



*Well-structured efforts
to get children ready
pay off in greater
academic gains.*

by Aaron Loewenberg*

States Pave the Way for Smoother Transitions to Kindergarten

Children enter kindergarten with a wide range of previous education experiences: Some have participated in pre-K programs: private, state-funded, or part of Head Start. Others have spent time in a family child care setting or in informal arrangements with family, friends, and neighbors. Regardless, this transition is fraught with stress and uncertainty for many children and their parents. State leaders, as well as elementary and pre-K educators, can ease the transition into kindergarten and by doing so improve the odds that children will succeed in school.

Generally speaking, kindergarten represents a markedly different environment for children who used to spend their days

at home or even those who participated in pre-K. Interactions in a kindergarten classroom become more focused on academic progress, with specific targets for literacy and numeracy that may not have been present before.

This transition is significant for parents as well. Contact with teachers is often more formalized and less frequent than in a pre-K classroom. There is often less emphasis on parent-teacher and parent-parent contact than before.

Since evidence suggests that early education experiences can powerfully affect students' later academic and life outcomes, state boards of education have strong incentives for making the

*This article is adapted from the author's earlier report, "Connecting the Steps: State Strategies to Ease the Transition from pre-K to Kindergarten" (Washington, DC: New America, July 2017).

transition to kindergarten as smooth and stress-free as possible for children and families. A 2005 study that examined data on more than 17,000 children established a link between the number of transition activities schools facilitated prior to and near the beginning of the kindergarten year, such as teacher home visits or parent orientation sessions, and larger gains in academic achievement by the end of the year. These positive gains were greatest for children whose families were low- or middle-income.¹

Despite evidence illustrating the importance of the kindergarten transition point, many districts and schools take a haphazard approach. To the extent that transition activities take place, they frequently entail such practices as sending brochures home rather than more effective, high-intensity activities such as arranging for pre-K students to visit a kindergarten classroom or allowing for joint planning time between pre-K and kindergarten teachers.²

While planning a stable, well-connected transition falls largely within the purview of individual schools and districts, state leadership can actively encourage intentional efforts at the local level. Four states that have improved the transition process serve as examples of what state leaders can achieve: West Virginia, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington.

West Virginia

West Virginia's Board of Education took an active role in easing the transition to kindergarten by codifying requirements for counties. Board of Education Policy 2525 outlines criteria for approving and operating programs that are part of the West Virginia Universal Pre-K program, and it mandates certain activities at the county level:³

- Each county's early childhood team—made up of representatives from the county pre-K program, the pre-K special needs program, a licensed community child care program, and a Head Start program—writes a plan for transitioning students out of pre-K and into kindergarten.
- Each plan must offer pre-K students and their families an opportunity to visit their prospective kindergarten setting.

- Counties must provide written information to parents about kindergarten registration and expectations for kindergarten students.
- County collaborative teams must give pre-K providers and kindergarten teachers an opportunity to meet annually to discuss how to best prepare students for kindergarten.

County teams also must establish a system for transferring assessment data that are documented as a part of each child's Kindergarten Transition Report to the student's future kindergarten teacher. Pre-K teachers use the Early Learning Scale three times a year to assess children. These assessment results offer a snapshot of children's learning and development in the domains of social and emotional learning, language/literacy, math, and science. Some counties bring pre-K and kindergarten teachers together to interpret the data, while other counties provide a general overview to kindergarten teachers about the purpose and use of the transition report. These assessment results and narrative comments are intended to help kindergarten teachers prepare to meet the individual needs of each incoming student.

The board's policy also requires county teams to use transition best practices detailed in the West Virginia Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework created by the state's department of education and board of education and established in 2011. The framework includes an early childhood transitions toolkit that breaks down transition activities into four components: Ready Children, Ready Families, Ready Schools and Programs, and Ready State and Communities.

Oregon

Oregon has taken a different approach. A 2013 legislative initiative sought to encourage local innovation in improving transitions to kindergarten through grants. The Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation grant program (KRPI) gives grantees considerable discretion to implement approaches in one or more of the following areas:

- supporting successful transitions into kindergarten;
- engaging families as partners in children's learning and development;

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- providing opportunities for shared professional development between early learning and elementary school educators; and
- increasing alignment, connection, and collaboration within the prenatal to third grade continuum.

The first grants were distributed during the 2014–15 school year. Since the program was established, grants have funded a wide variety of programs. For example, Early Learning Multnomah, the early learning hub for the Portland area, has used a portion of its grant to fund full-time P-3 coordinators in eight high-need schools. The coordinators organized Play and Learn groups, where children aged zero to five play educational games while their parents learn more about what is expected once children reach kindergarten. The coordinators also help organize and staff the Early Kindergarten Transition Program, a two- to three-week summer program in which incoming kindergarteners become familiar with their new school and parents learn about ways to support learning at home.

KRPI funds have also been used to establish joint training sessions between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers. Within the Portland Public School System, Head Start and kindergarten teachers participated in trainings about positive behavioral intervention and supports.

In the program's first year, the 16 communities that received grants provided professional development events for hundreds of early learning providers and elementary school staff throughout the state, many of which were joint professional development events. According to a program evaluation, early learning providers who participated in joint training sessions reported higher levels of understanding of kindergarten teachers' expectations after attending the sessions, and teachers reported increased levels of understanding of the early care environments children participate in prior to kindergarten entry.⁴

Colorado

Colorado is working to improve local transition planning through a Colorado Department of Education program to promote ongoing,

observation-based assessment in early care and education settings. Results Matter is designed to streamline the system for measuring the development of children aged zero to five in early care and education programs by training educators in the use of authentic observational assessment and enabling results to be tracked from year to year.

Results Matter is open to any early care or education program that chooses to participate. Participation is required for children enrolled in the Colorado Preschool Program and pre-K students who receive special education services. The program has helped create partnerships between pre-K and kindergarten teachers. It has also helped nonprofit foundations to more precisely identify where technical assistance is most needed when working with districts and schools.

The Colorado Department of Education publishes a handbook each school year to lay out the timeline and steps for administering assessments and the expectations for documentation of student records. The department also provides training on early childhood observation skills at no charge for pre-K educators in publicly funded programs if they did not receive this training in college or through another program.

Funding provided by the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge enabled the state to expand the project to include more child care centers and family child care homes. Child care providers received training and technical assistance over a two-year period to support the use of age-appropriate assessment in these settings.

Washington

Washington passed legislation to improve kindergarten transitions, which then governor Christine Gregoire signed into law in 2011. The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, or WaKIDS, is led by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in collaboration with the Department of Early Learning and Thrive Washington, a well-known advocacy organization. The program has three components—family connection, whole-child assessment, and early learning collaboration—and is required for state-funded, full-day kindergarten. State funding for full-day kindergarten

was available to all schools in 2016–17, when approximately 77,000 kindergarteners took part in WaKIDS.

Family Connection. Schools must invite families to individual meetings to discuss goals and expectations for the kindergarten year and allow parents to share information about their child with the teacher. State law permits districts to use up to three school days to engage in the family connection meetings.

Whole-Child Assessment. Participating kindergarten programs are required to use a program called GOLD to assess child development and learning. Some school districts choose to use the GOLD data to create student report cards throughout the year. GOLD is also used in the state pre-K program; kindergarten teachers have access to the most recent scores of students previously enrolled in the state pre-K program.

Early Learning Collaboration. Unlike the other two components, the collaboration component leaves a great deal of flexibility to individual districts and schools to decide how to work with early learning providers. By law, districts are required to establish relationships with early learning community providers and engage in kindergarten readiness activities with those providers and parents, but individual districts choose the means for accomplishing these tasks.

The state encourages principals to bring kindergarten teachers and early learning providers together for professional development sessions that include reviewing WaKIDS kindergarten data and transition forms completed by pre-K programs. Washington has developed an Early Learning Collaboration Framework to help guide schools and districts in this work. The framework is used at regional convenings, where kindergarten teachers, principals, and early learning providers discuss steps for collaboration and analyze assessment data. The state has also created a voluntary kindergarten transition form that early learning providers and parents can use to share information about incoming students with kindergarten teachers.

In addition, Child Care Aware of Washington launched the Bridging Communities and Making Connections program to improve collaboration with early learning providers. This program allows elementary school principals

to receive reports of licensed child care providers in their area. Regional Child Care Aware of Washington offices follow up with resources and services to facilitate communication between providers and principals. By building these connections, the program helps principals form relationships with families of incoming students before kindergarten starts.

Conclusion

While transitions take place at the individual district and school level, the four states profiled here took steps to encourage local actors to move beyond standard practices such as sending home kindergarten brochures. Schools in their states are instead engaged in the more substantive work of building relationships between early learning providers and elementary schools.

Each state's approach offers unique benefits and challenges, and it will be up to individual states to decide which is the best fit for their population of students and families. The key takeaway is that states must be engaged in making the transition to kindergarten less difficult for students and families in order to ensure successful academic and life outcomes for all children.

State boards of education play an important role in smoothing these transitions. Actions such as ensuring that pre-K and kindergarten curriculum standards are aligned and making early childhood education a component of administrator preparation can pave the way toward making kindergarten transitions easier for children and their families.

By supporting state legislation or grant programs that have smoother transitions as a goal, state boards can also use their bully pulpits to encourage districts to be more intentional about the transition process. State boards can encourage collaboration and partnership across state agencies that provide oversight of birth-to-5 early childhood programs and elementary schools.

Additionally, states can take the following steps:

1. Use federal funds to finance transition activities. With the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states and districts now have greater flexibility to invest in early learning. Under Title I of ESSA, federal

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(2009): 55–63; Lieny Jeon, et al., “Pathways from Teacher Depression and Child Care Quality to Child Behavioral Problems,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 82, (2014): 225–35; R.C. Whitaker et al., “Workplace Stress and the Quality of Teacher–Children Relationships in Head Start,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 30 (2015): 57–69.

¹²Ruben Fukkink and Anna Lont, “Does Training Matter? A Meta-Analysis and Review of Caregiver Training Studies,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2007):

294–311; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, “Toward the Identification of Features of Effective Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators, Literature Review” (Washington, D.C., 2010).

¹³IOM/NRC, “Transforming the Workforce”; McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, “Quality Standards Drive Professional Development Opportunities” (Wheeling, IL: National Louis University, 2016).

¹⁴The program is described here: <http://www.naeyc.org/profession/overview>.

¹⁵The states participating are Indiana, Iowa, New Mexico, New York, and Wisconsin.

¹⁶IOM/NRC, “Transforming the Workforce.” The project is described at <http://www.nas.edu/i2I>. The states participating are California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Virginia, and Washington, and the region of Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia is also participating.

¹⁷Governors in the following states participated: Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Utah, and Washington.

¹⁸States participating in these efforts are Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. In addition, T.E.A.C.H is also active in Colorado, Delaware, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, and Washington, D.C.

¹⁹The states that participated are California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington.

²⁰The states participating include Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, and New York. The cities participating include Hartford, Connecticut; Jacksonville, Florida; Kansas City, Missouri; and Richmond, Virginia. Rochester, New York, San Francisco, and Seattle serve as advisor cities.

²¹Winona Hao, “Advancing the Early Learning Workforce through State Policies,” *Policy Update* 23, no. 25 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2016); email communication from Winona Hao, September 22, 2017.

²²See IOM/NRC recommendations 1, 2, 3, and 8.

²³The four states in NASBE’s early learning group will be considering these competencies as part of their efforts.

²⁴IOM/NRC, “Transforming the Workforce,” p. 496–501.

²⁵Table 1 shows state boards could be instrumental in implementing IOM/NRC recommendations 4 and 5 regarding preparation and high-quality practice.



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funds can be used to assist pre-K students in the transition from early childhood education programs to elementary school programs. Title I plans must include a description of how local

education agencies will “support, coordinate, and integrate” Head Start services to enable smooth transitions between Head Start and elementary school programs. ESSA requires that districts reach agreements with Head Start programs and other early education programs. These agreements should include plans to organize joint transition-related training between child care providers and kindergarten teachers and specific instructions regarding the transfer of student records.

2. Provide tools and guidance to assist in local planning of transition activities. While it is important to preserve local flexibility when it comes to decision making, states have a role to play in establishing best practices around the transition process. Resources such as West Virginia’s Ready, Set, Go! School Readiness Framework and the Colorado Department of Education’s catalog of training videos are good examples of how states can provide tools that can be easily modified for a local setting.

3. Consider establishing a grant program to encourage districts to prioritize transitions. A grant program can be an effective means of allowing for local flexibility and innovation while still allowing for state guidelines around the most effective use of funds. States can use a grant program similar to Oregon’s KRPI program to encourage districts to make the kindergarten transition process a priority. Grants can be structured to incentivize research-informed transition activities, such as joint planning, data sharing, and professional learning opportunities.

4. Bring child care center directors and principals together to improve transitions and alignment between early learning and elementary school settings. Bringing center directors and principals together to discuss transition practices, share data, and coordinate standards, curricula, and assessments is an effective method for breaking down barriers that have traditionally hindered a smooth transition between early education settings and elementary schools. The opportunity for principals and directors to connect also makes it more likely that principals will begin building relationships with students and families prior to kindergarten entry. ■

¹Amy B. Schulting, Patrick S. Malone, and Kenneth A. Dodge, “The Effect of School-Based Kindergarten Transition

Policies and Practices on Child Academic Outcomes,” *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 6 (2005): 860–71, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16351333>.

²Michael H. Little, Lora Cohen-Vogel, and F. Chris Curran, “Facilitating the Transition to Kindergarten: What ECLS-K Data Tell Us about School Practices Then and Now,” *AERA Open* 2, no. 3 (2016): 1–18, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858416655766>.

³West Virginia’s Universal Access to a Quality Early Education System (2525), 126 CSR 28, August 2016, <https://apps.sos.wv.gov/adlaw/csr/readfile.aspx?DocId=27726&Format=PDF>.

⁴Beth L. Green et al., “Oregon Early Learning Division Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation Grants Year 1 Evaluation Report” (Portland, OR: Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, August 2015), <https://www.pdx.edu/ccf/sites/www.pdx.edu/ccf/files/KRPI%20Year%201%202014-15%20Report.pdf>.



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For starters, the public and their elected officials may need education about the role high-quality pre-K plays in enabling all children to meet state standards.⁸ Unless pre-K is adequately funded to support a well-educated, stable teacher force, reasonable class sizes, plus embedded coaching and other aspects of a strong continuous improvement system, state pre-K investments are unlikely to produce the desired outcomes.⁹

Simply making the case for high-quality pre-K is unlikely to be sufficient. In our experience, wishful thinking often prevails in state discussions of what it should cost to fund high quality pre-K. The best way to combat this problem is for each state to engage in a formal process to determine the resources required for high-quality pre-K and how that might vary by child and community, as happens in the creation of K-12 formulas.

States can make use of the Cost of Preschool Quality (CPQ) Tool, an Excel-based model available from the federally funded Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (for which we both work). The CPQ lets policymakers calculate the full cost of quality (statewide or by community) and to estimate the cost of a new program or policy change to an existing program (e.g., changing class size or teacher qualifications, requiring salary parity between public schools and contracted providers, and expanding enrollment). The model also highlights inputs related to each of the National Institute for Early Education Research’s 10 research-based preschool quality standards.¹⁰

For those states that have engaged in such a process to inform pre-K funding, the results have been better than for those without the process. This approach can guide the adaptation of K-12 funding formulas to provide adequate and fair funding for pre-K based on careful appraisals of what is required to achieve a state’s goals for its young children. ■

¹Flavio Cunha et al., “Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation,” *Handbook of the Economics of Education* 1 (2006), 697–812; James J. Heckman, “The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education,” *American Educator* 35, no. 1 (2011), 31.

²W. Steven Barnett and Richard Kasmin, “Funding Landscape for Preschool with a Highly Qualified Workforce” (Rutgers University, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2016), http://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_175816.pdf.

³U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “The Current Population Survey October 2015: School Enrollment Supplement,” table 3 (Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census, 2015).

⁴W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2016: State Preschool Yearbook* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2017).

⁵Bruce Baker and Kevin Welner, “School Finance and Courts: Does Reform Matter, and How Can We Tell?” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 11 (2011): 2374–414; Timothy J. Gronberg et al., “The Adequacy of Educational Cost Functions: Lessons from Texas,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 86, no. 1 (2011): 3–27; Eric Hanushek and Alfred Lindseth, *Schoolhouses, Courthouses, and Statehouses: Solving the Funding-Achievement Puzzle in America’s Public Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶Bruce Baker et al., “Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card” (Newark, NJ: Education Law Center, 2016).

⁷Details of the calculations behind these estimates are in Barnett and Kasmin, “Funding Landscape.”

⁸Lynn Karoly et al., “Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise” (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2006); James E. Ryan, “A Constitutional Right to Preschool?” *California Law Review* 94, no. 1 (2006): 49–99.

⁹W. Steven Barnett and Ellen Frede, “The Promise of Preschool: Why We Need Early Education for All,” *American Educator* 34, no. 1 (2010): 21.

¹⁰The free, flexible tool is preloaded with state-specific data such as teacher and administration compensation rates. It enables comparisons of virtually any program design or policy change. The CPQ web page (<http://ceelo.org/cost-of-preschool-quality-tool/>) has a quick start guide, user guide, and access instructions, and technical assistance is available.

Wishful thinking often prevails in state discussions in what it should cost to fund high-quality pre-K.