

SEP 2018

Transitions and Alignment

FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN



**EDUCATION
COMMISSION
OF THE STATES**

Your education policy team.

BRUCE ATCHISON

SARAH POMPELIA

Too often government officials design programs for children as if they lived their lives in silos, as if each stage of a child’s life were independent of the other, unconnected to what came before or what lies ahead.

James Heckman¹

Policymakers and educators continue to grapple with issues of persistent achievement gaps in student performance at third grade and beyond. As they do, they look for ways to create a more seamless system of education that is “connected from one stage to the next — reducing the chances that students will be lost along the way or require remedial programs to acquire skills or knowledge they could have learned right from the start.”²

Successful coordination between preschool and kindergarten helps to lay the groundwork for a child’s positive school experience. If this transition does not go well, children can be turned off to learning and school at an early age. By aligning standards, curricula, instruction and assessments between preschool and kindergarten, children can experience a seamless pathway that sets them up for future success.

Based on research and work with states, Education Commission of the States has identified these two key elements that states can consider when creating a coordinated preschool-to-third grade system:

- **Effective transition** programs and practices that help the child and family move smoothly and successfully from one learning setting to another.
- **Authentic alignment** of the basic pedagogical components of early learning and kindergarten to create continuous learning and teaching experiences.

This brief elaborates on these key elements and provides examples of state efforts and strategies for creating successful transitions.

Six states reference early transitions in statute; and 14 states, plus the District of Columbia, reference them in code.

The early childhood years are recognized as the cornerstone of effective P-20 educational experience, yet there is a persistent gap in the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

Successful transitions from preschool to kindergarten and alignment of standards, curricula, instruction and assessments between the two are key to a child’s future educational success.

EFFECTIVE TRANSITION

Transition refers to the process of a child moving from one program or setting to another. When children make the transition from preschool to elementary school, they must adjust to new settings and situations — including new rules and expectations, new ways of learning, new relationships with peers and adults, and new physical surroundings. The earliest years are the cornerstone of effective P-20 systems and the foundation upon which subsequent learning is built. Yet there is a persistent gap in the transition between preschool to kindergarten.³

The first years of the **EDUCATION CONTINUUM** include what occurs from **birth to 5 years of age** and **early elementary**, from kindergarten to third grade.



A lot is at stake in ensuring a smooth transition between preschool and kindergarten. Researchers continue to find strong relationships between children's cognitive and social competence before kindergarten and later academic success.⁴ In a study of several, large longitudinal data sets that tracked children's development through ages 8, 10 and 14, students' reading and math skills and their ability to focus at kindergarten entry were significant predictors of later academic achievement.⁵ This shows that if a preschool program does not meet sufficiently high standards, its benefits may be short-lived.⁶ And if the public school system — especially in the early elementary grades — is not equipped to sustain and build on the benefits of high-quality, preschool programs, the gains children make in the early years may not translate into long-term success.⁷

A P-20 system refers to an entire educational continuum that stretches from preschool through high school, baccalaureate, graduate, doctoral and professional programs.

An inadequate transition from preschool to kindergarten can result in children experiencing high levels of stress, which can interfere with their academic performance and emotional adjustments.⁸ Ineffective transitions at this juncture can also lead to poor social adjustment, which may have negative consequences later — including chronic absenteeism and failure to make the academic gains necessary to succeed by third grade and beyond.⁹ When done well, an aligned and integrated approach that takes advantage of the potential of both preschool and the early elementary years — with a thoughtful transition for children and families — can reduce the likelihood that children fall behind early in life.

When a young child transitions successfully, he or she is more likely to enjoy school, show steady growth in academic and social skills, and have families who are more actively engaged.¹⁰ Intentional transition programs and practices

provide supports to the child, as well as the child’s family, and engage preschool and kindergarten teachers to ensure regular communication about children’s progress, including their assessment data. Effective activities generally occur over time and are tailored to meet the needs of children and families.

Examples of **CHILD AND FAMILY STRATEGIES**

may include:

- **Child visits to the kindergarten classroom.**
- **Kindergarten teacher visits to the preschool classroom.**
- **Teacher home visits.**
- **Workshops and networking for parents of young children.**
- **Attendance at schoolwide events for families and children.**
- **Kindergarten orientation sessions before school starts.**
- **Parent-child learning programs held in schools.**

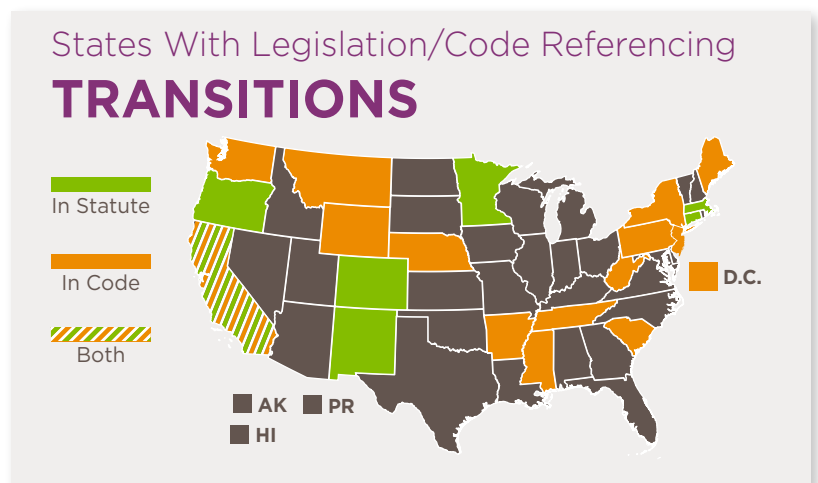
Policies and practices at the program level can also support effective transitions, help ensure continuity across systems and alleviate discontinuities that result from lack of communication and information between schools and early-care and education programs.

Examples of **PROGRAM- LEVEL TRANSITION PLANNING STRATEGIES**

may include:

- **Use of common transition forms across multiple programs and schools.**
- **Creation of transition teams and transition liaisons in districts and schools.**
- **Joint professional development for early education and early-grades teachers.**
- **Shared data and common data points across systems.**
- **Teacher-to-teacher conferences.**

Education Commission of the States’ [50-State Comparison: State Kindergarten-Through-Third-Grade Policies](#) identified six states that reference early transitions in statute and 14 states, plus the District of Columbia, that do so in regulatory code. The following state examples show how early transition policies appear in **California, Massachusetts** and **West Virginia**. Each state utilizes multiple best practices that lead to smoother transitions for children, families and teachers.





CALIFORNIA has a unique approach to the transition from preschool to kindergarten. In 2010, the state passed the Kindergarten Readiness Act ([S.B. 1381](#)), which created the only transitional kindergarten program in the country and amended entrance ages for kindergarten.¹¹ Transitional kindergarten is a two-year program that is part of the state's public K-12 education system. It teaches a modified kindergarten curriculum spread across both years and is available for all children in **California** who have their fifth birthday between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2. Though statute does not require a specific curriculum, it does require "curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate" and, according to the California Department of Education, "transitional kindergarten programs are intended to be aligned to the California Preschool Learning Foundations developed by the CDE."¹²

In addition to the Kindergarten Readiness Act, **California** code requires school districts to provide transition supports for children moving from preschool to kindergarten.¹³ The code stipulates that in order to provide educational continuity, districts should:

- Develop connections with public preschool programs (including state preschool, state child development and federal Head Start programs).
- Foster connections between before- and after-school programs.
- Provide opportunities for teachers and administrators at all public preschool programs, as well as in early elementary (kindergarten through third grade), to participate in activities such as program planning and staff development trainings together.



MASSACHUSETTS passed legislation in 2008 that requires kindergarten transition plans to be included in the system of evaluation used to determine the effectiveness of early education and care.¹⁴ One example of implementation of this legislation is in Somerville Public Schools, which has a framework for transitioning preschoolers to kindergarten that aims to ensure the child, family and teachers have the tools for a successful transition. Families and their children are invited to a transition day in June, when children receive a book and materials to engage with over the summer and are also able to socialize with other rising kindergartners. Later in the summer before school starts, Somerville offers an orientation aimed at easing the transition into kindergarten.

Another opportunity for transitioning children is the Summer Explore Kindergarten Transition program, geared toward children who have never been to school before, English-language learners, low-income children and those who might benefit from learning opportunities over the summer. The free program runs for four weeks in July and focuses on kindergarten routines and play experiences.¹⁵ In addition to supports for families and children, Somerville provides opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to share information and data through transition forms and in-person meetings. Somerville also developed the Kindergarten Entry Skills Inventory, which houses data on baseline skills assessments and how students are growing in relation to their baselines.¹⁶



WEST VIRGINIA code requires established county collaborative early childhood teams to ensure transition plans are informed by best practices, including the [West Virginia's Comprehensive Framework for School Readiness](#).¹⁷ The code also requires all county collaborative early childhood teams to “have a written plan for transitioning children into WV Pre-K and out of WV Pre-K into kindergarten” that includes:

- A chance for families and children to visit the setting into which the child is transitioning.
- A written document that includes registration information and what to expect from pre-K or kindergarten.
- An opportunity for pre-K and kindergarten providers and teachers to meet at least once a year to plan for successful transitions and the supports kindergarten readiness requires.
- A county system with the purpose of transferring assessment data between pre-K and kindergarten systems.
- Policies and procedures for transitioning children with Individual Education Plans.

West Virginia's codified language around early transitions sets the stage for effective implementation at the local level, as evidenced by Greenbrier County's early transition plan.¹⁸ The family engagement component of its framework includes at least two home visits from the preschool teacher at the beginning and at the end of the school year. To ensure smooth transitions, preschool teachers meet with the receiving kindergarten teachers to go over each child's assessment scores, strengths and what the child is working on.

Aside from this transition meeting, preschool and kindergarten teachers meet throughout the year. District staff also meet quarterly to review student data and progress and set goals based on these data. Greenbrier County's dedication to the critical preschool-to-kindergarten transition has led to growth in students' phonemic awareness and sets up a positive foundation for children and families in the district.¹⁹

AUTHENTIC ALIGNMENT

Alignment in early childhood education often refers to changes in governance that involve creating new state agencies focused on early childhood programs or consolidating multiple early childhood programs into the same department. In this paper, alignment refers to the continuous interrelated nature of education programs and practices in early learning settings and the early grades — an important component of a successful early learning experience for students.

Alignment within a program may highlight the coherence or interconnectedness between standards (what children are expected to know and do), curricula (what children are taught), instruction (how children are taught) and assessments (what and how children's progress is measured). Aligned experiences include all areas of learning (social, emotional, physical and cognitive) that are developmentally appropriate and matched to the individual abilities of the child. Intentional alignment of these interconnected pieces increases the consistency of children's experiences across and within grades to create a continuum of learning that builds on the previous year.

Important elements of **ALIGNMENT**



STANDARDS

What children are expected to know and do.

Standards are set by states and describe the skills and competencies students should develop by the end of each grade.

CURRICULA

What children are taught.

Classroom experiences that support state standards and the state's early learning developmental guidelines.

INSTRUCTION

How children are taught.

Teachers at every level who are trained in child development and prepared to provide experiences that meet children's developmental needs.

ASSESSMENTS

What and how children's progress is measured.

Assessments that inform instruction and are based on standards that measure what children have been taught.

Alignment across these elements can decrease the likelihood that gains made in preschool will fade out in the early grades.²⁰ When curricula, instruction and assessments are aligned with each other; high-quality standards are in place; and there is communication and transference of data and records from one year to the next, children are more likely to perform better academically.²¹ When teaching and learning are of high quality, matched to children's abilities, include an interrelated set of experiences, and are driven by teachers and school leaders who understand how young children learn, the gains that children make are likely to be sustained and expanded upon from one year to the next.²²

As states continue to invest in early childhood education with a commitment to educational attainment, one possibility for state policymakers is to make quality transition- and alignment-focused decisions. However, aligning early childhood education and K-3 policies is not a one-time project; it is incremental and a continuous process that requires systematic collaboration and communication among leaders across the preschool-to-third-grade continuum to develop a coherent strategy for improving student achievement. The skills and knowledge students gain in one year serve not as an end, but as a foundation upon which to build additional skills and knowledge in the next year.

Final Thoughts

A smooth transition between preschool and kindergarten is key to a child's social adjustment and future educational success. This alignment aids in ensuring that as students move from one system to another, they experience consistency in standards, curricula, instruction and assessments. Linking systems through new policies and intentional alignment of policies that support all elements of the education continuum — and are effectively implemented in schools — may result in better outcomes for children and foster a child's love of learning.

As educators and decision-makers work to create effective policies that support transitions and aligned learning from early childhood to early elementary grades, it will take additional effort to ensure that systems are linked. Moving forward, policymakers might consider ways to better align these early education years to ensure transitions are smooth for children, families and educators.

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AUTHORS

Bruce Atchison is a principal at Education Commission of the States. If you can't find Bruce at the office, you might look to the nearest Rocky Mountain stream, where he is likely casting a fly for the big one. He can be reached at batchison@ecs.org or **303.299.3657**.

Sarah Pompelia is a policy researcher at Education Commission of the States. She completed her bachelor's degree at Northwestern University and earned master's degrees in public policy and social work at the University of Denver. In her free time, Sarah enjoys cooking, building furniture and spending as much time as possible in the mountains. Contact Sarah at spompelia@ecs.org or **303.299.3612**.

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