

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

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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>.

REFERENCES

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Sparks, S. D. 2016. “Focus on Fade-Out: A \$26 Million Project to Hash Out How to Make Pre-K Gains Last,” Inside School Research blog, *Education Week* (January 19), http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2016/01/fadeout_series_1_education_problems.html.