

PENNSYLVANIA GOVERNOR'S FORUM:

Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools

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A View from Pennsylvania

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Education Commission
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 W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION



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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE



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A few years ago, teachers and administrators in the Derry Area School District in Western Pennsylvania began to notice a strange and troubling trend: children entering kindergarten were not ready for school. They were less prepared than previous generations had been, and the rural and suburban school district — one of the poorest in the state — was spending ever more time and money to help them catch up.

“Why was this happening?” asked Superintendent Roberta Kuhns McCahan. “We were becoming very frustrated.”

The district began to explore, to reach out to experts and, ultimately, to partner with an array of organizations, including a health care provider, an artists’ program and a neighboring district facing the same predicament.

“What started out as a quest to answer that why question and myopically help Derry Area School District soon turned into the most exciting and productive journey I have ever been associated with,” McCahan said. “Our quest showed us that with communication and collaboration, amazing things could happen for our children, their parents and our schools.”

What Derry Area School District learned is that children need to move smoothly from preschool and early child care to kindergarten and the early grades, that there needs to be continuity both in what they are learning and how, and that there must be collaboration among school districts, early caregivers, parents and the community. The lesson — one that is key to improving the success of children from their earliest years into adulthood — is that transitions are critical, particularly for young learners.

It is a lesson that school officials in Pennsylvania have taken to heart. The state is one of a handful that are leading the way in ensuring children receive a continuum of care starting at birth and extending throughout childhood so that they can move seamlessly from home to child care to preschool to school, and then from grade to grade. That means children have to be ready for school. It also means that schools have to be ready for them.

“We simply cannot meet the challenges of this country without ready kids and ready schools,” Roger Sampson, president of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), told more than 200 educators at a Philadelphia forum in December 2008.

And yet, all across America, the goal remains elusive, Sampson said. “Reform is never easy,” he said. “It is filled with criticism. It has very little positive recognition.”

Change is happening, step by step. In an attempt to foster far-reaching, community-based strategies, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) has invested \$57 million to establish incubators in seven states and the District of Columbia through SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids. SPARK aims to improve education for at-risk children by engendering partnerships among parents, early education providers, elementary school teachers and principals — to provide seamless transitions.

Further, in 2008, hundreds of educators, education experts, community leaders and policymakers gathered in Pennsylvania and three other states at Governors' Forums: Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools, sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and ECS. There they traded experiences and ideas for how to smooth transitions for the earliest learners and set them on a path to success.

Until now, Sampson said, the focus has been primarily on remediation for children who fall behind, rather than on preventing them from slipping in the first place. Remediation, he said, simply doesn't work. "It is too late."

"Thirty-seven percent of all U.S. students today leave grade four as not proficient readers — 37 percent!" Sampson said. "Well, here is the statistic: they never catch up."

The national graduation rate is 68 percent, he added.

"We are competing globally," Sampson said. "Kids cannot read."

Research shows that the best learning years are ages three through eight. To capitalize on that time period, there must be coordination among all the entities that care for and teach children, including their parents and other early caregivers, child care centers, preschools, elementary school teachers, principals and community groups. There has to be alignment vertically, from level to level and grade to grade, and horizontally, among all the programs that touch them.

"We need a model badly in this country," Sampson said. "Let Pennsylvania lead for the country."

Pennsylvania is blazing trails. It was the first state to embark on a comprehensive effort to align learning standards from birth through third grade. It also has established learning standards for infants and toddlers as well as for children in preschool, kindergarten and first and second grades; crafted assessment tools to measure children's achievement and progress as

they enter kindergarten; expanded access to full-day kindergarten; created a unified approach to quality standards, professional development, program design and advocacy in early learning; developed a system to track children as they move through early learning, school and government agencies, and changed its certification system to align teachers' preparation with the developmental stage of their students.

As a testament to its commitment, the state has spent more than \$3 billion on early childhood education – more than 30 percent of its basic education money – in six years, Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak said.

And yet, state officials acknowledge, there is much more to do.

Dianne Mark, dean of the College of Professional Students at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, laid out in stark terms why educators and caregivers need to converge on transitions.

“We have some disconnects between our birth to age five early learning system and our six through 18 school system, and we have to address those disconnects if we are going to support better outcomes for children,” she said.

One important disconnect, Mark said, has to do with eliminating achievement gaps. To do that, “we have to have teachers who can provide both instructional and emotional support to students...” she said. Currently, early education and child care systems offer emotional support to children, but elementary and secondary schools do not.

Second, Mark pointed out, “we want to sustain the gains that young children make in early childhood. We know the children who participate in early childhood programs, particularly but not exclusively from disadvantaged populations, are ahead of their non-participating peers in terms of both cognitive and social development, but the early cognitive and social gains that children get from high-quality early childhood education tend to dissipate. They tend to fade as they move through the elementary grades.

“In many ways,” she said “we used to think of early childhood education as if it were like a measles vaccine, right? It inoculated you for life. It is the wrong analogy. We need to change our model from a vaccination immunization model to what we would call the ‘healthy habits model’....We need to develop healthy habits in education from Pre-K through grade 12. We will never be able to sustain the gains we get in early childhood unless we sustain the kinds of supports you will offer in early childhood throughout the K through 12 continuum.”

Pennsylvania has been using a transition framework designed by Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education and director of the Center for Advanced Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. Pianta emphasizes the need for communication – between parents and early childhood educators and caregivers; preschool and elementary school teachers; elementary school teachers and parents, and among principals, caregivers and parents. Then, he says, there must be additional communication between all those people and the children, so that they can move smoothly among schools and teachers with differing styles, standards and demands.

Under that framework, one way to prepare a preschooler for kindergarten might be to allow him or her to visit a new school before starting there, Mark said.

“That is happening more and more and more, but still not enough; it is not enough of a common practice,” she said. “Even in the K-12 world, they have the same situation with kids moving from elementary school to middle school and to high school, and you would be surprised how often we do not allow the elementary students to visit the middle school and the middle school students to visit the high school. We get so focused on academics that we forget that that is a very real frightening experience, even for older kids. Think how frightening it can be for a younger kid.”

Other worthwhile transition activities include having elementary school teachers meet with parents on the first day of school and holding joint professional development activities for early childhood and elementary school teachers, she said.

The transition framework has pedagogical, programmatic and policy pieces, explained Mark and Harriet Dichter, deputy secretary of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning in the Departments of Education and Public Welfare. The pedagogical piece includes standards, assessment and curriculum development in early childhood education programs and elementary schools.

“A big issue in the transition piece is about whether or not we know what kids are able to do when they get into kindergarten and first grade,” Mark said. “If there is no communication, no sharing between that, the kids wind up at the first grade teacher’s door or the kindergarten teacher’s door and they have no sense of what this kid is able to do and demonstrate, and so it is starting from ground zero again.”

The programmatic approach includes parent engagement, school climate and shared leadership. "It tends to engage the whole school and not just the elementary ed teachers and engages the whole family and it alters the early learning center," Mark said.

Policy involves such issues as common teacher standards and equalized funding for early childhood and elementary and secondary education.

Pennsylvania has developed its own framework that focuses on the alignment of standards, teacher preparation and community engagement and action. The state has created a new continuum of standards for what children should learn from infancy through third grade. It is changing teacher certification requirements and has created transition teams for community engagement, Dichter said.

Still, she said, there are obstacles.

"One of our challenges here is we do not have a fully formed early education system yet," Dichter said. The state has made early education available to more children than in the past, she said, "but we are not nearly there in terms of reaching the entire population."

Further, she said, the education system's main focus is on older students, particularly those who have fallen behind. It is exactly those at-risk students, she noted, who demonstrate the need to "invest early and create the foundations and the strong foundations in the early childhood level or we will never catch up."

The Kellogg Foundation recently named success by third grade as one of three overarching goals, said Gregory Taylor, vice president for Programs. One of the foundations dilemmas, he said, is "to demonstrate effective practice on the ground in communities and learn from those lessons to push policy and state-level change" that can be sustained over time. That is why the foundation has partnered with key states whose experiences can help guide policymakers in other states and in the Obama administration, Taylor said.

Pennsylvania stands out because it is looking at a "system change approach" rather than the creation of new programs, Taylor said. "We know that programs come and go," he said, but officials in the Keystone State are eyeing "the creation of this real system that we think has legs and wherewithal that could stand the test of time regardless of who is in office."

Pennsylvania is a large and diverse state, urban, suburban, small-town and rural, industrial and service-oriented, moneyed and not. The Governor's Forum served as a platform for school districts of disparate sizes and configurations to share experiences and brainstorm further about linking ready kids and ready schools.

Philadelphia has nearly 10,000 children in pre-kindergarten and 13,500 in full-day kindergarten, said Donna Piekarski, deputy chief of the city's Office of Early Childhood Education. Six years ago, Piekarski said, many child care providers were reluctant to deal with "the big, bad school district." But after partnering with United Way's Early to Learn Initiative, after hiring a kindergarten transition coordinator and creating a task force, after starting a program with 13 child care providers and nine elementary schools, the district extended an open invitation to other child care providers. They accepted. Philadelphia began system-wide professional development programs for kindergarten and Pre-K teachers, established collaboration standards and wrote handbooks for transitions and school readiness. And it started tracking children before they get to kindergarten so that elementary schools could partner with the early learning facilities that feed them.

"And the light bulb finally went off when we said, 'Wait a minute, the kids are ready; they have always been ready. Are the schools ready?'" Piekarski said. "And so we switched our initiative to ready schools and we developed a ready schools handbook and we identified at each elementary school a kindergarten transition leader and we provide professional development twice a year for those leaders and Pre-K directors and Pre-K providers."

Last year, Piekarski said, 133 of the district's 171 elementary schools completed transition plans. Among the activities were play dates between Pre-K and kindergarten students, a kindergarten teacher who went to a child care center to meet her future students and improved student registration. This year, she said, the goal is to have transition plans for all the schools.

Her message for colleagues from smaller districts: "If we can do it, so can you."

With more than 800 square miles, Susquehanna County is geographically large, but sparsely populated. It is rural, mountainous and, according to Stephnie Thornton, program manager for the Susquehanna County CARES Family Resource Center, doesn't have a single town with more than one stoplight. In the six school districts in Susquehanna and neighboring counties, about 600 children start school each year. There, the districts worked to build strong relationships among teachers in elementary schools

and child care providers by holding teacher swaps. They scheduled a “move up” day to enable children who were bound for kindergarten to check out their new schools. They created a booklet for parents and a CD, recorded by children, called “Tuning Up for School,” which they put in child-sized backpacks distributed upon registration for elementary school. They also held a summer program for some children and parents.

Cumberland County tried a different approach. The nine school districts in the central Pennsylvania county have participated in a transitioning team. They worked together, but they weren’t all doing the same thing.

“The vision was that every district, and every zone in that district, would build their own model,” said transition team chair Kent Chrisman, professor of Early Childhood Education at Shippensburg University. “So there wouldn’t be a unified model coming from a central source, but rather that those local communities would build the transitioning work that seemed to make sense for them.”

So one district made a CD with a third grader walking through a school building and explaining, to incoming students and their parents, what happens there. Another district made a book with photographs for rising kindergarteners.

In the Southern Tioga County School District, home to Pennsylvania’s Grand Canyon, a public-private partnership is working to give every three- and four-year-old the opportunity to attend full-day preschool at private centers and Head Start, said Sam Rotella, Jr., the district’s Pre-K Counts coordinator. The program also developed a new teamwork between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers.

“It was amazing to find that here are two groups of people trying to prepare kids for school and trying to prepare kids in readiness, and yet they very seldom if ever got together,” Rotella said. “It was an amazing transformation to actually get these individuals in one room and have them talk about what they are doing and what their experiences were.”

The point was that there are many ways to achieve the same goal, the goal of smoothing transitions for children, making them ready for school and making schools ready for them.

Sharon Lynn Kagan, the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University, told the educators that they needed to be “transition smart.”

“By that, I mean in a time of limited resources, at a time when our field is commanding incredible attention, it is imperative that what we do makes a difference for young kids,” she said. “I defined transition-smart as transitions that are durable, that are not one-time activities...and I define transitions that are smart as those that are very, very deep.”

Kagan and other experts said the timing for transition work is right in 2009.

Jim Moran, vice chancellor for the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, asserted that “there are a confluence of factors in very different systems that are all coming together about the same time to give us what I see as a storm of opportunity that did not exist five years ago, will not exist five years from now.”

The first factor, Moran said, “is the recognition that early childhood is vital, I think, to the economic development. And this is where we get partnerships really with labor and industry in terms of how we do it...”

“That places early childhood in a very different context — and I know some of us have been saying that for years,” he said. “The difference is we have economists saying it today instead of people from the early childhood field. These are the reasons why we see and are able to justify to a Chamber of Commerce, to our local community, the investment in early childhood as an investment that is tied to workforce development, labor and industry and the long-term economic success of that community.”

Another factor, he said, is a change in teacher certification that recognizes early childhood education as a distinct field requiring distinct preparation.

And a third factor is having the right people work on the issue at the right time.

“We know we have the people and we know our people have the passion,” Moran said. “And that is what it is going to take to really move us into that next level — it is to have that commitment of time, commitment of passion.”

Roberta Kuhns McCahan, the Derry Area School District superintendent, certainly conveyed that passion at the Governor’s Forum.

“I overhear K-12 educators on a regular basis, especially recently with the uncertain economic forecast, say things like, ‘We cannot be everything to everybody. We cannot afford to take one more initiative. And forget about those kids from birth to age four because we have to worry about kindergarten through grade 12 and PSSA (the Pennsylvania System of

School Assessment).’ I have learned through this very exciting initiative that we cannot afford not to,” McCahan said. “The benefits to our schools and community are priceless.”

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