

The Transition to Kindergarten in Hawai`i

—Jeanne Riley and Mike Fahey

A successful transition from home or preschool to kindergarten is a key component of school readiness (Pianta & Kraft Sayre, 2003). Yet, quite often this major step in a child's life is neither planned nor well coordinated. Thoughtful planning for this transition, however, can have a positive impact on children, families, teachers, schools, and communities that last well beyond the first weeks of school. The transition to formal school sets the tone and direction of a child's school career and can even be a turning point in a child's life. A fitting analogy is that of a seedling being transplanted from one location to another. The transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimize the shock so that the plant is not damaged and can flourish again as soon as possible (Makin, 2000). This metaphor also reminds us that children in transition are vulnerable and that the transition to kindergarten is more than a one-time event. It is a journey that takes time, preparation, and collaborative planning.

"Kindergarten is the place in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners. If no other objectives are accomplished it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners" (Bailey in Pianta & Cox, 1999, p. xv).

A National Perspective

The transition to kindergarten has been, in recent years, a subject of great interest because of the critical role it plays in helping children have a successful experience when they enter school.

Research conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) supports the view that the transition to kindergarten is a significant time to establish competencies critical to a child's school success and achievement. The transition is not only about how children adjust to kindergarten, but also how families and schools interact and cooperate with each other. Research conducted by the center documents that it is not just the child who makes a transition—families and school personnel are also involved (NCEDL, 2002).

A seminal work, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* published by the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (2000), presents the most up-to-date evidence about early brain development. It points out that school entry is a critical transition point when individual differences in what young children know and are able to do begin to influence longer-term patterns of learning and achievement. (p. 386).

Children who experience a smooth transition as they enter the formal world of elementary school are more likely to be successful in school (Glicksman & Hills, 1981; Lombardi, 1992; Pianta & Cox, 1999). Research conducted in the last fifteen years also shows that children, especially those at risk for school failure, who experience continuity as they enter the formal world of school are more likely to sustain gains that were achieved in preschool programs. In addition, early school adjustment has been shown to have a long-term impact on children's later school success (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Parker and Asher, 1987).

When viewed from a broader perspective, planning the transition from home or preschool to kindergarten entails a number of basic communication requirements that involve school programs, school staff, and the community. There are five critical elements to be considered to ensure successful transitions for young children and their families (Glicksman & Hills, 1981; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Elementary teachers and staff, and early education and care teachers, together with families, can make starting school a positive experience for all by focusing attention on each one of these elements:

Create and promote connections and relationships in the community. Transition has to be understood in terms of the settings that contribute to child development (e.g., family, classroom, community) and the connections and relationships among these settings at any given time and across time (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003). It is important that community members understand that school transition is not a one-size-fits-all program. What works in one community may not be effective or even needed in another community.

Maintain ongoing communication. People who work in early education, child care, and kindergarten can increase

educational program continuity by getting to know each other, sharing information about their programs, and planning for effective transitions. In addition, policy makers can support teachers by adopting a transition system, model, or guide that will work to coordinate the process. Early education and care personnel and kindergarten teachers have limited time outside the classroom. Therefore, opportunities for formal and informal contact should be supported throughout the year by flexible time schedules and advanced planning—preferably by a collaborative transition team that meets regularly.

Prepare children for transition. Although many parties are involved in the transition to kindergarten, children themselves are the most affected by the changes. Children can enter kindergarten with vastly different backgrounds and experiences. In turn, kindergarten programs are diverse in purpose, structure, and schedule. No matter what a child's previous experiences, all children need to be accepted at their own developmental level. Preparing children for the transition to kindergarten does not mean "getting them ready" by focusing on a narrow range of academic skills, drilling on new rules, or retaining them in preschool for another year. School is a place where children and parents expect opportunities for growth and development from whatever starting point the child brings to the new setting.

Involve families in the transition. Studies indicate that successful early childhood programs actively involve families. This involvement should not stop when children reach the elementary school campus. The family's influence is fundamental in the early years and successful schools welcome family members in ways that go beyond the traditional family activities such as fundraising, parent-teacher conferences, May Day, and Back-to-School Night. Ongoing, meaningful, two-way communication between parents, families, and teachers is important. Parents need to be involved as decision makers and volunteers on campus and at home. Schools need to be able to respond to the diversity among families. Activities need to be responsive to the language, culture, and socioeconomic conditions of children and families.

Provide program continuity through developmentally appropriate curriculum. "Programs for young children should not be seen as either play-oriented or academic. Rather, developmentally appropriate practice, whether in a preschool or a primary classroom, should respond to the natural curiosity of young children, reaffirm a sense of self, promote positive dispositions toward learning, and help

build increasingly complex skills in the use of language, problem solving, and cooperation" (Lombardi,1992).

Program continuity across early childhood services is facilitated by the degree to which all programs in the community, for children from birth to age 8, work together to ensure continuous and effective services throughout these important years. Children whose teachers practice appropriate methods in both early education and care programs and kindergarten are more easily able to build on earlier experiences to help them make sense of their world. When preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers use similar strategies, children adjust more easily to school. By attending joint training sessions teachers can help to communicate and share information about the curriculum. It is essential that both early education and care staff and elementary school teachers work together to overcome the barriers and achieve smooth transitions to kindergarten for children and families.

Children and the families that nurture them do not develop apart from the community around them. In fact, the home, the school, and the community all contribute to the lifelong success of children. With this in mind, developing systematic transition strategies must become a common goal of communities as a way of supporting children and families. Collaboration between the home or early education/care program, the school, and the community is a way to enhance the child's independence while supporting and empowering the family.

The Transition to Kindergarten in Hawai'i

As part of its statewide effort to help all children enter school ready to succeed, the School Readiness Task Force saw the transition to kindergarten as one of its major priorities. In order to accomplish this purpose they created a Transitions Work Group with partners from the Department of Education Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS) Team, the University of Hawai'i, the Good Beginnings Alliance, and early childhood leaders including administrators, elementary school teachers, preschool teachers and directors, and representatives of a variety of agencies which support young children and their families.

In July of 2002, the Transitions Work Group developed its goals, outcomes, and strategies. These focused on promoting practices that would facilitate home-school communication and activities that would result in the successful transition of children and families between home, early childhood programs, and kindergarten. It was hoped

that the outcomes would support a statewide systematic approach for smooth transitions.

The Good Beginnings Alliance received funding through an Early Learning Opportunities Act (ELOA) grant in September of 2002 and hired Jeanne Riley as a consultant to conduct national and local research and develop resource materials, training, and policy recommendations.

The first task undertaken was a survey of transition to kindergarten practices in the state of Hawai'i. This was completed in May 2003. The survey was designed to

- ❖ identify current best practices,
- ❖ collect information on transition to kindergarten practices statewide,
- ❖ raise awareness of transition practices and their importance to school success, and
- ❖ examine the framework from which schools and communities work together.

The initial findings of the Hawai'i survey were similar to the findings of a national survey of nearly 4,000 teachers conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCELD) in Spring, 1998. Both surveys found that this major step in a child's life is seldom well planned or well coordinated. On a more positive note, however, many promising practices were collected from throughout Hawai'i. This led to the development of the TOOLKIT—a collection of successful strategies to facilitate the transition from home or preschool to kindergarten that could be used to train teams in each geographic area of the state. The School-based Transition to Kindergarten Teams were supported by the state STEPS Team, the Good Beginnings Alliance, and community workers.

After a review of national research and the completion of the local survey, policy recommendations regarding the transition to kindergarten for the state of Hawai'i were developed. These included

- ❖ strengthening bonds between preschools and elementary schools to foster communication and continuity;
- ❖ requiring school-based, transition-planning teams within each community to include elementary school personnel, preschool staff, families, agency workers, and community leaders;
- ❖ strengthening the bonds between families and schools by requiring teacher training in building partnerships with

families, especially those from diverse backgrounds; and

- ❖ providing developmentally appropriate kindergarten and preschool classroom experiences for children.

Resource materials and training in their use were subsequently developed to address these recommendations, including the following:

Steps to Kindergarten Transition: An overview booklet that offers the most recent research and the critical elements necessary for a successful transition to kindergarten. It can be used as a stand-alone publication and is also part of the Transitions TOOLKIT.

Parent Tips: Steps to Kindergarten Transition. A brochure, adapted for use in Hawai'i, designed to be used by educators to provide parents and families with ways in which they may prepare their children for the transition to kindergarten.

Teacher Tips: Steps to Kindergarten Transition. A brochure, adapted for use in Hawai'i, written to provide early education and care staff with "best practices" in supporting children in their transition to kindergarten. These tips may also be used to create handouts by trainers of early education and care practitioners or to connect elementary schools to early childhood programs in their neighborhoods.

A TOOLKIT. A compendium of hands-on activities and promising practices collected throughout the State of Hawai'i and across the nation, designed to promote connections among each community. The TOOLKIT offers examples of ways to connect children to schools, families to schools, early education and care programs to elementary schools, community to schools, and children to children. Materials and ideas were included to help school personnel examine current transition practices in their schools and communities.

The training of School-based Transition to Kindergarten Teams in each geographical area was part of the development of a statewide systematic approach for smooth transitions to kindergarten. The Elementary School-based Transition to Kindergarten Team training, supported by the state STEPS teams, was first conducted for 14 Oahu teams in April of 2004. In February of 2005 an additional 10 teams were trained in the Windward District and in May of 2005 six teams were trained in Kaua'i District.

The School-based Transition to Kindergarten Teams are made up of approximately 7–10 people from the school community. They typically include a Department of Education kindergarten teacher, a preschool teacher from the school,

a teacher/director from a neighborhood preschool, a family child care provider, a school/public health nurse or health consultant, a school administrator, a Parent-Community Networking Center Facilitator (PCNC), a Primary School Adjustment Project (PSAP) representative, and a school counselor.

The goal is to form a team that is representative of each community. The team then assesses current transition activities, creates a timeline, implements recommended transition practices for each community, and then evaluates and revises activities in order to achieve improvements each year.

We know from research and experience that when parents, teachers, and administrators in a community work together the transition process goes smoothly and families and teachers feel better prepared and more confident about the children as they enter school. The products and training that we have just described are a significant part of Hawai'i's School Readiness Initiative. We know what works, we have developed resources to help, and there are groups willing and able to work with schools and families to ensure that smooth transitions occur. We hope that members of our community will avail themselves of these resources and commit themselves to providing the support that every child in Hawai'i needs to have a good beginning in school.

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