



# Bridging the Gap: Easing the Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten

Alignment between pre-K and kindergarten may help children successfully transition into school.

## Introduction

A child's transition from pre-K to kindergarten is an important time. It builds the foundation for academic, behavioral and social-emotional skills, as well as positive family-school connections, for years to come. Starting kindergarten is also a big shift for many children, one that requires them to adjust rapidly to new routines and expectations.

The nationwide Early Learning Network is studying children's transitions from publicly-funded pre-K into kindergarten in diverse communities, ranging from rural to urban locations; including coastal and central states; and representing children and families of diverse racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

The results of this work show significant misalignment in the experiences children have in pre-K and kindergarten classrooms. Deep structural challenges produce these misalignments, including complex governance systems and lack of interagency collaboration. When parts of the educational system are misaligned, learning and development may be compromised.

**Policy changes, both large and small, can bring children's early experiences into greater alignment. Improved continuity as children move from pre-K into kindergarten may help ease stressful transitions and maintain the advantages children gain from pre-K.**

**In this brief, we explore factors in pre-K and kindergarten that typically lack alignment and offer some ways program decision-makers can start bridging the gap.**



### What does alignment mean?

Alignment refers to a continuity of educational experiences (e.g. curricula, learning goals, instructional practices) to which children are exposed across grades, between pre-K and kindergarten.

### Why do we care about alignment?

*“Catch up” undermines the lasting effects of public pre-K on children’s development.*

Children who attend publicly-funded pre-K typically start kindergarten with better academic school readiness skills than similar children who do not attend<sup>i</sup>. But non-attenders tend to catch up as they move through elementary school. Furthermore, pre-K does not effectively close the gap between privileged and non-privileged children. This means public pre-K alone is not a strong enough buffer against the negative effects of poverty and racism, or the challenges faced by children with limited English skills. Instead, children need strong, well-aligned, coherent systems that support development across multiple years.

## What We’re Learning

There are many differences between publicly-funded pre-K and kindergarten classrooms. The following factors represent key differences between pre-K and kindergarten classrooms across the network’s six research studies.



### DIVERSITY

Children of color and those from diverse language backgrounds tend to attend pre-K programs with teachers and children who more closely match their race, ethnicity and home language, but transition to elementary schools that are more white and less language-diverse<sup>ii</sup>. The University of Virginia team found that 42% of pre-K teachers were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, while the same was true for only 16% of kindergarten teachers<sup>iii</sup>. Having a teacher of the same race or ethnic background can be beneficial for students of color<sup>iv</sup>, and having diverse teachers and classmates also benefits white children<sup>v</sup>.



#### PRE-K TEACHERS

42% were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds



#### KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

16% were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds

### Recommendations:

- **Prioritize diversity** in hiring teachers and staff.
- **Encourage all school personnel to explore their own backgrounds, expectations and biases**, and how these affect interactions with students.
- **Represent diverse children and adults** at schools and in the classroom through books, images and activities. Make sure these convey the dignity of individuals by showing them in many different roles — avoiding stereotypes and respecting cultural practices.
- **Learn best practices for culturally grounded teaching** and teaching English learners.

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### LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Consistently across studies, learning looks very different in pre-K and kindergarten. In kindergarten, children spend much more time in teacher-led learning (whole group, small group or individual work time) and more time focused on math and literacy<sup>vi</sup>. The MDRC team worked with Boston Public Schools to examine pre-K and kindergarten classrooms implementing a curriculum and professional development model that uses evidence-based language/literacy and math components in pre-K and aims to align instruction across early childhood and elementary school settings. The team found that pre-K and kindergarten children generally spent about the same amount of time on math activities and on activities to help build reading comprehension, like discussing a story. However, reflecting Common Core reading standards, kindergarten children spent relatively more time on activities focused on building their accuracy and fluency in reading skills, such as learning letter sounds and sounding out words. These findings are encouraging given that pre-K classrooms nationally tend to spend little time on math<sup>vii</sup>. With a proven, play-based, math-specific curriculum, like the one used in Boston, pre-K students can be exposed to the same amount of math as kindergartners.

### Recommendations:

- **Align pre-K and kindergarten content and teaching** to ensure children are consistently exposed to challenging material and opportunities for deep learning. Schools can look carefully at early learning standards and connect with pre-K programs to align goals and expectations for rising kindergartners.
- Find opportunities for kindergartners to **engage in unstructured learning time** and deep, open-ended exploration, and to **connect with learning through content focused on a theme, such as ocean life**.
- **Invest in a content-rich, culturally grounded curricula** that are aligned across grades and enriching for children from diverse backgrounds, and provide professional development supports for effective implementation.



### Supporting teacher-child interactions during a pandemic

It can be challenging for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to create warm and supportive classroom environments in the age of COVID-19, with state-by-state, and even locale-by-locale, differences in instruction delivery (e.g., all remote, opt-in to in-person, blended or split instruction), as well as social distancing guidelines limiting physical proximity, and mask wearing obscuring facial expressions. A variety of approaches can address these challenges. Teachers with all or a portion of their students learning remotely can schedule weekly virtual check-ins with each student to ensure quality one-on-one time. Teachers can make the most of their in-person time by regularly checking in with individual students outside of providing instruction.

## TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS

Warm, supportive and engaging interactions between teachers and children set the stage for learning and development. The University of Nebraska–Lincoln team found children who have consistently close relationships with their teachers across the pre-K to kindergarten transition have higher social skills and fewer problem behaviors over time<sup>viii</sup>. But many children experience a decrease in the quality of interactions when they leave pre-K and start school<sup>ix</sup>.

### Recommendations:

- **Provide teachers with professional development and coaching** focused on improving teacher-child relationships.
- Structure the school day to **allow teachers to spend quality time with students**, individually or in small groups. Administrators can support teachers by providing teaching assistants or paraprofessionals, and encouraging parent volunteers to lead activities so teachers can take time to connect with children.
- **Choose curricula and social-emotional learning approaches** that give children autonomy and and foster social competence.



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## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ADULTS

Parents, pre-K teachers, kindergarten teachers and school administrators are all invested in young children’s success. Positive relationships between parents and teachers can support children’s social skills and reduce problem behaviors<sup>ix</sup>. Yet, in most localities, parents have to navigate interacting with a new set of teachers, administrators and staff when their child enters kindergarten. Furthermore, the Ohio State University team found that professionals in pre-K programs and elementary schools also struggle to build relationships with one another because they are often working in separate systems<sup>x</sup>. Improving communication among parents and their children’s educators in pre-K programs and kindergartens can increase alignment between settings and help achieve common goals for children.

### Recommendations:

- **Sponsor opportunities for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to interact**, share information on students and curricula, and find ways to improve family communication.
- Implement policies and practices that **create opportunities for teachers to establish meaningful relationships with their students’ families**.
- **Consider implementing educational data systems** that allow student information to be easily transferred from pre-K to elementary schools (e.g., state education IDs are issued in some communities).
- **Use technology to connect parents to teachers and to each other**. Digital applications (apps) can be used to send messages, upload photos, and let parents know how and when their help is needed.

## Final Thoughts

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Early childhood is a sensitive developmental period, and our current systems were not designed to support all children and families equally through the important transition from pre-K to kindergarten. We need to re-think our systems to be child- and family-centered, support social and emotional development, and foster meaningful relationships between parents and schools. Adopting some of the approaches discussed above to foster better alignment between pre-K and kindergarten is a first step toward a more functional system that supports development over time.

Do you have additional ideas and recommendations? Contact us or tag us on social media.



@earlylearningnetwork



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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>x</sup>Purtell, K. M., Valauri, A., Rhoad-Drogalis, A., Jiang, H., Justice, L., Lin, T., & Logan, J. A. R. (2020). Understanding policies and practices that support successful transitions to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 5-14.

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