and education” (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007) and the push-down of standards (Brown et al., 2019), so that kindergarten is often experienced as the new first grade (Bassok et al., 2016). Other federal policies and funding have led to an increase in the number of states that have implemented early learning standards to define what young children should know and be able to do prior to kindergarten, including Kindergarten Entry Assessments (KEA) as a means to assess children’s readiness to succeed in kindergarten and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) as a means to measure and increase the quality of preschool programs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021; Merrill et al., 2020; Weisenfeld et al., 2020).

Taking these changes over the past 20 years together — expanded access to formal preschool programs, the academization of kindergarten, and increased political incentives to focus on school readiness — it is important to understand lessons learned in recent research to support young children’s transitions into kindergarten.

The purpose of this brief is to provide a review of recent research that was published in the past five years (2016-21) related to TTK. Specifically, the brief focuses on two aspects of TTK: explicit TTK *practices* that children and families may experience directly and the *policy levers* (e.g., supports, strategies, and systems) that state and local policymakers can enact to ensure successful TTK. At the end of the brief, examples of state-level efforts to comprehensively address TTK are provided.

TTK Practices

In this section, we focus on the TTK practices that children and families directly experience as they move from ECE to K-12 settings. These activities range from simple information sharing about kindergarten registration deadlines and processes to more complex and intentional practices to help children adjust to new environments.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM RECENT RESEARCH:

Takeaway #1: Transition strategies and plans cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. Research is getting more specific about which sub-populations of children benefit from more intensive transition supports. Ideally, transition strategies are nuanced and specific to the varying needs of sub-populations of children and families.

- The diversity of children and families is on the rise, and educators need training and support to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous population (Iruka et al., 2020). Children in African American, Hispanic and immigrant families, as well as those living in urban areas, experience fewer transition practices than their peers (Cook & Coley, 2017). Research reveals that African American and Hispanic families engaged in more *school*-based involvement, whereas European American families engaged in more *home*-based involvement (Puccioni, 2021). This suggests that African American and Hispanic families may benefit from shifting outreach efforts toward a greater focus on home-based involvement.
- Rural families may also need more transition supports as research documents that this population has less access to high-quality ECE programming (Iruka et al., 2020) and rural families communicate less with educators during TTK (Sheridan et al., 2020). Efforts to enhance communication with rural families, including those who do not enroll children in ECE programs, may be necessary to support this population.
- A recent study documented boys, children with individualized education plans, children living in families with low incomes and single-child families are more likely to experience transition challenges (Jiang et al., 2021).

Takeaway #2: TTK practices that engage families are the most influential. Family engagement is multi-faceted, including not only engaging in learning activities at home, but also engaging in activities at school. Families' own expectations for their child's TTK are also important.

- TTK practices that support positive relationships between children, families and educators can

increase parent involvement in schools and positively impact child outcomes (Cook & Coley, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2020).

Higher levels of family expectations of their child's readiness for kindergarten and engagement in home learning have been linked to academic performances at kindergarten entry and may be linked to later outcomes as well (Slicker et al., 2021). Families may need support and guidance to establish high yet reasonable expectations for their children when they enter kindergarten and how to best communicate these expectations with their children.

- Research documented links between higher levels of home-based involvement in learning and decreases in kindergarten teacher reports of conduct problems, hyperactivity and inattention (Puccioni et al., 2020). These findings imply that families should be supported to engage in a variety of home-learning activities with their children that range from singing songs and playing games to reading with their children and using chores as learning experiences.
- Research shows that when parents have positive perceptions of teachers' invitations to be involved in transition activities, there are increased levels of home-based learning activities and school-based involvement (Puccioni et al., 2020). To encourage the kinds of parent-preschool teacher relationships that foster engagement, programs can provide specific training to preschool teachers and staff focused on how to involve parents and other family members.
- Family school-based engagement and communication with teachers increased during the year prior to kindergarten, but decreased during kindergarten (Sheridan et al., 2020). This suggests that kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators may benefit from an intentional focus on providing opportunities for face-to-face contact and communication with families.

Takeaway #3: Implementing a well-rounded combination of TTK practices is the most effective strategy.

- Research using a nationally representative sample found that a simple increase in TTK practices predicted prosocial behavior in kindergarten but did not directly predict academic outcomes (Cook & Coley, 2017). Results from this study also showed that transition activities geared toward families were related to enhanced levels of kindergarten academic skills.
- At least one study demonstrates that parents value receiving information about their child's developmental progress and information about materials and resources intended to help families and children navigate the transition (Puccioni et al., 2020). This suggests that family engagement strategies need to include not only receiving information about their child's progress in relation to typical development, but also information about volunteer opportunities in schools and programs, supports for home learning and connections to community-based services.
- Additional research documents the importance of designing TTK strategies that attend to supporting children's academic and social-behavioral adjustment (Jiang et al., 2021).

Supports, Strategies and Systems

In this section, we focus on the TTK practices that are not directly experienced by children and families, but those that are behind the scenes and implemented by teachers, programs, schools or organizations on the sending side (e.g., ECE), the receiving side (e.g., K-12), or among both sending and receiving sides. These include strategies such as professional learning, coaching and other practices intended to enhance the capabilities of teachers, leaders and administrators to support transitions. They also include policies and regulations specified in statute like the inter-agency agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) required by the Head Start Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM RECENT RESEARCH

Takeaway #1: The mixed-delivery ECE system plays an important, albeit confusing, role as the sending side of transitions to kindergarten. The different programs within the ECE system have different policies and procedures, so greater attention to the variability across sending programs (e.g., Head Start, state-funded pre-K, child care) is needed. This suggests that Head Start, state- and locally-funded pre-K programs and the child care sector will benefit from efforts to establish similar TTK plans and approaches.

- Head Start has a lengthy history and a robust set of policies and strategies to support transitions to kindergarten (see, for example, Cook et al., 2019); other ECE programs do not have similar systematic approaches.
- In at least one study, kindergarten teachers discussed having informal knowledge about children provided by parents, but they did not have systematic information about the nature of the children's preschool experiences, including type, length of attendance and dosage (Purtell et al., 2020).
- Research shows that it is easier for pre-K teachers to collaborate with kindergarten teachers when children stay within the same school for both years (Little, 2020; Purtell et al., 2020; Vitiello, 2020). However, not all pre-K programs are co-located with elementary schools, requiring greater attention to strategies that connect community-based ECE classrooms with elementary schools.

Takeaway #2: The K-12 system also has widely variable approaches to supporting TTK.

- In one study, kindergarten teachers noted that differences in transition practices largely came down to differences in school leadership, with some schools implementing multiple activities while others were limited to a single event (Vitiello, 2020). This finding highlights the need to provide professional learning to elementary school principals about meaningful ways to support TTK.
- Logistical processes such as registering children for kindergarten can be burdensome for families. Absent robust outreach efforts from K-12 systems, some ECE programs serve as a bridge between families and elementary schools, providing the necessary information to facilitate these processes (Cook et al., 2019).

- While transition efforts tend to be led by kindergarten teachers and principals, school districts with committed leadership (e.g., a student support or curriculum director) have more consistent and intentional transition practices across multiple elementary schools (Purtell et al., 2020). However, in larger districts, transition practices are the responsibility of multiple leaders or departments, making it more difficult to effectively implement practices consistently across schools (Purtell et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest the need for school districts to be intentional about and committed to establishing predictable and transparent supports for TTK.

Takeaway #3: Effective implementation of transition policies, plans and practices requires joint buy-in from and in-person collaboration between the ECE and K-12 sides.

- Some research shows that when ECE programs provide children’s records to kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers rarely use them (Cook et al., 2019; Curby et al., 2018; Purtell et al., 2020).
- TTK practices that require cross-sector coordination or communication are difficult to implement, and even simple practices like preschoolers visiting kindergarten classes has decreased over time (Little et al., 2016; Purtell et al., 2020). Some ECE leaders consider such efforts a challenge because of the time, effort and resources required (Cook et al., 2019). Coherent policies that link sending and receiving systems can support consistent messages and avoid contradicting requirements and practices (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020).
- One study of TTK efforts found that the only practices significantly linked to children’s outcomes were in-person meetings between Head Start and kindergarten teachers (Cook & Coley, 2019). Additional research highlights that when teachers and staff receive explicit training on how to involve parents, parent involvement increases (Ansari & Gershoff, 2015). Time-intensive strategies, such as shared professional learning among ECE and kindergarten teachers, have been found to be the least common strategies enacted (Little et al., 2016), signaling that policymakers can develop and implement intentional supports to ensure regular, face-to-face interactions among key stakeholders.
- Policy levers such as requirements for formal agreements or MOUs between ECE and K-12 providers may not routinely result in meaningful collaboration (Cook et al., 2019). To address this, regulations that require evidence of collaboration (such as MOUs) should be coupled with explicit strategies and supports that engage ECE and kindergarten teachers and administrators in regular, face-to-face interactions to discuss, design, implement and continuously improve collaboration practices. When frequent coordination and communication exist between preschool personnel and elementary school personnel, it was because of conscious decision-making at some level within the school district (Purtell et al., 2020).

Takeaway #4: Practitioners and families would benefit from having a clear definition of readiness for kindergarten that accounts for multiple dimensions of children’s learning and development.

- At least one study documents that families, teachers and administrators lack a single, unifying definition of school readiness that could serve as a link between pre-K and kindergarten (Vitiello, 2020). In one study, parents felt their children were academically over-prepared for kindergarten and worried that children would feel bored and disengaged, demonstrating a concern about misalignment of academic expectations (Vitiello, 2020).
- Although kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about the importance of — as well as the focus of — state-level standards on academic skills has increased over the past 20 years, teachers and families still believe that other skills — such as self-regulation and social interaction — are the most important skills for children to have at school entry (Bassok et al., 2016; Vitiello, 2020). This disconnect suggests the need to elevate the importance of social, emotional and other skills in both state-level standards documents and in definitions of school readiness.

Takeaway #5: The concept of vertical alignment across various features of ECE and kindergarten programs and pedagogy provides a more complex perspective on how learning environments best support children’s development over time (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; Kauerz, 2018; Stipek et al., 2017; Vitiello, 2020).

- Research highlights many areas of misalignment between ECE and kindergarten classes in spite of educators having similar beliefs and values related to early learning (McCormick et al., 2020; Vitiello, Basuel, et al., 2020; Vitiello, Pianta, et al., 2020). In particular, sending and receiving organizations tend to be more aligned in relation to standards, curricula and assessments within ECE or within elementary settings rather than between ECE and elementary (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020).
- Implementing vertical alignment strategies represents a cultural and pedagogical shift as educators, administrators and state leaders need a deep understanding of child development and early learning, and what instruction looks like (McCormick et al., 2020).
- Alignment requires shifts in multiple dimensions of instructional policy, including shifts in classroom learning environments, assessment approaches, pedagogical strategies and curriculum (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; Kauerz & Coffman, 2019; Stipek et al., 2017).

Comprehensive State-Level Supports for TTK

States continuously develop resources to support implementation of TTK practices and strategies. Many states have worked across multiple sectors to develop statewide goals, community strategies and tools to support families, educators and leaders in ECE and K-12. The examples compiled here focus on explicit goals, strategy documents, and resources and tools for these systemwide approaches. In addition, we provide two examples of home-learning resources for families developed by state agencies and support

organizations. For policy recommendations, refer to a recent [Education Commission of the States Policy Guide](#) on TTK state policies (Bornfreund et al., 2020).

SYSTEMWIDE TTK APPROACHES



Connecticut's State Department of Education and Office of Early Childhood have collaboratively created [resources](#) to support the development of strategies and systems within and across organizations, including a [landscape analysis](#) tool to better understand the social and educational contexts surrounding TTK. [Transitioning to Kindergarten: The Why, What, and How of this Important Milestone for Connecticut Students](#) provides examples of strategies that school districts can use, including assessing current practices, as well as cross-sector team approaches to develop community-wide approaches to TTK.



Florida's TTK [resources](#) include materials for communities, schools and families. For Florida, successful transitions occur when children enjoy school and continue to grow socially and academically, and when families engage in children's learning. A [toolkit](#) includes a timeline of suggested TTK activities for districts, schools, ECE programs, educators and families.



In 2018, **Illinois'** Kindergarten Transition Advisory Committee submitted a [report on successful TTK practices](#) organized around the themes of aligned teaching and learning, aligned assessments and data, and strengthened cross-sector partnerships. The report includes definitions of critical success factors for children and families navigating birth-to-eight systems, as well as policy levers to support implementation.



Kentucky's Early Childhood Advisory Council has embraced transitions as a central theme in its [Early Childhood Strategic Plan](#). Through supporting and empowering families at various transition points as children develop from prenatal through third grade, Kentucky aims to achieve strategic goals through stakeholder engagement, statewide transition coordination and a TTK plan.



Oklahoma has drafted an [Early Childhood Transition Toolkit](#) based on collaboration across multiple sectors including the state department of education, state-level early childhood leaders and many others. The transition toolkit represents a state-level systemic approach that aligns to SEA strategic goals and is rooted in a community-wide and whole-child focus. The toolkit highlights the roles leaders play in transitions for ensuring high-quality and equitable transition experiences, respecting and affirming diversity and strategies for building family, school and community partnerships. The toolkit includes a clear definition of Ready Schools (p. 5) that combats common myths about school readiness by emphasizing all students have the ability to learn and are ready to start school.



West Virginia has established a state-level, cross-sector [Early Childhood Transition Steering Committee](#) to support communities' implementation of transition policies and practices.

TTK RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



Alabama's Born Ready initiative focuses on raising family's awareness of developmentally aligned strategies to engage their children in learning in the home. Resources for families include activity ideas for children at different ages (e.g., birth - 2, ages 4-5+) aligned to brain science. Each activity includes short and simple directions, as well as a brief explanation on what children are learning.



California's Talking is Teaching campaign focuses on elevating the importance of family roles in early brain and vocabulary development. Resources focus on supporting families in using language with their children during everyday interactions, whether it be by talking, reading, or singing, and to focus interactions in ways that boost early literacy, math, and social and emotional development.

TTK has become increasingly important as more students are attending ECE programs prior to kindergarten entry. The COVID-19 pandemic has also placed tremendous pressure on this issue as enrollment has decreased significantly and more is needed from the educational system to effectively support students in this transition. Luckily, there is ample research from recent years that points to a handful of effective strategies for state leaders to consider in making systemic improvements that lead to more equitable supports for all children.

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