

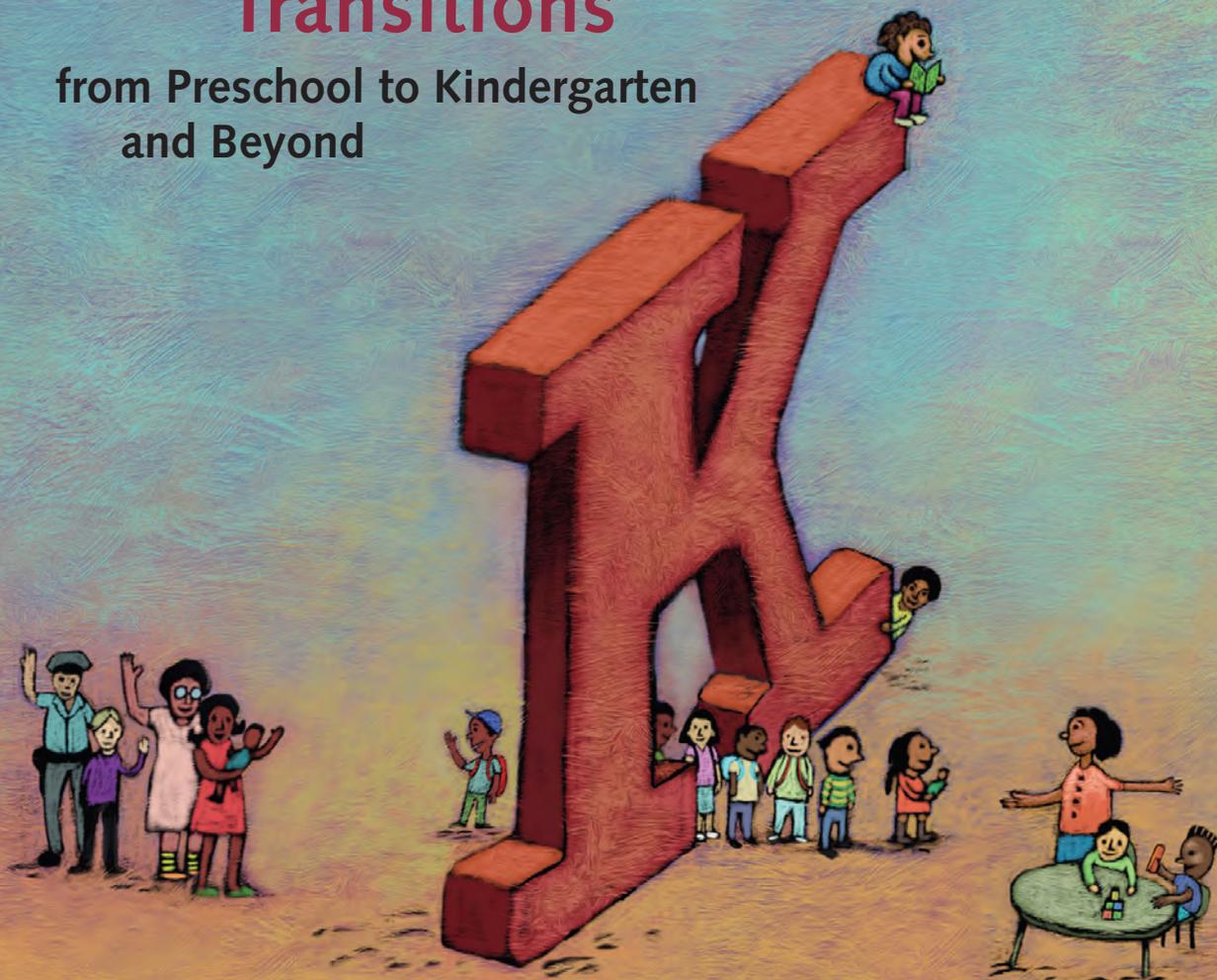
VUE

2016, NO. 43

ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*

Promoting Seamless Transitions

from Preschool to Kindergarten
and Beyond



Supporting Early Education Transitions: Alignment, Collaboration, and Community Engagement

Michael Grady

Sustaining the Benefits of Early Childhood Education Experiences: A Research Overview

Rebecca E. Gomez

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VUE

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Supporting Early Education Transitions: Alignment, Collaboration, and Community Engagement

MICHAEL GRADY

With widespread support for the expansion of early education programs, there is an increased need for collaboration across systems to support the critical transition from pre-K to elementary school in order to ensure positive educational outcomes for all.

The expansion of pre-kindergarten is one of those rare policy priorities that enjoys strong bipartisan support. Indeed, states with Republican governors such as Florida, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Michigan have been in the vanguard of efforts to expand pre-kindergarten access. A September 2015 survey fielded by the First Five Years Fund reported that nearly all respondents who self-identified as Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans support increased federal investments in early education.¹

New York City is now in the second year of what is arguably the nation’s largest and most rapid roll-out of a universal pre-kindergarten expansion. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed, Berkeley public policy professor David Kirp (2016) praised New York City’s first year of implementation, in which 68,000 students were served in over 300 community-based settings that met high program-quality standards for staffing, curriculum, data use, commitment to continuous improvement, and parental engagement. Kirp notes that the priority for the city should be to create structures and practices that create “smooth paths” to the early elementary years.

The vital need for new knowledge to guide preschool-to-elementary transitions compelled the federal government’s Institute for Education Sciences (IES) to launch a \$26 million research program this year to fund a network of studies aimed at understanding what factors are critical to preventing the “fade-out” of preschool gains. The Early Learning Network will focus squarely on what context-specific factors help sustain positive learning effects as young children matriculate through the early elementary years.

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1 See <http://ffyf.org/2015-poll/>.

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The research network will focus on the following three lines of inquiry and share their scientific discoveries with policy and practice communities:

- What federal, state, and local policy characteristics facilitate successful transitions from pre-kindergarten settings to elementary school?
- What classroom practices have a significant and sustaining impact on long-term learning?
- In what ways does the ecosystem in which the child lives – home, peers, neighborhood – interact to preserve the benefits of early learning experiences?

As stated by Vanderbilt researchers who led the evaluation of Tennessee’s voluntary preschool program, the IES research will examine the “poorly understood interaction between pre-K experience and the experience the children have in subsequent grades that fails to carry forward the momentum” (Sparks 2016).

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education (VUE)* addresses questions critical to the challenge of supporting young children’s transition from prekindergarten programs to elementary school. Authors represent a wide range of professional perspectives and experience, including social scientists, program developers and operators, advocates, and practitioners.

- Rebecca Gomez of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University opens the volume by describing the current state of social science knowledge about what it takes to sustain the benefits of high-quality early childhood education programs. Among other observations, she advocates for stronger systems to sustain these benefits throughout early learning transitions and beyond.
- Amy Fain and Diane Eason Contreras of the Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) recount that city’s experience on the leading edge of the national movement for universal prekindergarten. CAP Tulsa’s transition and curriculum staff partner with schools to sustain the early benefits of pre-K as students matriculate through the early elementary grades, working on four key elements of the transition process: family-school, school-school, child-school, and community-school.
- Randi Levine, director of the Early Childhood Education Project for the Advocates for Children of New York, reports on the Turning 5 work group that was set up to support families of students with disabilities who face a unique set of challenges in transitioning to kindergarten.
- Maureen Sigler, former director of the Olneyville Education initiative in Providence, describes a comprehensive, community-based approach to supporting young children’s passage from early childhood education to kindergarten. A broad array of supports, using the Early Head Start and Healthy Families America models, were designed to counter the debilitating effects of toxic stress.
- AISR’s Joanna Geller and Maria Cristina Betancur (a parent collaborator in Central Falls, Rhode Island) report on the *We Are A Village* initiative focused on family engagement in early childhood and funded through the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program. One of the goals of that project is to effect smooth transitions by fostering deep parent engagement to help families feel welcome, valued, and respected.

Rounding out this exploration of early learning transitions is a series of “perspective” pieces that complement some of the themes raised by the issue’s authors. Sara Mickelson describes the state policy conditions that are critical to the support of early education transitions, based on her previous work at the Rhode Island Department of Education’s Early Learning Division and on her current position as an education policy analyst at the National Governors Association. Peter Simon, a pediatrician and former official with the Rhode Island Department of Health, discusses his career-long advocacy for effective treatment and policies that combat lead poisoning in our urban communities. Dr. Simon’s reflections are especially timely given the public health crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the realization that lead poisoning remains a persistent threat nationwide to children’s health, development, and learning. And finally, Patricia Martinez, executive director for student and family support at the Central Falls School District, comments on the role of school district leadership in the design and delivery of high-quality transition supports and in recognizing parents as partners.

LOOKING FORWARD

Throughout the issue, several common themes emerge about the practices, policies, programs, and supports that are essential to extending the benefits of a high-quality preschool experience. Authors point to the importance of aligning the early learning and K–12 systems to effect smooth transitions for children. Moreover, the transition challenge calls for greater collaboration across systems – education, health, housing, and other family-serving agencies that have a role in keeping children on a path to academic success. And every article notes the importance of deep engagement with communities and parents as vital allies in the healthy transition of their children to kindergarten and beyond.

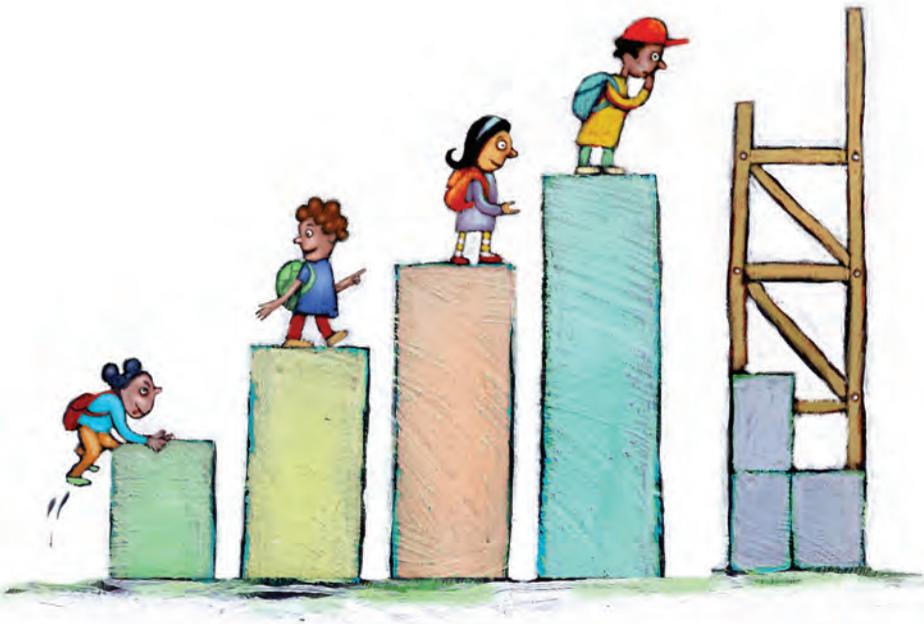
Many of these same principles are reflected in AISR’s concept of a “smart education system,” in which districts and local community agencies and organizations work together to do what schools alone cannot: to provide a comprehensive web of learning supports to ensure that all students have the resources and supports they need to learn at levels sufficient for productive futures as citizens and workers.² Moving forward, we will use the collective wisdom of the authors of *VUE 43* to advance our work with communities to promote the success of our youngest children, in school and in life.

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2 See <http://annenberginstitute.org/who-we-are/smart-education-systems>.

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Sustaining the Benefits of Early Childhood Education Experiences: A Research Overview

REBECCA E. GOMEZ

Over the past decade, there has been increased recognition of the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality early childhood education programs, but the systems needed to sustain these benefits throughout early learning transitions (and beyond) have not yet been fully implemented.

My oldest nephew is six years old and in first grade. Despite overcoming significant challenges during the first five years of his life, he is doing pretty well. He's reading above grade level and performing at grade level in math. He demonstrates good cognition and general knowledge, along with social competence and executive functioning skills consistent with what one might expect from a six-year-old. He approaches learning experiences with curiosity and persists in completing tasks that are difficult. He has also has

lived the first five years of his life in a single-parent household because his mother has been incarcerated and in and out of rehabilitation programs for drug addiction – a factor we know from the literature on early childhood development could put him at risk for developmental and learning delays (Shonkoff 2010; Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000).

What, then, bolstered my nephew's progress in learning and enabled him to be resilient despite these realities? Some of this, surely, is a result of the caring

Rebecca E. Gomez is an assistant research professor at the National Institute for Early Education Research in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University.

adults in his life, with whom he was able to form stable attachments and who engaged him in learning experiences grounded in his community and home culture. These supports acted as protective factors (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2009) helping to counteract those risks. He also, however, attended an early childhood education (ECE) program that was accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), widely thought to be the “gold standard” of quality in ECE (Neugebauer 2009). His first five years of life took place during a period of considerable attention to the role of early experiences on brain development and the impact of high-quality early childhood education on ameliorating risk factors and reducing achievement gaps in the early elementary grades.

The newest research in this field tackles the question of how to ensure that the gains made in ECE will be sustained. Research has begun to look at ECE systems that create the infrastructure for an aligned, effective set of policies and programs to support young children’s development and learning from birth through third grade. Much of my work as a researcher in the field of ECE has focused on exploring the potential of ECE systems, and the governance of those systems, to create a coherent learning continuum for children from birth through grade three. I continue this work at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), where we focus on conducting high-quality research on pre-K that can inform policy and practice. Indeed, NIEER was created in 2001 for the purpose of conducting independent research on pre-K and for seeking to increase the transparency and accountability of pre-K policies. NIEER is uniquely positioned at the intersection of research, policy, and practice, enabling its faculty to take a holistic view of pre-K and be responsive to the needs of the field.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: INCREASING RECOGNITION AND A SHIFT IN FOCUS

Decades of research on child development and the benefits of ECE as an intervention now indicates that high-quality programs result in both short- and long-term benefits to young children (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). We know that a child’s family and community environments are inextricably linked to his or her development, and stable attachment relationships can mitigate risk factors and promote positive social, emotional, and cognitive developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Ainsworth & Bowlby 1991). We also know from studies focusing on educational interventions for young children that “ability gaps” – or differences in children’s baseline knowledge and skills – are a primary cause for the achievement gap, begin at an early age, and cannot be mitigated by educational experiences after second grade (Heckman 2011).

Evidence from longitudinal studies of interventions like the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project¹ suggest that early childhood education has the potential to reduce these ability gaps (and subsequently, the achievement gap) by permanently bolstering social and emotional skills (Schweinhart et al. 2005) as well as IQ (Heckman 2011, citing work by Campbell and colleagues). My nephew

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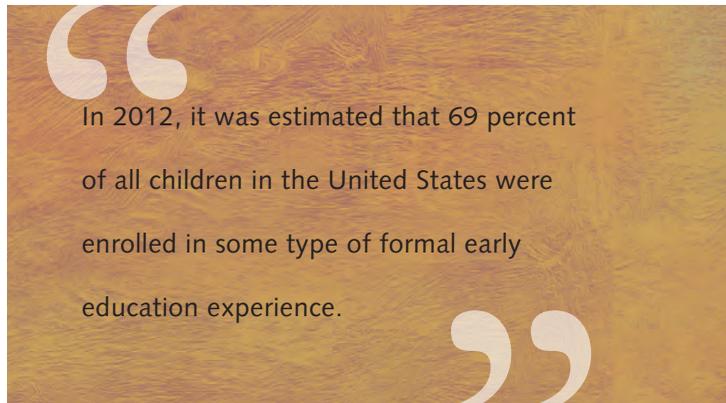
1 The HighScope Perry Preschool Study and the Carolina Abecedarian Project are two well-known early childhood education research studies that have tracked participants for over forty years and shown positive, long-term outcomes of high-quality early education, along a range of educational, social, and emotional indicators. For more information about the Abecedarian Project, see <http://abc.fpg.unc.edu/>; for the Perry Preschool project, see <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>.

benefited from this body of research because it pointed the way to interventions that could improve his life and reduce the negative impact of his early deleterious experiences.

The body of literature on the importance of the first five years of life in shaping a child’s overall developmental trajectory, and on the effectiveness of ECE as an intervention for young children, has continued to grow. Until relatively recently, however, policymakers at the federal, state, and local level have been guided by the ethos that the family has primacy over a child’s care and learning experiences, particularly during his or her first five years of life. As a result, these policymakers have largely limited investment in services for young children to those children deemed “at-risk” in some way (e.g., Head Start), or to support families during times of crisis (e.g., the Lanham Act of 1941, with provisions for childcare services for mothers who entered the workforce during World War II) (Lombardi 2003).

In recent years, this history of targeted investments and limited government involvement in the lives and education of children under the age of six has begun to change. Over the past two decades, the need for more widespread ECE services increased as more women entered the workforce and needed care for their children during the workday. The increase in demand for services, coupled with the rapid pace of research on the benefits of ECE for young children’s learning and development, created a “perfect storm” of sorts among scholars and advocates in the field that led them to the conclusion that it was time to leverage these advances in knowledge and public will.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the field made a concerted effort to translate and promote the growing body of research on ECE to policymakers and business leaders. It was then that ECE began to emerge as a policy issue (Kagan &



In 2012, it was estimated that 69 percent of all children in the United States were enrolled in some type of formal early education experience.

Gomez 2014), and more broad-based investment in ECE began to take place. Advocacy and media campaigns by various stakeholders were created in an effort to garner more widespread investment in ECE. Pre-K Now, for instance, was a ten-year campaign (from 2001 to 2011), funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, designed to educate federal and state policymakers about the importance of investing in early education – specifically, in state and federally funded pre-K services.

Interest also grew on the part of state governments in investing in publicly funded preschool programs to meet the greater demand for childcare and early learning experiences. The percentage of children served by state-funded pre-K programs rose from 14 percent in 2002 to 29 percent in 2014 (Barnett et al. 2015). While still a modest increase, it represents many thousands of children gaining access to preschool programs. Enrollment in other types of ECE programs also grew. In 2012, for instance, it was estimated that a total of 69 percent of all children in the United States were enrolled in some type of formal early education experience (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2012). During this decade, major investments in ECE were also made internationally. Of forty-five countries surveyed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012), thirty-three provided access to ECE for over 50 percent of all their children.

ECE is still not universally embraced. Only a few states truly provide for universal pre-K, and no state invests in universal ECE services for infants and toddlers. But the zeitgeist has shifted among families, researchers, and policymakers about the importance of young children’s participation in education and care outside of the home. My family’s decision to enroll my nephew in ECE reflects this shift.

“HIGH-QUALITY ECE”: EVOLVING DEFINITIONS

My nephew had the opportunity to attend an ECE program accredited by NAEYC. Research has shown that children enrolled in high-quality programs tend to demonstrate better cognitive and social emotional outcomes in school than do their peers who did not have the benefit of a high-quality ECE program (Mashburn et al. 2008), and that they sustain those outcomes into the primary grades (Love et al. 2013). ECE experiences that are of high quality are what make the difference for young children over time, particularly for children with identified risk factors. But what constitutes “high quality” in an ECE program?

The definition of *high-quality* ECE long hinged on three baseline, structural factors: group size, adult-child ratios, and teacher qualifications (training and experience) (Vandell & Wolfe 2000). NIEER has embraced these three factors, along with seven other “benchmarks of quality” for the purpose of establishing a floor for quality in state-funded pre-K programs and ranking states according to the number of quality benchmarks reflected in policy (Barnett et al. 2015).

Our understanding of “quality” over the past decade has become more multifaceted, emphasizing the impor-

tance of teacher-child and peer interactions for young children’s learning, in addition to structural factors (LaParo et al. 2012). While additional research is needed, there is consensus in the field that quality is an essential ingredient to producing benefits for children’s learning and development (Camilli et al. 2010). What is less clear, however, is how to sustain those gains over time – something that I think about when considering my nephew’s learning trajectory over the next few years.

SUSTAINING GAINS: MOVING FROM PROGRAMS TO SYSTEMS

My nephew has continued to do well in school, but the research is not yet conclusive regarding to what extent the gains accorded to young children by high-quality ECE experiences can be sustained over time. Several studies of pre-K programs (Hillm, Gormley & Adelstein 2015; Lipsey et al. 2013; Puma et al. 2010) suggest that by grade 3, the benefits children gain by participating in quality ECE experiences fade out or converge with those of their peers that did not participate in those experiences. Other studies found that educational outcomes from pre-K programs were sustained through third grade (Muschkin, Ladd & Dodge 2015) and that the long-term effects of Head Start programs are manifest in children’s increased social and emotional competency (Love et al. 2013). Still other research findings suggest that quality acts as a “counterfactual condition,”² (p. 3) resulting in effects that differ between groups of children who attended a high-quality ECE program and those who did not (Feller et al. 2014, p. 3; also see Jenkins et al. 2015). Furthermore, dosage (i.e., the amount of time spent in an ECE program) appears to matter, as children enrolled in high-quality ECE programs

for between one to three years performed better over time than those enrolled in a program for less than one year (Nores & Barnett 2010).

Why Do ECE Benefits Tend to Fade by Third Grade?

There are multiple theories about why fade-out occurs, among them: high-quality elementary school experiences allow peers who did not attend ECE to catch up with their peers; the instructional quality in elementary school may be poor, and thus children have fewer chances to maintain what they have learned; and the instructional approach in elementary school is misaligned with that provided in ECE settings, triggering fade-out as a result of mismatch in content and instruction (Jenkins et al. 2015).

Research is being conducted to assess the validity of each of these theories, and hopefully, interventions can be designed to address potential challenges. Interventions in individual ECE programs and schools, however, are not the only areas in which work needs to take place to ensure that children – like my nephew – have the chance to capitalize on the knowledge, skills, and

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- 2 A counterfactual condition refers to a set of conditions in which a particular outcome results that is different from the outcome achieved when the conditions were similar but not exactly the same. Here, this refers to ECE settings, all of which can be said to be similar, but with varying differences in quality.
- 3 The “smart education systems” (SES) framework from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University proposes a similar approach (see <http://annenberginstitute.org/who-we-are/smart-education-systems>). An SES is defined as a partnership between a high-functioning school district and local civic and community organizations that coordinates educational supports and services wherever they occur – at school, at home, and in the community – to provide all children with equitable opportunities and high-quality learning experiences.

experiences they have developed during their time in ECE programs. Work also needs to occur at the system level.

Ensuring Access, Quality, Alignment, and Continuity: The Need for a Systemic Approach

The broad-based recognition that ECE can impact children’s learning and development has resulted in increased enrollments and a proliferation of publicly and privately funded ECE programs. It has also created a patchwork of policies and fragmented administrative structures at the federal, state, and local levels. This fragmented infrastructure means that access to high-quality ECE programs for children and families varies tremendously depending on the state – and sometimes even the community – in which they live (Barnett et al. 2015). Inequities leading to potential fade-out of ECE benefits remain pervasive for children in all fifty states.

The response from some scholars has been to shift the unit of analysis from *programs to systems*. An ECE system can be defined as programs and services for young children and families plus the policies and administrative infrastructure that support those programs (Kagan & Kauerz 2012).³ ECE systems typically have seven elements:

- regulations articulating minimum requirements for safety and health;
- professional development supports for ECE professionals;
- financing;
- accountability measures ensuring programs meet fiscal and quality benchmarks;
- outreach to and engagement with families and communities;
- standards for early learning and development, programming, and professional preparation; and

- a coordinated approach to governance to manage each of the other six elements (Kagan & Kauerz 2012; Kagan & Cohen 1996).

The primary goal of a functional ECE system is to create the mechanisms for children and families to have greater access to high-quality ECE programs.

Still in its infancy, research on ECE systems is an important area of inquiry in the field, with implications for policymaking. Notable innovations in research and practice focus on the development of a P–3 early learning system, in which there is alignment not only among the policies and programs that address children from birth to age five, but also from birth through third grade (Kagan & Kauerz 2012).⁴ Many challenges arise from a lack of alignment among these policies and programs. For example, in many states and localities, there are few transition supports for children as they move from pre-K to kindergarten. Transition supports should not only include systematic methods of communication between pre-K and kindergarten teachers, but also an alignment of the standards, curriculum, and assessments in pre-K to kindergarten to ensure a continuum of developmentally appropriate teaching and learning (Kagan & Tarrant 2010).⁵ When my nephew, for example, transitioned from a privately owned ECE program into a kindergarten program in the public school system, there were no formalized opportunities for teacher communication, and the curricula in kindergarten looked very different from that of his pre-K program.

In addition to research on the importance of systemic supports during transitions, research on governance suggests that creating a coordinated state-level approach to governance of ECE/P–3 systems gives states the authority to foster greater alignment across the birth-to-grade-3 continuum,

implement systemic interventions that increase program quality,⁶ focus on enhanced supports to the ECE workforce, and explore durable options for financing ECE programs (Kagan & Gomez 2015; Gomez 2015; Regenstein 2015; Goffin, Martella & Coffman 2011). Several states, including Maryland, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Washington have already implemented new approaches to governance aimed at aligning policies and infrastructure from birth through grade 3.

It is important to emphasize that a causal connection cannot be made between system development and improved child outcomes or sustained gains over time. However, research on systems indicates that system-level interventions increase the capacity of states to improve the supports to programs (Gomez 2015), which, in turn, could bolster the structural quality of those programs and, in some cases, the process quality as well (Tarrant & Huerta 2015). Furthermore, if a P–3 system focus is applied, state efforts can be directed to exploring alignment of early learning and development standards with K–12 standards, and the alignment of those standards with curriculum and assessments for children from birth through grade 3.

Research on systems underscore the need to address transitions in outreach and engagement systems, including systemic supports for

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- 4 I distinguish here between an ECE system, which typically focuses on birth through age 5, and a P–3 system, which focuses on birth through third grade.
- 5 For a description of a systemic approach led by a community advocacy organization in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that supports aligned transitions, see the article by Amy Fain and Diane Eason Contreras in this issue of *VUE*.
- 6 See the Quality Rating and Improvement System National Learning Network at <http://qrisnetwork.org/>.

vertical transitions (from ECE to public school settings, including pre-K to kindergarten); *horizontal* transitions (from home to school and from school to community settings); and *temporal* transitions (moving from activity to activity within the course of the day) (Kagan & Tarrant 2010). Another study that examined transitions from pre-K to kindergarten in Finland found that while many types of transition activities were beneficial to children, “co-operation over curricula and passing on written information about children between the preschool and the elementary school were the best predictors of the children’s skill” (Ahtola et al. 2011, p. 295).

These studies offer a prologue for thinking about the structure of a P–3 system that would increase access to high-quality ECE programs for all children and align those programs with the primary-level curriculum, instructional approaches, and assessments. This kind of high-quality, aligned P–3 system has the potential to support children in becoming healthy, socially competent lifelong learners.

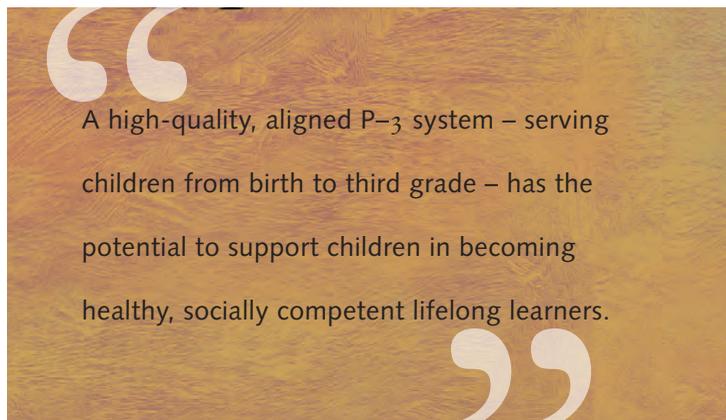
WHAT RESEARCH HAS YET TO ANSWER

I have highlighted here the areas of consensus in the research regarding the importance of high-quality ECE for supporting young children’s development and learning. Despite this consensus, there is still much to be explored. I have discussed the areas of intellectual and practical debate regarding the causes of fade-out and what can be done to mitigate fade-out effects, an important line of inquiry that must continue.

We have also yet to fully understand the influence of the ECE workforce on program quality and children’s learning, including the type and amount of professional development needed to

support high-quality teaching. Recently, the National Academies of Science released a report on the ECE workforce, which can serve as a basis for thinking about what types of investments in workforce supports are needed to contribute to program quality and boost children’s learning (Allen & Kelly 2015). The influence of family and community on children’s learning and the ability of these supportive factors to influence children’s learning over time is another area of investigation that shows promise.

The notion of ECE/P–3 systems as drivers of program quality is still fairly new; to date, no state has a fully implemented system (Kagan & Kauerz 2012). This makes research on ECE systems difficult to design and carry out. However, the past decade has done a great deal to advance the field’s thinking about a range of aspects of ECE; this work can and should be used as a springboard for continued research and policymaking.



MUCH PROGRESS, MUCH STILL TO DO

More and more people are aware of the importance of the first five years of a child's life for his or her overall development in the early years and long-term benefits in school and life. Research continues on the critical factors in high-quality ECE programs that result in significant benefits for young children's success in school and beyond. Federal, state, and local investments in programs and systems are affording many more children access to high-quality ECE.

However, many children still do not have access to good programs that are accessible and affordable for their families. My nephew had the benefit of a strong family support system and a high-quality ECE program to help him succeed in school. However, he lives in a state where there is no publicly funded pre-K, nor is there even full-day kindergarten. This means that there are countless children in similar situations who do not have the opportunity to participate in high-quality ECE experiences, and this may affect their learning and development negatively over the long term. And despite increased recognition of the importance of early childhood education, the emerging research on the systems needed to scale up ECE programs and align them with K–3 systems has yet to be implemented in any major way. This decade of recognition has brought about much progress and knowledge about the influence of ECE on children's lives. But we can and we must do better.

For more on the National Institute for Early Education Research, see <http://nieer.org/>.

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STATE POLICYMAKERS' ROLE IN SMOOTHING EARLY EDUCATION TRANSITIONS

Sara Mickelson

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State policymakers have made great strides toward understanding the early childhood years as a key piece of the education pipeline and recognizing that early education spans from birth to age eight – from creating and using learning and development standards for young children to investing in raising the quality of childcare and establishing pre-K programs. Making this connection has broader implications for the education system and requires a coherent link between preschool and public school as children move from various early learning programs into kindergarten classrooms. State policymakers can smooth this transition for children in four key areas.

Coordinating State Policymaking

Typically, multiple state agencies or offices have a role in governing early childhood education. Further, those who govern early education are disconnected from those who govern elementary education. As a result, state policy around early childhood can create a disconnected experience for both educators and families. States can facilitate better policy coordination between those responsible for various early childhood programs (such as Head Start, pre-K, and center- or home-based childcare) by either establishing avenues for agencies to meet and coordinate rules, regulations, and other policies or by establishing one central agency or office to oversee all aspects of early childhood education.

Aligning Pre-K and Kindergarten Experiences for Children

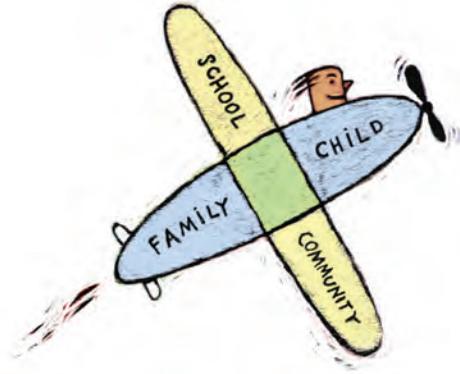
States that have established high-quality state pre-K programs have done so by explicitly defining what “high quality” is, including outlining the standards, curricula, and daily schedule for the program, and by supporting the implementation of the program through ongoing professional development and coaching for teachers and administrators. Children who attend these state pre-K programs have more positive daily experiences and, ultimately, positive outcomes. States can develop the same capacity in defining and supporting the implementation of high-quality kindergarten. To do this, states will need to understand how kindergarten is being implemented and identify districts or schools where the curriculum is not aligned with what is most appropriate for young children.

Increasing Collaboration between Early Learning Programs and Elementary Schools

When the experiences of children vary greatly in their preschool setting from what they experience within the kindergarten classroom, transitions will be more difficult. Greater coordination between administrators and teachers in early learning settings and those in kindergarten can help align children's daily experiences between the two settings. States can employ data systems to provide information on where children within districts typically attend early learning programs and encourage this coordination by requiring districts to create and implement plans to provide time for kindergarten and preschool teachers to meet and collaborate.

Recognizing Families as Educators

Engaging families helps them better support their children's growth and development. When early learning programs can support families in fostering learning at home, children will come to kindergarten ready to continue their learning. States can include family engagement as a part of requirements for all schools, beginning with early learning programs, and can make it a part of their standards, regulations, and other accountability systems for childcare centers, family childcare homes, and elementary schools.



PRE-K

Collaborating for Seamless Transitions from Early Childhood Education into Elementary Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma

AMY FAIN AND DIANE EASON CONTRERAS

Within the context of Oklahoma's universal pre-K system, Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) collaborates with schools to facilitate pre-K students' successful transitions to the early elementary grades.

Oklahoma implemented universal pre-K in 1998. It is one of only five states that has or is implementing universal preschool, and for several years has served more four-year-old children than any other state. Our organization, CAP Tulsa, occupies a unique position in this work. As one of the largest anti-poverty agencies in Oklahoma

– and the largest provider of early childhood programs serving children from birth to age five in Tulsa – our work complements public preschool programs by focusing on families in poverty. We believe that the most effective way to address poverty is to promote the healthy development of young children through high-quality early childhood education and wrap-around supports.

Amy Fain is manager of the Oklahoma Early Childhood Program and transitions at the Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) in Oklahoma. Diane Eason Contreras is innovation specialist at CAP Tulsa.

The authors would like to give a special recognition to Swanner Soderstrom, transition specialist, for her contributions to this article and the valuable work she does every day on behalf of children and families at CAP Tulsa.

We also believe that children’s first and most powerful teachers are their parents (or primary caregivers), and we know that children thrive when their families are also advancing. To this end, CAP has adopted a two-generation (2-Gen) service approach that encourages a high level of parental engagement in the early childhood education program at the same time it develops parents’ advocacy skills and offers them educational and employability programs.

CAP has operated Head Start since 1998, and Early Head Start since 2001. In 2008, CAP received additional slots through the Oklahoma Early Childhood Program – state funding matched by private dollars to operate services for children from birth through age three. Combined, CAP serves over 2,300 children under age five, including 1,960 children in full-day, year-round early learning services in thirteen centers (nine NAEYC-accredited),¹ which accounts for roughly 36 percent of the children under age five in licensed childcare facilities in Tulsa. CAP also serves 345 children under three in evidence-based home visiting programs. We partner with three area school districts and many of our schools are co-located with an elementary school to promote continuity of care and encourage parental involvement in the educational system.

Every year we transition more than 500 children from our four-year-old program to more than seventy elementary schools in the larger Tulsa area. This past December, almost 300 parents participated in transition events at the school. Last spring, 480 families discussed with their child’s teacher where their child would be attending elementary school. Our support for early education transitions is made possible by collaborating with parents, teachers, schools, and districts and is made sustainable through careful attention to data and evaluation to better understand the impact of our work and how it can be improved.

REFLECTIONS ON PARENT ADVOCACY FROM THE CAP CLASSROOM

Olivia Harper (2015), a CAP staff member and former CAP teacher, reflected on the importance of parents as advocates for their child’s success in pre-kindergarten and beyond:

Every morning and every afternoon, I had the luxury of catching up with parents during drop off and pick up. We shared stories of the school day and laughed about the silly songs and phrases my students had picked up from my classroom. “Literacy Nights” happened every quarter in room 8; my little, wise owls brought their whole family. Together, they took part in games and activities that made letter sounds and early reading fun. Families warmly welcomed me into their homes for our bi-annual home visits. During these visits we shared coffee, listened to the kids share their talents (singing none other than “Let it Go”), and spent time creating a personalized vision for their child’s pre-kindergarten year. . . .

Through teaching with this program, I have come to believe that long-term academic success is best fostered by the depth and quality of relationships I was able to build with parents, and how these parents have and will continue to encourage and campaign for their children throughout their academic experience. CAP Tulsa empowers their teachers to adopt innovative strategies that will equip parents to advocate for and engage in their child’s learning – a function that history has demonstrated to be essential. On graduation day, I felt the reality of my vision for the year come to life. I would not have seen these results without the daily engagement, partnership, and support that my parents so graciously offered.

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1 The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a nationally recognized organization that has set standards for quality early childhood education.

SUPPORT FOR TRANSITIONS: ESSENTIAL TO CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM SUCCESS

An important part of the CAP Tulsa program and the long-term success of our children is our focus on transitions. Our transition and curriculum (T&C) staff support the full gamut of transition points from admission into the early childhood program, year-to-year classroom changes, and entry into elementary school. The benefits to children who have access to successful transition practices from our school to their next learning environment include improved relationships with peers and adults, enhanced self-confidence, increased motivation, openness to new experiences, and adaptability to change.² T&C staff, grounded in Head Start standards, focus on child preparation, ongoing communication and coordination, parent involvement, continuity of care and services, and collaborations between schools and teachers.³

Parents as Advocates

Each December, we invite every family of a four-year-old child enrolled at CAP to come to our kindergarten transition event and talk to CAP staff about their child's options for kindergarten. We start by letting each family know their child's home school for kindergarten based on their address

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- 2 See *Terrific Transitions: Supporting Children's Transition to Kindergarten* from the SERVE: Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Head Start Association for a range of resources on the benefits and best practices for transitions at <http://center.serve.org/tt/transiti.html>.
- 3 For more information about Head Start standards, research, and promising practices for the Head Start and Early Head Start community, see *Harvard Family Research Project and Boston Children's Hospital's Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten* at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/transitions-kindergarten.pdf>.

and share what other options are available in the district, as well as important dates for tours, transfers, and enrollment. We also invite schools that serve kindergarten children in all areas of our city to come and talk to families about their programs. These options include a robust list of charter and magnet programs.

The key message for these events is that families have the right to make the best choice for their child's next learning environment and that parents are their child's best advocates. (For more on CAP's approach to supporting long-term parent advocacy skills, see the sidebar on page 17.) We give parents a list of their rights and school assessment data, encourage families to visit schools before they make a decision, and provide a list of important questions to ask while on school campuses, such as school discipline practices, before- and after-school activities and childcare, rest and break times, transportation, and drop-off policy. There is also space for parents to write and document their own questions. We make sure families know they have choices and help them navigate the process to enroll their child in the school they desire.

Each CAP school also plans a set of transition activities for children, which vary based on their proximity to a public school and the depth of their relationship with the administration and kindergarten staff. Plans routinely include tours of the school, visiting kindergarten classrooms, and participating in kindergarten activities such as eating lunch in the cafeteria and playing on the playground. If children are unable to visit a public school partner, activities may include pen-pal programs, sharing video messages, and on-site practice days with cafeteria simulations and practicing new drop-off and pick-up systems. Each school encourages parents to participate in all

the experiences available to their children both on and off campus.

At one school, for instance, children spent a full morning in kindergarten classrooms. Preschool children paired with a kindergarten child, sat together on the carpet for story time, worked together during a learning station, and walked in a line together in the hallway. With the longer visit, CAP children were also able to participate in music, physical education, and art activities.

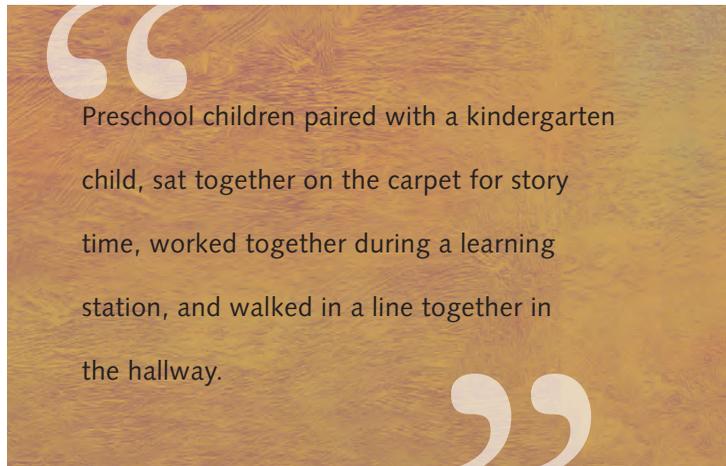
Individual teachers also have the opportunity to create transition activities within their classrooms. Other transition activities that support families include arranging opportunities for families to create social networks with other families going to the same schools, giving books to families to read with their children about going to kindergarten, and providing tips for successful transitions.

One of our most valuable practices is conducting individual meetings with families who have children who need additional support to connect them to other school services and community resources. For example, families with a child on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) receive an extra tip sheet with information about the IEP process and resources like the Oklahoma Parents Center,⁴ which provides individual assistance, workshops, referrals, and more to families of children with disabilities. CAP Disability Associates attend the winter transition events to share information with families and answer questions. Finally, individual meetings are scheduled with families in the spring to help with the transition of services under the IEP, reinforcing the information already received and addressing individual questions and concerns.

One alumni parent, whose child had received special services while attending

4 See <http://oklahomaparentscenter.org/>.

CAP, reported on her experiences at CAP and how it had prepared her family for kindergarten: “I learned a lot about the school system [while at CAP] – rights and what to expect. I knew the elementary school could provide better special education services for my child and I knew to advocate for my child.”



Collaboration with Elementary Schools Receiving CAP Children

Collaboration with the elementary schools that CAP children attend is crucial to successful transitions. But with more than seventy elementary schools in three school districts in and around Tulsa receiving children from CAP schools, these collaborations can be particularly challenging. T&C staff have traditionally focused on collaborations with schools that receive the most CAP alumni. For some years, identifying these schools was based on staff perceptions. More recently, the team has instituted data pulls from both the public schools and a parent survey to determine the schools most likely to receive CAP alumni. As we increasingly rely on data and track elementary attendance more closely, we observe slight changes in the list of top schools receiving CAP students every year.

At each CAP school, a team of staff is identified to lead transition efforts. Staff volunteer to participate based on their personal interest and dedication to the work. Once a list of schools is pinpointed, CAP staff reach out to the schools directly, collaborating with the most influential stakeholders in each school to establish a transition community. Traditionally the groups we have found to be most influential in the transition process are pre-K teachers, kindergarten teachers, community service coordinators or parent facilitators, and instructional coaches. These groups bring specialized knowledge of their systems, enhancing the understanding of each other's programs as well as the ability to build parental and community support. (For one instructional coach's description of her transition activities, see the sidebar.)

CAP STAFF REFLECTIONS ON TRANSITION EVENTS

Instructional coach Stacy Eglinton describes her work at CAP Tulsa and reflects on the importance of transition events for students and families:

I support teachers with planning and scheduling events throughout January to the end of the school year. These events include on-site events, in-classroom events, and field trip events that involve schools that a student may attend the following school year. I also work with our agency transition specialist to coordinate these events, and she supports myself, teachers, and families to plan, schedule, and facilitate these events, as well as act as a liaison between our agency and the public and charter schools.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to participate in different types of transition events, and the value in these experiences for the students is priceless. It not only creates excitement for the students and families to know that there will be something new to look forward to, but it also helps to turn the dialogue between teachers, parents, and students into something real and concrete for the students and families, especially when they are able to visit their future school, take a tour in a real kindergarten classroom, and possibly meet their future teacher, principal, gym teacher, playground auditorium, and the most anticipated – the cafeteria! Students love to grab a lunch tray and go through the lunch line and receive a hot lunch and eat it in the “big kid” cafeteria. Without the collaboration between teachers, school leadership, our transition specialist, and the public schools, these authentic experiences would not take place.

“Without the collaboration between teachers, school leadership, our transition specialist, and the public schools, these authentic kindergarten transition experiences would not take place.”

– Stacy Eglinton, CAP Tulsa instructional coach

Each school transition team meets several times throughout the year, allowing staff to work together to establish a transition plan. CAP Tulsa asks each team to identify past activities and practices, discuss what did and did not work, and outline activities and tasks for the current school year – listing dates, responsible individuals, possible barriers, and follow-up steps. Work is divided into four sections to ensure a holistic transition experience: family-school, school-school, child-school, and community-school. Examples of school-school activities include sharing assessment data between preschool and kindergarten teachers, developing early learning standards together, visiting each other’s classrooms, and learning about curriculum and routines. Parents are welcome to attend planning meetings, and the team shares finalized plans with families.⁵

Olga McKeown, an instructional coach at CAP Reed (one of CAP Tulsa’s early education sites), reported on her experience on the transition team with Lewis and Clark Elementary School, where she builds relationships with the elementary school staff and supports CAP staff on transition events such as library time, cafeteria day, and visits to a kindergarten classroom. She makes a special effort to encourage parent participation in the transition activities:

Transitions work is important because going to kindergarten is an important life event. Preschoolers can feel excited and a bit worried too. Families have similar feelings, knowing their child is going to the “big school.” Preschool teachers want the children in their classrooms to be ready for kindergarten, too. It is a process that is most successful when it is carefully planned out over the entire pre-kindergarten year.

This collaborative structure builds buy-in by allowing the transition teams to decide collectively what will work

best in their school. One transition team decided CAP teachers would complete a Literacy First checklist for outgoing preschoolers. This was a form specific to one district. Completing the checklist allowed CAP teachers to provide individualized information on their students to receiving teachers and helped kindergarten teachers with the number of assessments they complete at the beginning of the school year. This process works, in part, because the teachers decided as a team to implement this practice.

Supports for Teachers

CAP schools provide a range of supports and materials to teachers to support their work with partner schools, as well as with children and families. Meetings are held between teachers to discuss transition activities and kindergarten expectations. Books with related resources are supplied to the classrooms on going to kindergarten and how to make connections.⁶ A handout on summer transition tips and monthly handouts during the summer on transitions activities are provided to teachers and families each year. The Ready, Set, Go!⁷ video series includes a child, teacher, and family version and is provided to staff and families. Teachers are given survey results in which parents identify the transition activities they feel would be helpful for their child and where the child will likely attend school the following year.

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- 5 For additional ideas on best practices, rubrics, and action plans as well as many other resources using the four quadrants (child-school, family-school, school-school, and community-school) mentioned above, see Pennsylvania Key’s *Early Learning in Pennsylvania, Transition Into Formal Schooling Toolkit* at <http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=TransitionToolkit>.
- 6 Favorite books include *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson (<http://enemypie.com/blog1/>) and *My Brave Year of Firsts* and *It’s Hard to be Five* by Jamie Lee Curtis.
- 7 See <http://www.ready-set-go.org/>.

Collaboration with the District Central Office

CAP has a strong working relationship with the three districts in which our schools are located: Tulsa, Union, and Sand Springs. The Union Public Schools superintendent and the assistant to the superintendent for early childhood services currently sit on the CAP board, and the Sand Springs superintendent served on the board for a number of years. CAP and Sand Springs operate early childhood classrooms within the same building, with one leader overseeing both programs. They meet regularly to discuss school operations, transitions, curriculum, and how the two sides of the building are collaborating, as well as to review enrollment and attendance data and child outcomes. We partner with Union Public Schools on a teen parenting program and a workforce development program. The parenting program gives priority enrollment to the children of teen parents in our early childhood program located across the street from the high school, and the workforce development program, Career Connect,⁸ offers our early childhood classrooms for child development associate training for their high school students. Within and outside the partner meetings, data is shared between CAP and the districts. This includes both sides reporting on child outcomes as well as CAP requests on CAP alumni.

Support at the district level is important for transitions, but much of the work happens school-to-school and teacher-to-teacher, often resulting in bottom-up changes and improvements. School transition teams discuss how partners can support each other's efforts; identify barriers to children's transition success, such as dropping off and picking up at the front entrance or the need for school uniforms at the elementary school, and the resources needed to eliminate common barriers;

and collaborate on new initiatives. A spring 2016 project includes gathering CAP and public school teachers to improve record sharing to help prepare kindergarten teachers for their new students. Once determined and tested, a recommendation will be made to leadership to institutionalize the practice. We have also implemented some collaborative enrollment events at select locations, allowing families who are enrolling their school-aged children to complete enrollment applications for CAP at the same time.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA AND EVALUATION

The journey to a seamless transition for the children in our program is an ongoing process of research, implementation, and internal evaluation. T&C staff have worked hard in the past few years to implement internal controls and survey efforts to obtain feedback from parents on transition offerings. The team also regularly reviews data on children and families and analyzes how children are doing while they are with us and, to the extent possible, what those data can predict for future success and areas of need.

As discussed earlier, CAP also collaborates with district partners to collect and assess data on school performance and learning after students leave our program, as well as obtaining data from alumni families to identify areas for improvements in CAP services, curriculum, and practice. A common challenge in obtaining data is the mobility of CAP alumni, both within and across districts. At one partner district, Union Public, only 44 percent of children were still enrolled at Union in fifth grade, seven years after they began the CAP program.

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⁸ See <http://www.unionps.org/union-career-connect/>.

Program Improvement Efforts

T&C staff have worked with CAP's Innovation Lab⁹ on several survey projects to understand the effectiveness of their services. At the winter transition events mentioned earlier, families complete a survey to assess the effectiveness of the service. We also measure how empowered families feel to determine the best school for their child. Roughly half of the participants in the December 2014 sessions reported that the conversations had changed their thoughts on where they wanted their child to attend kindergarten, and 98 percent agreed or strongly agreed they had a better understanding of the enrollment and application process.

Teachers asked families about their plans for kindergarten during the last parent-teacher conferences of the 2014-2015 school year, which helped us identify the schools most likely to receive CAP alumni and target them for partnership meetings and transition events. Data on enrollment in charter and magnet programs, as well as evaluation information on many of the schools, allow us to examine the types of schools our children will be attending. We cross-referenced the data from the survey with various demographic fields and risk factors to identify vulnerable groups that are not fully participating or benefiting from the current transition activities so we can provide them with extra attention in the future. For example, children who enroll at age four were less likely to participate in transition events and less likely to apply for a different elementary school from their neighborhood school than children who entered CAP at age three or younger.

The Tulsa area has several charter and magnet elementary schools. Every year enrollment among CAP alumni in these programs increases as families learn

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9 See <http://captulsa.org/innovation-lab/>.

about the programs and more families apply for admission. Through alumni surveys, we have seen that families who attend charter or magnet programs are more likely to be involved in the school; however, we do not have sufficient data at this time to understand how children perform in charter and magnet programs. As we work towards continued improvements, CAP will be tracking how alumni children are doing in magnet and charter programs around the city.

In the prior year, transition and Innovation Lab staff worked together to obtain information from parents on their child's first weeks of kindergarten. Parents were asked how well children adjusted to different aspects of the new school, whether they felt they had the knowledge and resources to prepare for kindergarten, their participation in transition activities, and overall satisfaction with CAP transition services. The majority of families reported that children adjusted well during the first week and credited the CAP transition services with helping prepare their child and themselves for kindergarten. The families who reported significant challenges were outliers. Families who stated their child was sad and confused during the first week of school were also more likely to report some confusion about their knowledge and resources to prepare their child, participated in fewer transition activities, and reported slightly lower satisfaction with CAP's transition services. Although the survey did not allow for direct cause-and-effect analysis, the results underscore the importance of parents feeling empowered and knowledgeable and the importance of providing transition activities to families.

Understanding Child and Family Progress Data

In addition to better understanding and improving the transition experience, CAP Tulsa is keenly interested in the long-term success of children and families. We work with partners to regularly examine data on the success and needs of children and families after they leave our program.

Every three years, CAP Tulsa requests school data on CAP alumni from Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) and Union Public Schools, the two districts receiving the majority of our children. This data allows CAP to understand alumni performance on state tests, class grades, attendance, grade retention, and participation in English language learner programs, special education, and free and reduced-price lunch. CAP staff analyzes and reviews this information internally, as well as through partner meetings with the public school district, to identify areas for improvements, including the alignment of curriculum and services. For example, CAP Tulsa’s preschool program is focused on the whole child, while TPS’s preschool program is strongly focused on pre-literacy skills, resulting in higher literacy outcomes for TPS preschoolers at the start of kindergarten. We discuss this openly and want to examine if one approach has a stronger impact in the long run over the other. We also believe we can learn from TPS about how to better teach literacy, while TPS can learn from us about the importance of other domains like self-regulation, communication, and math.

To supplement what the agency learned from public school data, we conducted a five-year longitudinal survey from 2009 to 2013, recruiting 244 families in our three-year-old program and surveying them yearly through second grade. Just over 60 percent of families participated in the final year. The Alumni Impact Project (AIP) covered a broad range of indicators from health

to finances to school engagement that were repeated year to year. The agency’s Results Map, which outlines areas the organization believes are critical to children’s and families’ development and success, guided the questions in the survey. CAP staff used the findings to identify areas of need and inform changes to 2-Gen program offerings to families. This has included a financial capabilities offering, an English language program, and a focus on supporting alumni families in the agency’s new strategic plan.

A half-dozen additional open-ended questions were included each year based on the age of the children. Surveys included questions on how CAP could better prepare children for kindergarten; how parents, schools, and the community could better support children in elementary school; advice alumni parents would give to parents preparing for elementary school; and questions on reading progress every year. The information collected from families often aligned with the areas that T&C staff had identified for continued refinements.¹⁰

For instance, in Year 3 of the AIP, when cohort children were completing kindergarten, roughly a third of families provided suggestions to a question on how CAP could better prepare children for kindergarten. Literacy-related items were the most common answer. By cross-referencing data points, we found that AIP parents who reported not reading to their child at home were twice as likely to report their child was behind in first grade reading. CAP renewed efforts to encourage parents to read at home, to help non-English-speaking parents understand the importance of reading in any language, and to provide more books for children to build their home libraries.

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¹⁰ For summaries of the first four years and a full report for the final year (including the Results Map), visit: <http://captulsa.org/innovation-lab/research-initiatives/alumni-impact-project/>.

Another large-scale project initially led by CAP was the implementation of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) in Tulsa. Developed by McMaster University, EDI is a powerful predictor of later school success, examining kindergarteners' school readiness at the school and neighborhood levels in five domains: physical, social, emotional, literacy/math, and communication. Between 2011 and 2013, teachers completed checklists on 5,250 kindergartners in three school districts. The findings allow schools and community partners to identify areas of need and risk. Children who participated in a pre-K program (whether CAP or public school) were half as likely to be "at risk" than children who did not attend preschool, with the best results coming from children who also attended CAP's three-year-old program. These positive impacts of preschool hold in a regression controlling for the available observable characteristics such as race, income, gender, and language at home. Of course, it is possible that some of the difference is due to unmeasured factors such as the level of parent engagement with the child. T&C staff trained individual schools on how to use their school reports to identify areas where children are lagging behind for focus during the early years of elementary school. This information is also useful in conversations with community partners and funders to underscore the importance of early childhood programs and allocation of resources to address needs.¹¹

Physical health and well-being was an area in which CAP children were particularly low. Because of this finding, T&C staff advocated for improved playground equipment to provide challenges that are more physical and encourage more movement during free play. This included

11 For more information on the EDI and Tulsa's assessment efforts, see <http://risktoready.org>.

building tracks around playgrounds to encourage more use of tricycles, walking, and running.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: ENSURING LONG-TERM SUCCESS

T&C staff also take time to reflect on more global issues and on how to incorporate possible solutions into their current everyday practices. The challenge of achieving long-term success and the well-documented fade-out is of concern to everyone involved in early childhood education. There is no question that pre-K and three-year-old programs provide an important boost to children and that children who benefit from a pre-K program are more likely to be ready for school than their peers who do not. However, much like national trends, the significant gains children achieve while enrolled in CAP's early childhood program appear to diminish over time for many.

A Long-Term Strategy: Birth through Third Grade

CAP Tulsa is in the process of finalizing a ten-year strategic framework. Recognizing that early childhood education is essential but not enough, a particular focus of the strategic plan is to build and support a continuum of services for children from birth through third grade. While still focusing heavily on the time children are enrolled in our early childhood program, CAP seeks to elongate the time during which we can positively influence children, both directly and indirectly. These efforts may include a more robust tracking of child outcome data for alumni, maintaining contact and developing support programs for alumni children and families, increasing CAP's capacity to support and serve older children, and partnering

with other organizations that serve children in kindergarten and beyond, including charter schools and after-school and summer program providers.

How Can Districts Support This Work?

Districts play an important role in the successful transition of children to elementary school. This includes working in partnership with early childhood providers and choosing effective policies for incoming families, such as drop-off and pick-up policies, access to teachers, opportunities for families to engage with the school and their child's classroom, and cafeteria experiences, to name a few. At the district level, it is important to have open communication channels with major partners as well as a designated contact person for transition issues. Allowing for school-to-school and teacher-to-teacher collaborations is critical, as this is where much of the work takes place. Providing planning time to teachers and administrators for meetings and encouraging relationships at the local level is equally important. Finally, it is essential to have school administrators in place who understand the differences in child development for the younger ages and training that includes transitions.

Working Collectively toward Seamless Transitions

T&C staff seek to provide a seamless transition to the families at CAP Tulsa with special consideration for children's needs, family input, impact on district partners, and thoughtful examination of data. This work guides our efforts to ensure all children receive seamless transitions that empower parents and create effective school partnerships. We look forward to the journey of continuing growth and learning.

For more on CAP Tulsa, see <http://captulsa.org/>.

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Turning 5: Helping Families of Preschoolers with Disabilities Navigate the Transition to Kindergarten in New York City

RANDI LEVINE

The Turning 5 work group – a collaboration between Advocates for Children of New York, the New York City Department of Education, and other partner organizations – provides support to families of students with disabilities facing the challenges of transitioning to kindergarten.

Angelica¹ felt excitement and anxiety as she walked into P.S. 35 with her five-year-old son, Aiden, for the first time. It was the spring before Aiden would enter kindergarten, and Angelica was seeking to register him. She was pleased that she had received a letter from the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) placing Aiden at his zoned school, located just a few blocks from their apartment. Registration was

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1. All names have been changed.

Randi Levine is project director of early childhood education at Advocates for Children of New York.

going smoothly until the school asked to see Aiden’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), the legal plan that states the types of classes and services recommended for each student with a disability. Aiden’s kindergarten IEP stated that he needed a “12:1:1 special class” – a class with up to twelve students with disabilities, a special education teacher, and a paraprofessional. School staff stated that P.S. 35 did not have a 12:1:1 special class and could not register Aiden, directing Angelica to an enrollment office.

When Angelica went to the enrollment office, staff informed her that P.S. 35, Aiden’s assigned school, would provide the 12:1:1 special class recommended on Aiden’s IEP and directed Angelica back to P.S. 35. Angelica returned to P.S. 35, conveying the message from the enrollment office. However, school leadership explained that Aiden was the only incoming kindergarten student who needed a 12:1:1 special class, that the school’s kindergarten class had twenty-five students, and that Angelica needed to find a different school for Aiden. Angelica contacted several other schools, but they stated that Aiden had to attend his assigned school, P.S. 35.

Unfortunately, Aiden’s story is not unique. While the transition from preschool to kindergarten can be difficult to navigate for all families in New York City, it can be particularly onerous for families of students with disabilities.

In the fall of 2008, I joined the staff of Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) to focus on early childhood education. AFC’s mission is to promote access to the best education New York can provide for all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Each year, AFC helps thousands of individual families navigate the education system, empowers families and communities through know-your-rights workshops

and informational materials, and promotes systemic change to strengthen education. Working with families, I found that the transition from preschool to kindergarten, especially for students with disabilities, was a common area of concern and confusion.

Ensuring that students with disabilities get the proper supports is critical to their education. During the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 18 percent of students in NYC schools were classified as having a disability (NYC DOE 2015a), yet 38 percent of school suspensions involved students with disabilities (Khan 2015). On the third-through eighth-grade state tests, only 7 percent of NYC-district students with disabilities scored in the proficient range in reading, and only 11 percent scored proficiently in math (NYC DOE 2015b). These percentages do not include the scores of students with the most significant disabilities who attend specialized schools or are exempt from standardized testing. These outcomes highlight the need to provide appropriate academic and social-emotional support to students with disabilities from the time they enter kindergarten. To create a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten, it’s especially important for these students to begin school with these supports in place.

THE KINDERGARTEN IEP AND PLACEMENT PROCESSES

In New York City, the process of developing a child’s kindergarten IEP happens during the year before kindergarten. This process is commonly called Turning 5. Approximately 30,000 NYC children between the ages of three and five are classified as being preschoolers with disabilities (Fariña 2015). In the winter before these children enter kindergarten, each child’s case is assigned to an NYC DOE psychologist or social worker, either at a local school or at a

Committee on Special Education (CSE) district office. The NYC DOE representative reviews the child’s file and assesses whether any new evaluations or classroom observations are needed in order to have accurate information on the child’s strengths and needs. A parent can also request new evaluations.

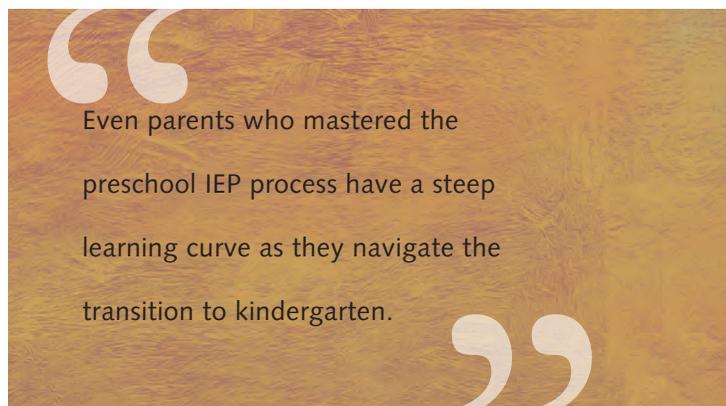
Following the completion of any new evaluations, an IEP meeting takes place to determine the child’s eligibility for kindergarten special education services and develop the child’s kindergarten IEP. The meeting participants include the NYC DOE representative, the child’s parent, and the child’s preschool teacher or provider, among others. Most kindergarten IEP meetings take place between January and May, and the IEPs are implemented the following September when children start kindergarten.

The kindergarten IEP process differs in several ways from the preschool IEP process. With different eligibility criteria and types of classes available, even parents who mastered the preschool IEP process have a steep learning curve as they navigate the transition to kindergarten.

While families of students with disabilities are engaged in the kindergarten IEP development process, they also must contend with a separate kindergarten *placement* process. (See the sidebar on page 30 for details about recent changes in kindergarten placement.) During the winter in the year before children enter kindergarten, families complete a central application form. Families can apply to up to twelve schools, ranked in order of their preference. Each school has a hierarchical list of admissions priorities, generally prioritizing students who live in the school’s zone and students who have siblings attending the school. Students are admitted to schools based on the list of admissions criteria and their families’ ranking. While the

application process allows families to have some choice, most students are admitted to their zoned school due to the admissions priorities. In the spring, families receive an offer for one school and are placed on waitlists for any schools ranked higher on their application. If none of the schools listed on the family’s application has a seat available for the child, the NYC DOE offers a different school with an available seat. For the 2015-2016 school year, 72 percent of families who applied to kindergarten received an offer for their top choice school, while 10 percent of families were not admitted to any of the schools listed on their application (Wall 2015). Families who wish to apply to charter schools must use a separate process. For gifted and talented kindergarten programs, there is yet another process.

Most students with disabilities attend the school that admits them through the centralized kindergarten admissions process – usually their zoned school. However, for children whose IEPs recommend certain “specialized programs” or “specialized schools,” the NYC DOE assigns a school and informs the family through a placement notice in June. Some of these “specialized programs” have their own application processes, making the system even more complicated.



Even parents who mastered the preschool IEP process have a steep learning curve as they navigate the transition to kindergarten.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES IN THE KINDERGARTEN PLACEMENT PROCESS

Before 2012, the NYC DOE's general kindergarten admissions process for children without disabilities did not apply to the majority of students with disabilities. While families of all incoming kindergarten students, including students with disabilities, had the right to apply to schools for kindergarten, the application process would secure a seat only in a school's general education class. Thus, students whose IEPs recommended integrated classes or special classes could not get a seat in such a class through the kindergarten admissions process. Rather, the NYC DOE placed these students in schools based on the type of class recommended on their IEPs. For example, the NYC DOE might assign twelve students whose IEPs recommended a twelve-student class to P.S.1. The NYC DOE would send a letter to parents in June stating their child's school placement.

However, for the 2012-2013 school year, the NYC DOE implemented a "special education reform" to centralize the kindergarten admissions process. As part of an effort to have more students with disabilities attend their local schools, the NYC DOE made the general kindergarten admissions process applicable to most students with disabilities. Incoming kindergarten students whose IEPs recommended a general education class, integrated class, or special class in a neighborhood school would get their placement through this centralized admissions process.

At that time, parents applied to kindergarten by completing applications at individual schools during the winter prior to kindergarten entry. Many families, especially those who wanted to enroll their child in their zoned school, appreciated the simplicity of this process. They went across the street to the local school, completed an application, and were set for September. However, AFC received calls from other parents who were having

difficulty with the process. While the NYC DOE required schools to accept applications from all families, we heard about schools sending away families because they lived outside the school's zone. We heard from parents who took off a day from work to apply to a school, but arrived at the school to find a line around the block, and after standing in line for several hours, were asked to return on a different day. We even heard about a security guard sending away a family because the child "looked too young" for kindergarten. More commonly, we heard from parents of students with disabilities about schools that said they could not apply because their child had an IEP.

For the 2014-2015 school year, the NYC DOE announced that it would begin operating a centralized kindergarten admissions process in which parents could apply to multiple schools using a single application form that they would submit online, over the phone, or at an enrollment office during the winter in the year before children enter kindergarten. The NYC DOE touted the new system as a "transformative" enrollment process that would simplify kindergarten admissions for families by allowing them to apply online from the comfort of their homes (NYC DOE 2013). AFC was pleased that this system would allow families of students with disabilities to apply to schools for kindergarten without the hurdles some families had encountered at individual schools. This centralized process continues to be in place.

HELPING FAMILIES UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS: THE TURNING 5 WORK GROUP

Around five years ago, the ARISE Coalition,² which is led by AFC and focuses on strengthening education for students with disabilities in New York City, asked the NYC DOE to meet with us about the transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with disabilities. A group came together including NYC DOE staff, advocates, and representatives from preschool special education programs and from Early Childhood Direction Centers, which provide resources and referrals to families of young children with delays or disabilities. We formed the “Turning 5” work group, which for the past five years has met with the NYC DOE monthly to discuss ways of improving the transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with disabilities. The NYC DOE and Turning 5 work group members have valued this partnership. The NYC DOE sends a group of staff members to each meeting and has noted the importance of hearing from the Turning 5 work group about the experiences of families on the ground.

One of the main goals of the Turning 5 work group is to help families navigate the transition process for preschoolers with disabilities entering kindergarten. The calls that AFC and other organizations had received before forming the work group demonstrated that parents of preschoolers with disabilities were eager for information on the process and often had many questions. The work group and the NYC DOE have worked to provide information to families through presentations and written materials.

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2 For more information, see <http://www.arisecoalition.org>.

Orientation Meetings and Presentations

Each year, in the late fall, the NYC DOE holds a series of kindergarten orientation meetings to provide information about the transition from preschool to kindergarten for families of students with disabilities. Over the years, the Turning 5 work group has collaborated with the NYC DOE to strengthen these presentations with the goal of providing clear, accurate information about the topics that parents want to have addressed. Interpreters are available at each meeting for families who speak languages other than English. At the request of the Turning 5 work group, the NYC DOE began providing a second round of meetings in February, a few months after the first round, so that families whose children were referred for special education evaluations later in the year before kindergarten or who were not aware of the first round of meetings could attend. Last year, the NYC DOE videotaped a meeting and is working to upload portions of the presentation to its website so that parents can watch online if they are unable to attend.

In addition, each year, AFC and other organizations conduct other workshops for families in English and Spanish focused on the transition to kindergarten for students with disabilities. Many of our workshops take place at preschool special education programs, where we can speak with smaller groups of families and tailor the workshops to their needs. For example, at a preschool special education program that specializes in serving children with autism, we spend more time discussing the programs that may be appropriate for those students.

“The Turning 5 work group collaborated with the NYC DOE to add key information that had been missing from the orientation guide for families of incoming kindergarten students with disabilities.”

Written Materials

The Turning 5 work group helped the NYC DOE create and disseminate informational materials for families of incoming kindergarten students with disabilities, including an orientation packet mailed to parents in the fall of the year before their children enter kindergarten and a comprehensive kindergarten orientation guide. The Turning 5 work group collaborated with the NYC DOE to add key information to the orientation guide that had been missing, including information about the placement process, key distinctions between preschool and kindergarten special education, how to get help from the NYC DOE, and contact information for organizations that parents can call with questions or concerns. The NYC DOE also added forms that parents can pull out of the guide to request medical accommodations.

In addition to the most common types of classes, the NYC DOE offers several specialized programs focused on serving particular populations of students. Often, we heard that parents did not know about these programs or did not have sufficient information about the eligibility criteria and the application process. The Turning 5 work group worked with the NYC DOE to incorporate information about

several specialized programs serving particular populations of students – such as an “ASD Nest” program that places high-performing students on the autism spectrum in reduced-size integrated classes – into the kindergarten orientation materials and meetings. The NYC DOE has now created family resource guides so that parents are better informed about the eligibility criteria and application processes for these programs.

In collaboration with the Turning 5 work group, the NYC DOE created a “Turning 5” website that includes all of these written materials, information from orientation meetings, and relevant forms.³ While not all families have access to the Internet, preschool providers can help families access these documents.

In addition to these materials tailored to preschoolers with disabilities, the Turning 5 work group encouraged the NYC DOE to ensure that general publications about the kindergarten application process included information about programs for students with disabilities. For example, the NYC DOE’s Kindergarten Directories now include information about which schools are accessible to students with mobility needs.

To supplement the NYC DOE’s materials, AFC also developed a comprehensive *Turning 5 Guide*,⁴ available in English and Spanish. This guide, updated annually, presents questions and answers about the process based on the questions we receive most frequently from parents. We have heard from families that the guide has helped them understand the process and that they have used the

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³ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/kindergartenspecialeducation>.

⁴ See http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/turning_5_guide.pdf?pt=1.

guide at kindergarten IEP meetings to advocate for services and to help resolve problems. AFC also developed a kindergarten admissions guide⁵ focused on the placement process for all students transitioning to kindergarten.

Despite these positive changes, the Turning 5 process continues to be complicated for families, and the process of improving and refining the written materials and presentations is ongoing. Over the years, however, these collaborative efforts have had an impact in helping families understand the transition process. One Spanish-speaking parent of a preschool student with a disability stated that a recent Turning 5 workshop “oriented me about how to apply to kindergarten because I was lacking this information.” Another parent explained how she used examples from the NYC DOE kindergarten materials to advocate successfully for the services her son needed at his kindergarten IEP meeting.

COMMUNICATING WITH PRESCHOOL PROVIDERS

Most NYC preschoolers with disabilities receive their special education services through private agencies that have contracts with the NYC DOE. For example, a Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) from a private agency may work with a preschooler for several hours per week in a prekindergarten class. Preschoolers with more significant needs may attend a preschool special education class run by a private community-based organization.

The Turning 5 work group emphasized to the NYC DOE the importance of partnering with the preschool special education providers during the transition to kindergarten. Since these providers work with preschoolers everyday and have regular communication with families, they serve as a key link between the NYC DOE and families. The Turning 5 work group

includes a representative from an association of preschool special education providers, bringing an important perspective to this work.

At the Turning 5 work group’s urging, the NYC DOE began holding annual meetings on the transition to kindergarten for the preschool special education providers. In addition, the NYC DOE began providing electronic updates to the preschool providers about the transition process as well as about kindergarten options such as gifted and talented programs. We explained that when the DOE sent a mailing to families, they also needed to give a copy to the preschool providers who could ensure families received it and could answer families’ questions.

With the recent expansion of prekindergarten in NYC,⁶ the Turning 5 work group and NYC DOE have been discussing how to ensure that these new pre-K programs are also partners in this process, since many preschoolers with disabilities attend them. We want to ensure that the NYC DOE is educating pre-K programs about the Turning 5 process and, at a minimum, providing them with the same information it is giving to preschool special education programs. This information is important so that pre-K programs can help families navigate the Turning 5 process and that pre-K teachers can be knowledgeable participants at kindergarten IEP meetings. More work needs to be done to ensure that preschool providers are truly valued as partners in this process, but increased communication has been an important step forward.

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5 See http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/kindergarten_admissions_guide.pdf.

6 Mayor de Blasio identified universal pre-K as a cornerstone of his education agenda, and in the fall of 2015, began offering a seat in a free, full-day pre-K program to every four-year-old child across the city (see Samuels 2015).

GUIDANCE FOR NYC DOE

In addition to our work with families and preschool providers, the Turning 5 work group has worked with the NYC DOE to identify operational challenges and areas in which guidance was needed for the hundreds of NYC DOE psychologists and social workers whose responsibilities include leading the kindergarten IEP development process for individual children. Through written protocols and webinars, the NYC DOE has provided guidance to these staff members on various aspects of the transition process.

The Turning 5 work group also helped the NYC DOE identify the need to hire a full-time staff member to focus on the Turning 5 process, a position that has made a difference in improving the transition. Since this is the first year that pre-K is available to every four-year-old child in New York City, we are encouraging the NYC DOE to prepare for a possible increase in the number of children identified prior to kindergarten as needing special education services as they assign cases and plan for this year's Turning 5 process.

HELPING FAMILIES RESOLVE PROBLEMS WITH THE TRANSITION

In the midst of the Turning 5 work group's partnership with the NYC DOE, the NYC DOE made a major change to the placement process. As discussed above, for the 2012-2013 school year, the NYC DOE began assigning most students with disabilities to schools based on the general kindergarten application process, which does not take into account the type of class recommended on a student's kindergarten IEP. While a worthy goal of this change was to reduce segregation of students with disabilities and give more students with

disabilities access to their local schools, the new process resulted in the assignment of kindergarten students with disabilities to schools that did not have the type of classes recommended by their kindergarten IEPs. The NYC DOE told families that these schools would need to create the types of classes recommended on the IEPs of any assigned students, but in reality, if P.S. 1 had only one student recommended for a twelve-student special education class, it would not have the funding to open such a class. Nor would it be appropriate to have a class with one teacher, one paraprofessional, and *one student*.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts to help families understand the transition process, this placement process continues to be a major source of confusion and frustration for families. When families have asked what happens when the assigned school does not have the class mandated by the student's IEP, the NYC DOE has answered that the school is expected to serve the student, but has been reluctant to provide more specific information.

The Turning 5 work group encouraged the NYC DOE to develop and publicize a plan for how it would respond when schools could not implement the IEPs of students admitted through the kindergarten admissions process. The NYC DOE took several steps, including developing a form that schools could complete to request additional resources to implement IEPs. However, parents have continued to complain to AFC that the NYC DOE has not given them satisfactory answers.

As AFC received more calls about incoming kindergarten students with disabilities whose assigned schools did not have the classes they needed, we asked the NYC DOE, at a minimum, to assign a point person who could help families experiencing this problem. In response, the NYC DOE

created a central e-mail address (turning5@schools.nyc.gov) for families and preschools to use when there is a problem with the transition process that they cannot resolve at the school level. AFC also created an e-mail address (kindergarten@afcnyc.org) that families and preschools could copy on e-mails to the NYC DOE so that AFC could monitor the problems and the NYC DOE's response and intervene to assist a family when necessary. For families who do not have e-mail access, the NYC DOE also advertised a special education hotline phone number. Families of students with disabilities can request an administrative hearing if the NYC DOE assigns a school that cannot implement the child's IEP or if they have another concern with their child's IEP or placement. However, the administrative hearing process is burdensome – for families and for the NYC DOE – and may create an adversarial relationship between the family and the school that the child may attend.

Over the past few years, parents and preschools have copied AFC on more than one hundred e-mails to the NYC DOE's Turning 5 inbox. In addition to reporting problems of schools that cannot implement kindergarten IEPs, parents have reported problems such as not being invited to their children's IEP meetings, inadequate services recommended for kindergarten, and children recommended for classes that are more segregated than necessary.

The central e-mail address and hotline have served two important functions. First, they have provided families with access to the NYC DOE to resolve individual problems. Second, they have increased the NYC DOE's awareness of the problems that families face in the transition, allowing the NYC DOE to identify systemic barriers and consider systemic solutions.

WORKING TOWARD SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS FOR ALL

Angelica was very frustrated when P.S. 35 turned her away from enrolling her son, Aiden. She wondered why the NYC DOE would assign Aiden to a school that did not have the class he needed. However, because she had gone to a kindergarten orientation meeting and had materials from the NYC DOE and AFC, she knew that she could e-mail the NYC DOE's Turning 5 inbox and copy AFC. With the help of Aiden's preschool, Angelica sent an e-mail reporting this problem. Upon investigation, the NYC DOE discovered that other children assigned to P.S. 35 also needed a 12:1:1 special class and worked with P.S. 35 to open the class for September.

Not every case has ended with this type of resolution. In other cases, the NYC DOE has offered a new school placement, or the parent and school have been able to agree on changes to the IEP with a different set of appropriate services for the child. Unfortunately, in some cases, AFC gets calls about children who have spent half the year in the wrong kindergarten setting and have already fallen behind.

Substantial work remains to avoid problems in the transition like the one faced by Angelica and Aiden. The Turning 5 work group will continue working with the NYC DOE to strengthen the Turning 5 process to help families of preschoolers with disabilities navigate the transition process with the goal of children experiencing a seamless transition to kindergarten.

For more on Advocates for Children of New York, see <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org>.

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Expanding Transition: Redefining School Readiness in Response to Toxic Stress

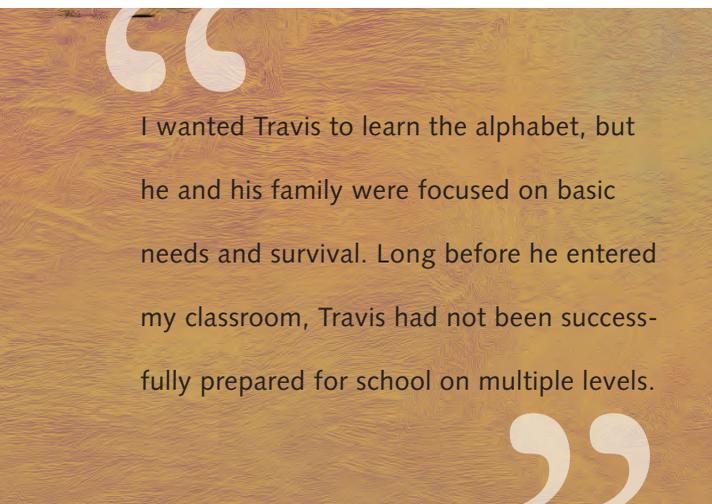
MAUREEN KAY SIGLER

Early childhood interventions such as home-visiting and kindergarten preparation programs can mitigate the effects of toxic stress and equip children with the skills and support they need for a successful transition into school.

Travis walked into my third grade classroom in Washington, D.C., not knowing how to read, do basic addition or subtraction, or even write his last name. It was March of 2001, and I was his third teacher that school year. Travis, his mother, and his siblings were chronically homeless, moving from one shelter or housing project to the next. As his

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teacher, I simply did not know where to start with Travis academically. How could I ask him to read the novel *Because of Winn Dixie*, when he had never been taught all the letters in the alphabet? How could I expect him to know multiplication, when he had never had the opportunity to learn addition?



I wanted Travis to learn the alphabet, but he and his family were focused on basic needs and survival. Long before he entered my classroom, Travis had not been successfully prepared for school on multiple levels.

A few months after Travis joined my classroom, I walked him home from school. I don't remember now why I walked him home, but I remember I wanted to speak to his mother and I had been unable to reach her. Travis lived about five blocks from school, and as we arrived at his apartment, he hesitated. His sisters had gone ahead of us and run into the backyard. It was then that Travis told me that he, his mother, and his two sisters were living in their car, which was parked in the backyard of the apartment building. No one was in the car that afternoon, so I took the children back to school and with school administrators called the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). That night at the school, Travis' mother gave Travis and his siblings up to CFSA. She stood before us sobbing and told us over and over about how she simply could not keep them – she did not have the

support or resources to provide the life she wanted for them. While I wanted Travis to learn the alphabet, he and his family were focused on basic needs and survival. What I realize now is that long before he entered my classroom, Travis had not been successfully prepared for school on multiple levels.

Transition is typically defined as the time in which we move children from pre-K into the K–12 education system. Put more concretely, transition is often about K–12 school readiness. One aspect of school readiness is to prepare children academically for kindergarten, but it should also include meeting a child's basic needs from a very early age. When these basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, and safety – are met, a child can develop healthy social, emotional, and cognitive skills that are also essential to school readiness, allowing children to be prepared to acquire the academic skills.

Early childhood interventions, including home-visiting and kindergarten prep programs, can equip children like Travis with both the academic skills and the basic needs that set children up for a successful transition into school. The cost of not preparing children in both ways is too high. We know that a child like Travis – who cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade and who lives in poverty – is thirteen times less likely to graduate on time or even graduate at all compared to his proficiently reading peers. We also know that not graduating from high school and living in poverty puts a person at great risk for worse life outcomes than their peers who do graduate (Fiestler 2010). We must think more broadly about transition and take a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to school readiness.

TOXIC STRESS AND ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

As a young educator, I did not understand that Travis was dealing with profound toxic stress. Toxic stress is generally defined as “strong, frequent, and/or prolonged activation of the body’s stress-response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of adult support” (Shonkoff, Boyce & McEwen 2009). Chronic homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, neglect, interpersonal violence, and economic insecurity are all examples of the kind of traumatic, adverse experiences that produce toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child 2012). The impact of these experiences on children has profound, far-reaching effects on healthy development. In fact, developmental research reveals that in the context of toxically stressful environments, children cannot develop healthy neural connections that are vital for learning (Klebanov & Travis 2015).

Given this data, our approach to early education transitions for children who experience toxic stress must be different from that of their peers who do not. It demands that interventions that mitigate toxic stress happen as early as possible in those children’s lives, so that any barriers to school readiness are removed long before they get to kindergarten. Fortunately, there are effective interventions that can do just that.

HOME VISITS AS INTERVENTIONS THAT MITIGATE TOXIC STRESS

I previously directed two early childhood home-visiting programs at Meeting Street in Providence, Rhode Island – Early Head Start (EHS) and Healthy Families America (HFA) – both of which serve families living in poverty. Both programs work with families to build a solid foundation for their children so that they are set up for success in school and life.

EHS, a part of the larger national Head Start program, is run by the federal Administration for Children and Families. It was born out of the civil rights movement fifty years ago with the goal to close the enormous gap between children who live in poverty and their peers who do not. Its main focus areas are promoting school readiness and providing families with wraparound social service support to remove barriers that might negatively impact a child’s transition into school.

HFA is a program run by Prevent Child Abuse America. It is an evidence-based child-abuse prevention program for low-income families. HFA uses a trauma-informed approach to working with families that focuses on supporting healthy bonding and attachment between parents and children. This healthy bonding and attachment in turn supports healthy brain development. As with EHS, HFA also focuses on wraparound social service support and school readiness.

These programs allow their staff members the privilege of working with families in their home environments. When a home visitor walks into a family’s home, she gets to experience their strengths and challenges in an authentic and intimate way. The opportunity to clearly observe what each child and family may need to help them thrive is an enormous advantage to our work. The home context allows us to clearly see the toxic stressors and barriers to healthy development that exist for each child and family as well as the strengths that each family possesses. As a result, home visitors are well positioned to help families access the social service support they may need and can more easily build on the strengths of the family.

Working with families in their home setting allows staff to uncover their needs and strengths and provide support and encouragement in whatever way necessary. Many of the

families we worked with lived in homes with extended, intergenerational family members; home visitors worked on building on that strength and including the whole family in the program. For families facing eviction, home visitors were able to help them know their rights as tenants and work toward a plan to help them stay in their home. A majority of our families struggled with mental health issues, and we provided them with mental health consultation as well as referrals to ongoing counseling services. Several women we worked with were in relationships where they experienced intimate partner violence; home visitors worked to create safety

plans, and in many cases worked to get them into domestic violence shelters or other resources. For one teen mother who dropped out of high school, her home visitor helped her get into a GED program and supported her through staying on track. By providing needed supports, these programs help families deal with toxic stressors that can impede their ability to give their child what they need for healthy development. This is the work of transition; it is at the core of whether or not a child is set up to succeed in school.

FINDINGS ON OLNEYVILLE'S HOME-VISITING PROGRAMS FROM BROWN'S URBAN EDUCATION POLICY PROGRAM

Adapted with permission from Lovitz, M., C. Ross, and M. Costa, "Navigating the Many Dimensions of School Readiness: Supporting Parents, Families, and Children through Early Childhood and the Transition into School," Unpublished research report, Urban Education Policy graduate program, Brown University, 2015.

Connecting to Resources

In interviews and focus groups with HFA and EHS staff and parents, connecting families to community resources was seen as a critical component of the family support workers' job. For example, parents were connected through the home visiting program to formal educational pathways like GED programs or CNA courses. During a home visit observed by two research team members, the family support worker provided the mother with many different resources such as a budgeting sheet, information about savings programs, and information about GED programs. These resources were provided based on previous interactions and requests for services, showing how easily the transfer of knowledge about resources can be facilitated within a trusting relationship.

Other examples of connections to resources mentioned by parents and staff members include mental health services, financial assistance, childcare, and diapers or formula for babies. One EHS parent said:

My home visitor helps me a lot with any resources I could need. . . . Anything I need for [my child], like if I'm lacking on anything I could possibly need, I could just tell her. She's helped me with food banks, furniture, anything, which I didn't think she would possibly know about, but she does.

Parent Education

Focus groups and interviews with staff and parents also highlighted the program's goal of helping parents to increase their knowledge of child development. In a focus group, one home visitor explained the parent education component in this way:

It's not so much teaching them how to be parents but reinforcing a lot of things that they're already doing and hopefully them learning things along the way.

Research shows that these interventions succeed on several levels. A national evaluation of EHS found that:

Three-year-old Early Head Start children performed significantly better on a range of measures of cognitive, language, and social-emotional development than a randomly assigned control group. In addition, their parents scored significantly higher than control group parents on many aspects of the home environment and parenting behavior. Furthermore, Early Head Start programs had impacts on parents' progress toward self-sufficiency. (Administration for Children and Families 2006)

According to an HFA impact brief, children who participated in HFA were more likely to be in gifted programs and less likely to receive special education services or repeat first grade than their peers who did not take part in HFA; these participants also exhibited positive learning behaviors such as following oral directions and playing cooperatively upon entering school (Healthy Families America n.d.). This data give strong support to the argument that children must have early access to preventative programs like EHS and HFA in order to transition successfully into school.

Another staff member explained that in helping parents understand their role in their child's school readiness, they

stress the fact that they are their child's first teacher; their child is not going to go to school to learn everything. Parents are going to lay that foundation at home.

A parent shared that through EHS she learned that she should be speaking out loud to her children and reading books to them to prepare them for school. She explained that her two youngest children benefited from this knowledge and are ready to learn in ways that her oldest child, whom she had before she learned these techniques, was not.

Home visiting was an opportunity for parents to learn about activities that promote development and why they work. For example, the home visitor we observed demonstrated how exploratory play (e.g., building a fort or going outside) provided the opportunity for language exposure and connected games to specific cognitive skills (e.g., sorting, categorizing, comparing, organizing, matching, recognizing shapes). Staff see

an important part of their role as making sure parents know about developmentally appropriate behaviors and feel equipped to notice possible delays. One staff member noted:

Helping parents to detect delays or potential delays and then providing activities to assist or referrals out to early intervention, . . . ongoing assessment around the child's development and also their social-emotional development . . . supports the child in continued growth.

Parents' gaining an understanding of developmental language itself is also an asset. One EHS staff member explained that

just being able to talk and use the language of learning and child development when you are interacting with a teacher or a school official or the school department – I think is a real advantage for families.

CREATING A PATH OF COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES TO SUPPORT EARLY EDUCATION TRANSITIONS

President Obama's 2013 plan to improve access to high-quality early childhood education has brought a renewed focus and increased funding opportunities to the field,¹ which opens up opportunities for the education world to think about transition into K-12 differently than it has in the past. Initiatives that help connect early preventative services to high-quality kindergarten preparation programs build on the vision set out by President Obama.

The development of programs that create a path of educational and social service supports for children from as early as their prenatal development until their transition into kindergarten are exciting opportunities to provide a comprehensive approach to transition and school readiness. The supports families receive and skills they develop from the previously mentioned home-visiting programs are an integral part of successful transition into the primary grades and beyond. A complement to these home-visiting programs are kindergarten preparatory (K-prep) programs, which focus on the academic and behavioral skills needed for school readiness. (In the next section, I will discuss in greater detail the K-prep summer program that was a key part of Meeting Street's Olneyville Education initiative, which I directed.)

Continuing services for children when they age out of the home-visiting programs in which they are enrolled is key. In Rhode Island, Early Head Start and Healthy Families America funding ends at ages three and four, respective-

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¹ See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/13/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-plan-early-education-all-americans>.

ly. At the end of each program, families should have the option to transition children into some kind of non-parental formal education setting such as Head Start, preschool, pre-K, or a licensed childcare program. However, space is limited in these programs and there is no guarantee that a child will transition successfully into one. In Rhode Island in 2014, Head Start served only 34 percent of the children who were income-eligible, and there was an 11 percent reduction in open preschool seats as well as a 4 percent reduction in the enrollment capacity of licensed childcare centers (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT 2015).

Children who age out of EHS and/or HFA and are not transitioned into a high-quality early childhood program are at significant risk of losing the gains made while in the programs. Toxic stress and poverty do not suddenly end at age three, four, or five. For families who age out of home visiting, it is imperative that services do not stop but that they have opportunities to transition into another high-quality early childcare program to mitigate toxic stress and sustain gains achieved through the home-visiting programs.

KINDERGARTEN PREP IN OLNEYVILLE

As one of the poorest neighborhoods in Providence, Olneyville is a prime place for this work mitigating the impact of toxic stress. According to the Providence Plan (2012), 37 percent of neighborhood residents live in poverty, and the median income is \$31,000 per year. Residents also have a low level of educational attainment, with 43 percent of those age twenty-five or older without a high school diploma and only 13 percent earning a bachelor's degree.

Olneyville has a high concentration of traditionally underserved populations.

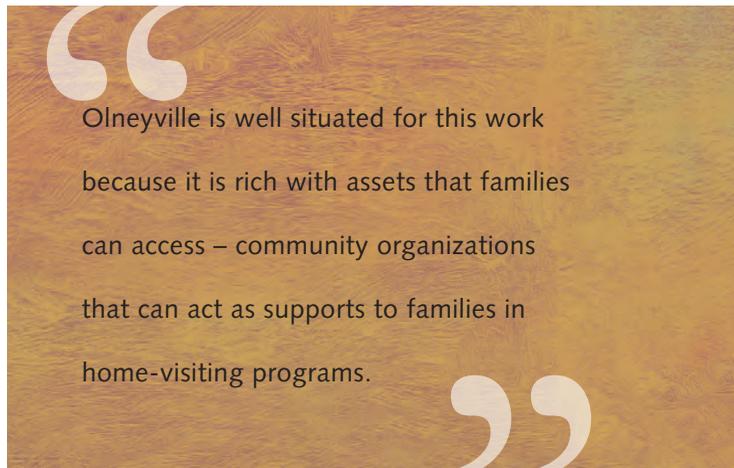
Community profile data collected by the Providence Plan (2012) indicates that the neighborhood is 59 percent Hispanic, 19 percent non-Hispanic White, 15 percent Black, and 4 percent Asian; 63 percent of residents age five and over speak Spanish at home.

In addition, Olneyville is well situated for this work because it is rich with assets that families can access. Olneyville houses the Scalibrini Center – a community center that has English classes, citizenship classes, and a WIC office – as well as the Boys and Girls Club, D’Abate Community Elementary School, the Olneyville Housing Collaborative, the Manton Avenue Project, and United Way. All of these entities support the healthy development of the neighborhood and can act as supports to the families and children enrolled in home-visiting programs.

The Olneyville Education K-prep program is an intensive, five-week program that – in summer 2015 – served fifty-two children in three classrooms, one of which was a Spanish bilingual classroom. The bilingual classroom was held at the Manton Avenue Housing Development – Section 8 housing where many of the families live – and the other two classes were held at the D’Abate Community School, a Providence public school that has deep roots in the Olneyville community.

The goal of this summer K-prep was to equip students with the academic and behavioral skills that will help them with their transition into kindergarten. The classrooms were purposefully small in size and staffed with a certified teacher and teaching assistant to ensure high-quality instruction and a low student-to-teacher ratio. The curriculum focused on basic academic skills including identification of numbers, letters, shapes, and colors, as well as students learning to write their own

name. The curriculum also focused on the behavioral aspects of attending school such as following directions, cooperating with classmates, and following a structured routine.



A small number of students did attend Head Start or were enrolled in Early Head Start, but for most of the students, the K-prep program was their first experience in a classroom setting, having spent their first five years in informal or unlicensed childcare settings. The range of student’s skills upon entering the K-prep program varied, but many children had large gaps in basic academic skills: holding a pencil, identifying letters, knowing shapes and colors, and being able to write their name. Other children had some of these basic skills, but needed a lot of behavioral support. Teachers focused on differentiating their instruction for this range of skills. Over the course of the summer, the growth of the students was staggering. Every single child made gains in all areas as measured from the initial assessments to the end assessment.

One particular child had never been in a formal childcare setting before coming to our program, having been taken care of by family for all of his life. When he arrived, he could only

identify a few letters, could not hold his pencil properly, or spell his name. He also struggled with typical school routines and cooperative learning settings. By the end of the program, he was able to identify many more letters, hold his pencil, and spell his name. He also made significant progress in learning how to successfully participate in a formal school setting. Another child, whose family was struggling with insecure housing, domestic violence, and extreme poverty also made progress in all areas that we assessed, including letter, color, and shape recognition as well as following typical school routines. There was still much work to do, but he was on a better path to kindergarten readiness.

While the results of this particular summer K-prep were exciting, the program only addressed the academic and behavioral aspects of school readiness; students did not receive the social service support that many needed and which could have helped them grow even more. The combination of a high-quality K-prep program – focused on the academic and behavioral side of school readiness – coupled with a home-visiting program that provides comprehensive social service support could give children intensive school readiness programs that would ensure a successful transition into kindergarten.

EARLY INTERVENTIONS TO FIGHT THE EFFECTS OF TOXIC STRESS

When children walk into their first day of school, their whole life story walks in with them. For children who enter the classroom door with the weight of toxic stress, they are already at much greater risk for worse outcomes in school and life than their peers who do not experience toxic stress. Preventative programs like EHS, HFA, and high-quality K-prep can mitigate the detrimental effects of toxic stress and put a child on the road to school readiness. While the opportunity is great to provide these preventative programs to all children who need them, it will take a commitment from the entire education system. As a field we must agree that comprehensive preventative programs are essential to school readiness and successful early education transition, and they must be provided to students who need them as early as possible.

Our education system failed Travis. For him, transition should have started very early in his life – long before he entered my classroom. His story, and those of so many children like him, must serve as a cautionary tale and propel the field to act. Working together, high-quality preventative programs can keep us from failing more children like Travis.

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THE EFFECTS OF EARLY TOXIC STRESS AND LEAD POISONING ON LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS REQUIRE SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

Peter Simon

Peter Simon is a pediatrician and public health expert who has worked at the Rhode Island Department of Health for nearly forty years, most recently as the medical director of the Division of Community, Family Health, and Equity, a position from which he retired in 2013.

For pediatricians, everything in our curriculum is targeted to developmental transitions: from the uterus to the external environment; from the hospital to the home; and from the home to social institutions, whether it be childcare or school and the community, and all the different systems – biological, social, environmental – that determine the outcomes for those.

Then we get into schools, and we're not having that kind of discussion. We don't get a good integrated understanding of how to improve outcomes for schools if we only focus on what goes on inside the school system. Sixty percent of Rhode Island's urban school children have no formal exposure to an enriched early childhood education. Why isn't there outrage over cuts in Head Start? Where's the advocacy for Head Start coming from, besides the people who run Head Start?

We've got to do this together – and shame on us for not realizing that. We don't talk the same language in public health and education. I have to acknowledge that when I go down to the Department of Education, they use terms that sound familiar to me, but they don't use them the same way – what's a screen? What's an assessment? There's a learning curve, and you have to be willing to support that.

Awareness of Childhood Lead Poisoning First Emerges

I was working at the Rhode Island Department of Health in 1977, when the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued the first request for proposals [RFP] on prevention of childhood blood poisoning. My boss asked me to present it to [then head of the department] Dr. Joseph Cannon. I told Dr. Cannon, "It appears from limited surveillance that there's a real problem here. We have a lot of poor kids. We have a lot of old housing with lead in it. And a little bit of screening that's going on just is yielding quite a significant load." He said, "Where's the lead coming from?" I said, "Most likely it's coming from housing." So he thought for about two seconds, and he said, "It sounds like it's a real problem for kids in Rhode Island, for the state. It's a real public health challenge. And I'm going to tell you to go ahead. But I've got to tell you right now, it's a loser. You're going to be barking up a housing tree that is loaded with politics and the worst kinds of human behavior. But go ahead."

We got funded to increase screening and include screening as a routine part of a child's medical care. We had to build up a lab capacity and an outreach. Those were some of the things that I learned the most from – the need to do cross-cultural, cross-linguistic health education outreach to families and screen their kids right on their doorsteps. We had a door-to-door summer campaign every summer, and I'd hire twenty-five college kids – representative of all the different ethnic, linguistic, minority communities in Rhode Island – train them about lead, teach them how to get a good finger stick sample, fill out the form correctly. We used to do 10,000 kids a summer. It was an outstanding model program of childhood lead poisoning control.

From Medical Problem to Public Health Issue

In 1993 or 1994, we were converting our screening test to an initial lead analysis on 35 to 40 thousand specimens a year instead of a preliminary screening using erythrocyte protoporphyrin. The new screening strategy drastically reduced the number of lead-poisoned kids misclassified as negative, which tripled the number of positives that needed follow up. We didn't have the capacity to actually intervene for all elevated lead tests, so we had to ration our inspectors and our inspections and our dollars, focusing on the highest end of the distribution. At that time, in South Elmwood, along Elmwood Avenue in South Providence, one out of two kids was poisoned – fifty percent of kids!

That's the hardest communication challenge, because it's not a medical problem. Now it's a public health problem. You can talk about science till you're blue in the face; the parents aren't thinking about means or populations. They're thinking about their kid and what it means for their family. Teachers are like parents – they're working with twenty or twenty-five kids, but they're working individually with each one of them.

If you ask early childhood educators, "How you can see the effects of lead in your preschool kids?" they'll tell you: "They're distractible. They're easily agitated. Their working memory is poor. Their behavior and developmental profiles are immature in terms of their emotional volatility." The descriptions you get of kids who are struggling to socially fit into a working early-childhood classroom overlap tremendously with the kinds of things that lead can do to the prefrontal cortex, the amygdala, hippocampus, all those parts of your brain that, when you talk about executive functions or you talk about emotional behaviors, all those functions are affected by lead.

And they're affected by toxic stress. It can be difficult to distinguish from lead poisoning. You can't do psycho-neurological assessments on preschoolers; they're too young. There isn't any real way of examining their brain, other than by observing their behavior. A good preschool teacher will tell you, and the kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade teachers will, too.

From a public health standpoint, there's a difference between measuring toxic stress and measuring lead, because we don't have as many metrics yet; we don't even have a definition. You have the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study,¹ and the ACE scores. I think home visiting has some promise. Although what I learned from lead is that, in many of these neighborhoods and many of these households, lead gets you inside the door in a different way than home visiting. With home visiting on its own, the message could be interpreted as, "You're broken and we're here to fix you," but with lead it's that "There's a threat to you in your home, put there many years ago, and if your landlord isn't doing what they're supposed to be doing, your baby, and you, could be at risk." So the two together, if they're well integrated, could perform very well.

Building on Our Progress: The Need for Adequate Resources and a Cross-Sector Approach

Since we started the lead program thirty-eight years ago, the percentages affected and new cases have been falling.² Rhode Island KIDS COUNT uses as an indicator kids entering kindergarten with a lead level over 5³ – that indicator was one of the best things we ever did with our lead data. And KIDS COUNT has gotten a lot of good, positive feedback about that as a way of bringing attention from the preschool part of kids' lives through the kindergarten doorway.

1 See <http://www.centerforyouthwellness.org/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/>.

2 See <http://www.health.ri.gov/data/childhoodleadpoisoning/>.

3 See "Children with Lead Poisoning," <http://www.rikidscount.org/DataPublications/RIKidsCountFactbook.aspx#701160-health>.

And from what I understand from talking to the people in charge of early learning in the Department of Education is that now the entire curriculum in K–3 is essentially an ongoing effort to identify and work with struggling students. So they don't wait for the kids to fail. They're constantly providing additional resources inside the classroom. And I think that's fantastic.

However, when I know that resources are limited and I look at the lead data for each school in the state, which now we produce on an annual basis, I wonder when our General Assembly is going to weight the resources distribution with the challenges that are being brought into the classroom. The high lead level itself adds a risk, but it is also an *indicator* that a child comes from threatening and hazardous environments, and that brings toxic stress. Urban school districts need equitable support from our state funds.

We need to harmonize some of what we're doing across public health and education. We can't afford to keep operating in silos. Earlier care and education, healthy housing, food-system reform, and adult community building activities like community gardens and community agriculture have real promise to reduce stress and the toxic characteristics inside the home that are social and not environmental. An example is the West Elmwood Neighborhood Housing's Sankofa initiative, which addresses these issues on an ecological level.⁴ I hope we can get people to understand the importance of collaboration rather than competition. We need more of an ecological approach, building on the assets we already have.

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⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/SankofaPVD/>.

BACKGROUND ON CHILD LEAD POISONING IN PROVIDENCE

Adapted with permission from Bucknell, S., S. Cullen, A. Dominguez, and D. Ochs, "Final Team Research Paper: Providence Children and Youth Cabinet," Unpublished research report, Urban Education Policy graduate program, Brown University, 2013.

Childhood lead poisoning has been a problem endemic to New England for some time due to its industrial history. Providence had ten companies that produced potentially lead-based paints into the 1970s, as well as at least seven large companies that manufactured distilled gasoline and oil products that contained lead; and in contrast to other urban areas with relatively similar demographics, the city had no lead paint housing regulations until 1992 (Bailey, Sargent & Blake 1998). Providence did not successfully litigate against companies at fault for the lead poisoning crisis until 2006 (Fitzpatrick & Sprague 2006). The current prevalence of elevated blood lead levels (BLLs) in Providence is influenced by this history.

Catalyzed by litigation, a recent push to remedy past injustices and prevent future lead poisoning has had some success, but it has not eliminated the problem (Fitzpatrick & Sprague 2006). From 1997 until 2010, the incidence of elevated BLLs in children in Providence dropped dramatically, but Providence still had the highest rate of incidence of new cases of elevated BLLs in the state as of 2010 (Rhode Island Department of Health 2011). And Providence still faces an urgent lead poisoning problem, with 70 percent of housing stock in the city potentially lead hazardous (Rhode Island Department of Health 2016).

Certain neighborhoods within Providence experience a greater prevalence of lead poisoning than others. According to publicly available data maps from the Providence Plan (2012), a larger minority population and lower median family income seem to correspond to a higher percentage of children with elevated BLLs, indicating the inequitable distribution of lead poisoning in Providence.

The history of lead poisoning in Providence is further illuminated by considering the CDC's evolving definitions and recommendations around lead poisoning (2012). Prior to 2012, the CDC set the blood lead "level of concern" in children with a BLL above 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. Based on research indicating the harmful effects of a lead level below 10, in 2012, the CDC re-evaluated the toxicity threshold for lead and their use of the phrase "level of concern." The CDC now recommends that the parents of any child with a BLL above 5 be informed, and public health initiatives set into action. It is important to note that though the CDC calls the public to action at lead levels above 5, medical treatment is not recommended below 45. However, the CDC admits that there is no safe level of lead in the blood (2012).

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Why Families Are Engaged in Early Learning in Central Falls, Rhode Island

JOANNA GELLER AND MARIA CRISTINA BETANCUR

We Are A Village, a program funded by a federal Investing in Innovation grant focused on family engagement in early childhood, fosters parent collaboration during early learning transitions to help families feel welcome, valued, and respected.

“How do we get parents to show up?” As a researcher who studies family engagement, I [Joanna Geller] hear this question all the time – in school faculty meetings, at family engagement conferences, in working groups with nonprofit leaders. It always unsettles me a bit, because

the question is invariably referring to parents in schools where the overwhelming majority of students are of color, and the answers that typically follow tend to focus on changing the parents rather than the school, program, or event that parents are expected to take time away from

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their families or jobs to attend. Over the past two and half years of evaluating *We Are A Village*, a highly competitive federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant focused on family engagement in early childhood in Central Falls, Rhode Island, our research team at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) has gained much insight into the transformational process that occurs when a school system and community partners ask, “What can we do to help families feel welcome, valued, and respected?” rather than, “How do we get *parents* to show up?”

Early learning transitions are a particularly important time for educators to consider this question, not only because family engagement during this time is associated with improved student academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Crosnoe & Cooper 2010; Iruka et al. 2014; Powell et al. 2012),¹ but also because transitions can produce great anxiety and feelings of isolation for children and their families (Berlin, Dunning & Dodge 2011; Kreider 2002). As Anne Henderson (2015), a longtime leader in the field of family engagement, writes, “Let us remember that it is not just the children who enroll in school, it is the whole family.” Often, the kindergarten or elementary school to which a student transitions has different cultures and routines than the child’s previous school and is less culturally responsive than the preschool setting (Miller 2015). For some parents, bringing their child to a new kindergarten is the first time they themselves

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¹ Most research has linked home-based family engagement to student outcomes in early childhood, particularly “literacy-rich” activities, such as reading, telling stories, singing, and visiting the library. However, there is also evidence that school-based interventions that are culturally responsive and meaningful to families can improve student outcomes.

have been inside a school since their own school experience, which might evoke painful memories. Furthermore, immigrant families may be experiencing the U.S. public school system for the first time. Families of children with special needs must learn what services are available for their students, and families of children whose native language is not English may need to understand the different types of instruction the school offers English language learners. On top of all of this, most parents worry how their children will fare academically and socially in a new setting. Therefore, schools have a special responsibility during early learning transitions to help families feel welcome, valued, and respected.

THE CENTRAL FALLS I3 WE ARE A VILLAGE INITIATIVE

Central Falls is a one-square-mile city in northeastern Rhode Island, with a population of 19,000. The Central Falls School District (CFSD) is 74 percent Latino, 12 percent Black, 9 percent White, and 4 percent multiracial; 79 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch; and 24 percent of students are English language learners. In 2013, CFSD, in collaboration with Children’s Friend of Rhode Island and the Bradley Children’s Research Center, was awarded a \$3 million i3 grant with the goal of expanding and enriching opportunities for family engagement in early childhood. The goal was for every family to feel welcome, valued, and respected in their children’s schools and for schools to connect families with one another and with community resources. Children in CFSD are in the unique position of changing schools three times in their first three years: when they start pre-K, when they move to a new building for kindergarten, and again when they move to yet another building for elementary school.

Supporting students and families with these transitions was a key goal of the grant. To this end, the grant allowed the district to hire a full-time bilingual “parent collaborator” for each of the five schools; create a parent room in each school; and provide regular parent coffee hours, opportunities for parents to receive training and mentoring to become leaders in the schools, parent workshops, and an evidence-based parenting training called Incredible Years. *We Are A Village* was inspired by the Head Start Family and Community Engagement Framework, which asserts that family engagement extends far “beyond the bake sale”; it also entails parents being physically and emotionally healthy, lifelong learners, and advocates and leaders.² The framework focuses on how this engagement happens, not solely on *what* it involves. The goal is not just to get parents to show up at coffee hours or to visit parent rooms, but to truly engage them through relationships that are rooted in trust, respect, and reciprocity. These relationships ensure that when families make sacrifices to show up at their children’s schools, the experience is meaningful for them and for their children.

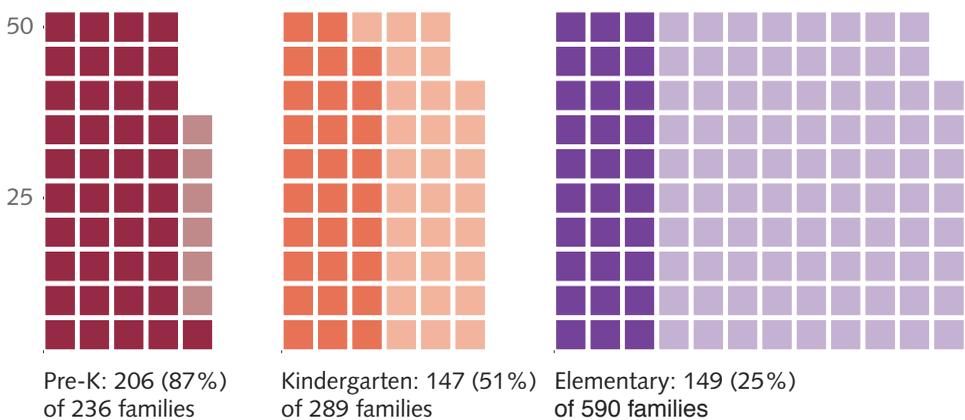
Our evaluation data speaks to the great success of the i3 initiative in helping families to feel welcome, valued, and respected in their children’s schools. As shown in Figure 1, 87 percent of preschool students, 51 percent of kindergarten students, and 25 percent of elementary school students in the participating i3 schools had a family member who engaged in at least one i3 family engagement activity, such as attending a workshop, volunteering, or having a one-on-one meeting with a parent collaborator. Data from the focus groups we conducted with 100 family members illuminate how families felt when they came to the schools. One parent said:

You know when you feel welcome in a place and you know when you don’t feel welcome. They make it feel welcome. We always have bagels and coffee. Parents know each other already in coffee hour, so they feel comfortable. Valued? You feel valued because they ask a lot of questions. They hear your opinions. They don’t just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. They

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² For more on this Head Start framework, see <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pfcef>.

Figure 1. Involvement in family engagement activities in five schools within the Central Falls School District.



1 square = 5 families / Darker squares represent participating families

ask questions, and they hear your opinions, whatever you have to say... They never disrespect.

Although we cannot determine from our evaluation that increased family engagement caused better outcomes, evidence suggests that it is paying off for improving student outcomes. For example, among students who had been chronically absent (missing more than 10 percent of the school year) during 2013-2014, when families engaged in at least one i3 activity, their child's risk of being chronically absent again the following school year was reduced by 32 percent.

ROOTS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND RESOURCES

So, what's the secret in Central Falls? Why did so many families engage with the schools? To answer this question, I turn to a framework from the field of community organizing. Groups that mobilize and organize communities in an effective and authentic way have 3 Rs: roots, relationships, and resources (McAlister & Catone 2014):

- **Roots** involve a sustained commitment to serve and develop a particular neighborhood, staff with shared histories and identities with residents of that neighborhood, and values of equity and justice.
- **Relationships** involve collaboration with parents and residents – the constituencies critical to community-based school improvement efforts – as well as the ability to connect community members with one another and with educators and system decision makers.
- **Resources** include trained staff and an administrative infrastructure, which are necessary for the labor-intensive and skilled work of community outreach.

Individuals and organizations with roots, relationships, and resources are

often called “cultural brokers.” Cultural brokers help culturally and linguistically diverse families navigate the language, customs, and norms of the school and school system while simultaneously affirming parents' own culture and rights. In the sections that follow, Maria Cristina Betancur, one of the i3 parent collaborators, describes how her roots in the Central Falls community, her relationships with families, and the resources she and her colleagues share have changed how families engage with their children's schools.

PARENTS AS COLLABORATORS IN THE CENTRAL FALLS “VILLAGE” / MARIA CRISTINA BETANCUR

As a parent engaged in my children's education, I can testify how important family engagement is. I'm a proud parent of two successful children (now adults) from the city of Central Falls. On a basic level, family engagement meant learning together, as my children and I became colleagues in learning how to support each other. Their contribution was to put forth their best effort to complete assignments, and my contribution was to find support to assist them when I wasn't able to help them myself. On another level, family engagement was about building strong two-way communication with teachers to make sure that the teachers, my children, and I understood the grade-level standards, so they could receive support on time or have an opportunity to have advanced classes. Finally, as a parent leader and an i3 parent collaborator, I had the opportunity to share my knowledge with other parents, to offer time to the school to contribute, and to transfer the knowledge from school to home and vice versa. These levels of engagement taught me that we grow only when we recognize the participation of others in our lives.

Roots

I feel privileged to live and work in the same community. I'm an immigrant from Colombia, South America. I came to live in Central Falls in 1993. My language barriers and my disconnect from my culture made me very vulnerable. My husband and I made a commitment with each other to build a family in a circle of love so we could strengthen one another. We understood how painful it could be to be disenfranchised from the community in which we were living by not knowing the language, the culture, and the people around us. We brought our children into this circle of love. We worked two jobs for many years and we paid a lot of money to babysitters, but we built an unbreakable family. While I worked for years doing cleaning and at factories, I always managed to make time to support my children's school, even requesting time off to volunteer as a chaperone at events, school activities, Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, and to attend parent/teacher conferences.

Gradually, I became part of the community of Central Falls, although everything in my life was obtained with much sacrifice. After my labor rights had been abused, I co-founded a local non-profit organization focused on labor rights, *Fuerza Laboral/Power of Workers*. But I never had any problem with my children's education or with the school system until 2009, when my son was in ninth grade and Central Falls High School received national media attention due to persistent low performance. I wasn't prepared for something like that. There's nothing scarier than to hear that the only high school in your city was among the "worst" in the country. The news was saying bad things about the school every single day, but I'm the kind of person who likes to learn about things for myself, and I wanted to get more involved. I went to my place of work

with some newspapers to explain to my supervisor why I wanted to request time off every Thursday, so that I could volunteer at the afterschool program at my son's school. As I mentioned before, my son is part of my unbreakable family and I've always believed that education is the most important tool to become successful in life. My supervisor showed his admiration for my commitment to the education of my children, granting me permission to take time off from my scheduled work hours so that I could be a volunteer at my son's school. (My son also became a tutor to other students of the program.)

While I was volunteering, I started listening to students and other families complain about how they felt disrespected and unwelcomed at the school. I started developing strong relationships with some teachers, administrators, home school liaisons, and families who liked the idea of having more parents volunteer at the school. The school was in need of support with many tasks such as making phone calls to students who were late or absent, providing late slips to students in the morning, supporting events, checking the hallways and classrooms, and forming a PTO. As a parent volunteer, I also represented other parents as part of the negotiations between the school district and the teachers union.

That is how my journey began as a volunteer, and I later left my factory job to volunteer at the school every single day to greet the students in the morning. Why? Many people asked that question, including family members, teachers, administrators, and even the local news. The answer was that I wanted to be the mother that I am today: the mother of two successful children who both graduated from high school as National Honor Society recipients and both continued pursuing their higher education.

With my engagement in my children's school parent committee, I learned how to become knowledgeable about and celebrate my children's progress, but what's more, I learned how to develop my children's passion for education. I always liked to read with my children, but through my engagement I developed the habits to read *with* them and listen to *them* read.

I also learned how to advocate for a better education, not only for my children, but for *all* children. I learned about my rights as a parent to visit my children's classrooms. I learned about the power that parents have and how to use that power to be at the same level as the teachers. I started sharing my story with other families. Many families felt connected with it and started sharing their stories, too, and volunteering at the school. We formed a school PTO where we all exchanged knowledge and our passion for the progress of our children. We called that personal connection "peer navigation." From parent to parent we developed the link of good communication and being a stronger community that wants to raise children with skills to compete in today's society.

Eventually, I was hired by the school district and then as an i3 Collaborator. I started as a parent who was only interested in obtaining support for my children, but I ended up taking trainings, English classes, completing a bachelor's degree and even a master's degree. My life changed, and today my interest is educating other families about opportunities for their children and for themselves. I want the families to know that I understand where they come from when they struggle with their children's education.

Relationships

What culturally and linguistically diverse parents require is not a re-orientation of values or parenting

classes to compensate for deficiencies, but rather partnerships with educators to foster understanding and help bridge differences. It doesn't matter where you come from or the language you speak. When a good relationship is developed between parents and teachers, everyone wins. Teachers learn about other cultures and how to approach the students to have a better result in the classroom. Families learn to nurture proud bilingual children who can improve academically by reading in their own language. Encouraging parent involvement to heighten student achievement is also a way to share power between families, students, teachers, school staff, and the community. Part of my job as an i3 collaborator is to help parents and teachers form these kinds of relationships.

Working as an i3 collaborator, I have had many opportunities to share my experience with families and talk about how they can become more active in their children's education. During the first year of the i3 grant, I worked at a pre-K center and I'm now working at an elementary school, so I have supported families through different types of transitions. Many families like to bring their children to school in the morning, and the best thing I can do for them is receive them with a big smile. I always start the conversation by thanking the parent for being there every day and on time. The families are more open to start a conversation when they feel appreciated and welcomed at their children's school. I learned through experience about how to make people feel welcomed at school; the most important thing is to be a good listener. The families let you know about their personal lives not only because they want to complain or they want your help, but because they need to trust someone. The families have the power; they are the ones who can change systems and structures.

I always provide families with the tools to enhance their leadership, but I also ask them how I can be useful to them instead of assuming that I know how to help them. The families are knowledgeable and are a great resource; there is no one better to let us know about the progress of their children. My success with the families is the result of good communication built on respect, trust, and a genuine relationship.

A common barrier to participation for some families is the perception that they should defer to the teacher in all academic matters. Other families have the feeling because of previous school experiences that classrooms are simply “off limits” to visits or observations. Family members who struggled themselves as students may view their child’s school as a place where they are unlikely to fit in or feel welcome. Schools can remove these “invisible barriers” between families and the school by welcoming families while respecting their attitudes and beliefs.



I always provide families with the tools to enhance their leadership, but I also ask them how I can be useful to them instead of assuming that I know how to help them.



During the past summer, I was part of a team formed by home school liaisons, 13 collaborators, parent volunteers, and administrators; we made home visits to parents whose children were transitioning from pre-K to kindergarten, and from kindergarten to first grade. We made sure that all the families received information about the school (such as

changes and policies about attendance, discipline, and uniforms), and made them aware of services available to students and their families. In order to become prepared for the home visit, we all received intensive training. We planned ahead about how to accomplish the goal and how to build a relationship with the families. This work was very important to the families, and to us. The families trust their most valuable possession – their children – in our hands. A home visit demonstrates that each family is an integral part of the school community and shows that the school is willing to put in the extra effort to include every family in its child’s education.

Resources

All of my personal experience as a parent and my continuing education makes me a resource for families. I became passionate about helping other parents understand the school system because I always wished to have a better understanding when my children were younger. One way I offer my resources is teaching parents about their rights. For example, many families think that they need to wait until the parent/teacher conference to meet their child’s teacher, but I always suggest families take all the opportunities the school offers to approach the teacher before the parent/teacher conference so they can meet one another in a different setting than the classroom.

I also love to help families enhance their communication with schools. When families are able to access information and advocate for their child/family, they are showing an important form of leadership. I instruct families to ask themselves: What are the means of communication between home and school? Who can I communicate with? What means of communication do we already know/

use and how well do they work? Where do we go for information about our child's education? I support families with information about the different communications systems the schools use, such as the school portal, emails, texts, and/or notebooks. Our community is very diverse, which is why many families find it difficult to communicate with the educators of their children. My own experience taught me that it is important to ask the right questions in order to receive the right answers. Although the process may seem simple, it can be a challenge for families who have language and cultural barriers or when they have to work countless hours during the day. It is important to consider how difficult the process can be and why, so I also support families through role-playing, helping them prepare for a parent/teacher conference or a meeting with an administrator or guidance counselor.

Not only am I a resource for families, but by developing their leadership skills, families become resources for one another. Although this is a community in which families work countless hours, I always count my blessings of having parents volunteering at the school. The parent volunteers support the school inside and out by sharing information with other families who cannot visit the school as often as they do.

I have found that other resources help families become engaged in their children's schools. These include:

- Leadership training to equip parents with the tools to advocate for their children
- Workshops to learn about how the education system works and available resources
- Courses in GED, English, and computer literacy
- Referrals to services that assist with social and economic needs

- Appreciation of diversity by employing school staff from different nationalities
- Training for school staff on strategies for developing strong, trusting relationships and effective communication strategies with families
- Community celebrations and cultural festivals held at the school so that the school can center on community life
- Translation of school information into languages that parents speak at home
- Scheduling of meetings at times that are convenient for parents' work schedules
- Homework help for students and support for families when they don't know how to assist them (for example, in Central Falls, there are monthly workshops in which parents and teachers exchange tips to engage children in reading or math exercises)

CULTURAL BROKERS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION TRANSITIONS

Family engagement is particularly important during early learning transitions, as families are expected to learn about new resources and supports for their children, establish communication with teachers, support learning at home, and help their children develop positive attitudes toward school. Support from family members is a constant during the transitions from preschool to kindergarten to first grade, when children experience new schools with different teachers, classmates, routines, and expectations. Maria Cristina's story illustrates how families benefit from relationships with cultural brokers who share common experiences, have a durable investment in the community, listen to their concerns, welcome their

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Cultural brokers are most effective when they collaborate with teachers, principals, and other staff and are considered as valued members of the school community.

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contributions, help them navigate the educational system, and connect them with resources. In turn, the schools and school system benefit from families who have the power and knowledge to stand up for every child’s right to a quality education.

As we have found, this process is not without its challenges. Cultural brokers are most effective when they collaborate with teachers, principals, and other staff and are considered as valued members of the school community. However, 13 parent collaborators have had to work hard to communicate their role and prove their value to school staff. They have had to figure out how to establish trust while simultaneously encouraging staff toward more inclusive and welcoming family engagement practices. Although the payoffs are tremendous, the work is hard. Cultural brokers need consistent support from one another and from school, district, and community leaders and supervisors. This process is at odds with many funders’ expectations for quick results. Cultural brokers might not yield overnight improvements in test scores, but with the right supports, they can have a long-lasting, sustainable impact on changing the culture of schools and school systems.

Unlike many family engagement efforts that focus on “fixing” families, cultural brokers in Central Falls come to families as allies. The aboriginal artist and activist Lilla Watson embodies Central Falls’ successful philosophy toward family engagement in her famous quote:

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.



SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF THE VILLAGE AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

Patricia Martinez

Patricia Martinez is the executive director for family and student support at the Central Falls School District and project director for the We Are A Village i3 grant.

Through the *We Are A Village* initiative, we have created an early education transition process that fosters collaboration with services providers and district staff by offering continuous opportunities for relationship building for children and families. Success means a constant reminder and intentionality of high expectations for family engagement that includes opportunities for educators from community agencies and district administrators to come together regularly to share their work and review challenges and opportunities – creating a process for continuity for families transitioning to the school district.

We take a very proactive approach to engaging families and children who will be transitioning into the district the following school year, beginning as early as the winter before they enter the district. This proactive approach for systemic change means that we need to be intentional in developing an early calendar of activities and interventions that need to take place as part of this work and constantly reviewing and assessing its outcomes.

Our work is based on reaching out to families very early on. We schedule visits – by me or other project staff and the kindergarten school principal – to the preschool and Head Start sites to meet families and share the programs offered in kindergarten. We invite families to visit the school and participate in parent educational workshops. We provide stability by having these early visits be followed by a series of monthly meetings, offering flexible schedules (mornings, late afternoons, and evenings) to respond to the needs of working families. These family meetings are opportunities for families of incoming kindergarteners to hear from families of current students about their fears and concerns when they were in their shoes, their experience with school transition, and their current experiences in the school.

During the summer we personalize our engagement through transition/welcoming home visits for all children transitioning into the district: kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school. Every family is visited by a team (a parent peer navigator, a district home-school liaison, and the i3 collaborator) to welcome them into the district and bring informational packets that include a survey with the purpose of taking their pulse about their children's education, information on the first day of school, a calendar of upcoming workshops, and opportunities for families to get involved. This transitional process culminates with a “block party” or back-to-school celebration in the community, which includes a resource community fair where multiple community agencies provide information about services and resources for families. The process continues throughout the year with monthly parent workshops, principal coffee hours, parent-teacher groups, and invitations to participate in a Family Leadership Institute.

Despite these many strides, any initiative that requires systemic change will always face many challenges that can distract from the original vision. For *Village* partners, a clear challenge was in implementing cross-system family engagement trainings to build teacher buy-in on meaningful family engagement. Perhaps the biggest challenge for this intervention was finding mutual times when both parents and school staff were available for joint educational opportunities to learn from and appreciate each other's strengths and commitment to their child's success. This goal quickly became unrealistic as teachers' and families' schedules are very different, with little flexibility.

Key to the buy-in was not only “speaking the same language” in terms of professional development opportunities, but literally, in being able to communicate with families in their native language. Although it is helpful to have a handful of bilingual staff members, including the five i3 collaborators and Title I home-school liaison, this also meant that these individuals were constantly pulled into translator roles, rather than drawing on their skills and talents to create opportunities for both teachers and families to interact. This need for translation took away from the limited opportunities for the connections, trust, and relationship building that are fundamental to any transformation.

The constant transition of school leaders and staff can always present challenges to the culture, vision, and structures at the school level. Thus, creating consistent interventions that do not rely on an individual, but rather on the school and family community, is critical to the continuity and sustainability of systems change initiatives like the *Village*.

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