

PRE-K

Collaborating for Seamless Transitions from Early Childhood Education into Elementary Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma

AMY FAIN AND DIANE EASON CONTRERAS

Within the context of Oklahoma's universal pre-K system, Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) collaborates with schools to facilitate pre-K students' successful transitions to the early elementary grades.

Oklahoma implemented universal pre-K in 1998. It is one of only five states that has or is implementing universal preschool, and for several years has served more four-year-old children than any other state. Our organization, CAP Tulsa, occupies a unique position in this work. As one of the largest anti-poverty agencies in Oklahoma

– and the largest provider of early childhood programs serving children from birth to age five in Tulsa – our work complements public preschool programs by focusing on families in poverty. We believe that the most effective way to address poverty is to promote the healthy development of young children through high-quality early childhood education and wrap-around supports.

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We also believe that children's first and most powerful teachers are their parents (or primary caregivers), and we know that children thrive when their families are also advancing. To this end, CAP has adopted a two-generation (2-Gen) service approach that encourages a high level of parental engagement in the early childhood education program at the same time it develops parents' advocacy skills and offers them educational and employability programs.

CAP has operated Head Start since 1998, and Early Head Start since 2001. In 2008, CAP received additional slots through the Oklahoma Early Childhood Program – state funding matched by private dollars to operate services for children from birth through age three. Combined, CAP serves over 2,300 children under age five, including 1,960 children in full-day, year-round early learning services in thirteen centers (nine NAEYC-accredited),¹ which accounts for roughly 36 percent of the children under age five in licensed childcare facilities in Tulsa. CAP also serves 345 children under three in evidence-based home visiting programs. We partner with three area school districts and many of our schools are co-located with an elementary school to promote continuity of care and encourage parental involvement in the educational system.

Every year we transition more than 500 children from our four-year-old program to more than seventy elementary schools in the larger Tulsa area. This past December, almost 300 parents participated in transition events at the school. Last spring, 480 families discussed with their child's teacher where their child would be attending elementary school. Our support for early education transitions is made possible by collaborating with parents, teachers, schools, and districts and is made sustainable through careful attention to data and evaluation to better understand the impact of our work and how it can be improved.

REFLECTIONS ON PARENT ADVOCACY FROM THE CAP CLASSROOM

Olivia Harper (2015), a CAP staff member and former CAP teacher, reflected on the importance of parents as advocates for their child's success in pre-kindergarten and beyond:

Every morning and every afternoon, I had the luxury of catching up with parents during drop off and pick up. We shared stories of the school day and laughed about the silly songs and phrases my students had picked up from my classroom. "Literacy Nights" happened every quarter in room 8; my little, wise owls brought their whole family. Together, they took part in games and activities that made letter sounds and early reading fun. Families warmly welcomed me into their homes for our bi-annual home visits. During these visits we shared coffee, listened to the kids share their talents (singing none other than "Let it Go"), and spent time creating a personalized vision for their child's pre-kindergarten year. . . .

Through teaching with this program, I have come to believe that long-term academic success is best fostered by the depth and quality of relationships I was able to build with parents, and how these parents have and will continue to encourage and campaign for their children throughout their academic experience. CAP Tulsa empowers their teachers to adopt innovative strategies that will equip parents to advocate for and engage in their child's learning – a function that history has demonstrated to be essential. On graduation day, I felt the reality of my vision for the year come to life. I would not have seen these results without the daily engagement, partnership, and support that my parents so graciously offered.

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1 The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a nationally recognized organization that has set standards for quality early childhood education.

SUPPORT FOR TRANSITIONS: ESSENTIAL TO CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM SUCCESS

An important part of the CAP Tulsa program and the long-term success of our children is our focus on transitions. Our transition and curriculum (T&C) staff support the full gamut of transition points from admission into the early childhood program, year-to-year classroom changes, and entry into elementary school. The benefits to children who have access to successful transition practices from our school to their next learning environment include improved relationships with peers and adults, enhanced self-confidence, increased motivation, openness to new experiences, and adaptability to change.² T&C staff, grounded in Head Start standards, focus on child preparation, ongoing communication and coordination, parent involvement, continuity of care and services, and collaborations between schools and teachers.³

Parents as Advocates

Each December, we invite every family of a four-year-old child enrolled at CAP to come to our kindergarten transition event and talk to CAP staff about their child's options for kindergarten. We start by letting each family know their child's home school for kindergarten based on their address

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- 2 See *Terrific Transitions: Supporting Children's Transition to Kindergarten* from the SERVE: Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Head Start Association for a range of resources on the benefits and best practices for transitions at <http://center.serve.org/tt/transiti.html>.
- 3 For more information about Head Start standards, research, and promising practices for the Head Start and Early Head Start community, see *Harvard Family Research Project and Boston Children's Hospital's Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten* at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/transitions-kindergarten.pdf>.

and share what other options are available in the district, as well as important dates for tours, transfers, and enrollment. We also invite schools that serve kindergarten children in all areas of our city to come and talk to families about their programs. These options include a robust list of charter and magnet programs.

The key message for these events is that families have the right to make the best choice for their child's next learning environment and that parents are their child's best advocates. (For more on CAP's approach to supporting long-term parent advocacy skills, see the sidebar on page 17.) We give parents a list of their rights and school assessment data, encourage families to visit schools before they make a decision, and provide a list of important questions to ask while on school campuses, such as school discipline practices, before- and after-school activities and childcare, rest and break times, transportation, and drop-off policy. There is also space for parents to write and document their own questions. We make sure families know they have choices and help them navigate the process to enroll their child in the school they desire.

Each CAP school also plans a set of transition activities for children, which vary based on their proximity to a public school and the depth of their relationship with the administration and kindergarten staff. Plans routinely include tours of the school, visiting kindergarten classrooms, and participating in kindergarten activities such as eating lunch in the cafeteria and playing on the playground. If children are unable to visit a public school partner, activities may include pen-pal programs, sharing video messages, and on-site practice days with cafeteria simulations and practicing new drop-off and pick-up systems. Each school encourages parents to participate in all

the experiences available to their children both on and off campus.

At one school, for instance, children spent a full morning in kindergarten classrooms. Preschool children paired with a kindergarten child, sat together on the carpet for story time, worked together during a learning station, and walked in a line together in the hallway. With the longer visit, CAP children were also able to participate in music, physical education, and art activities.

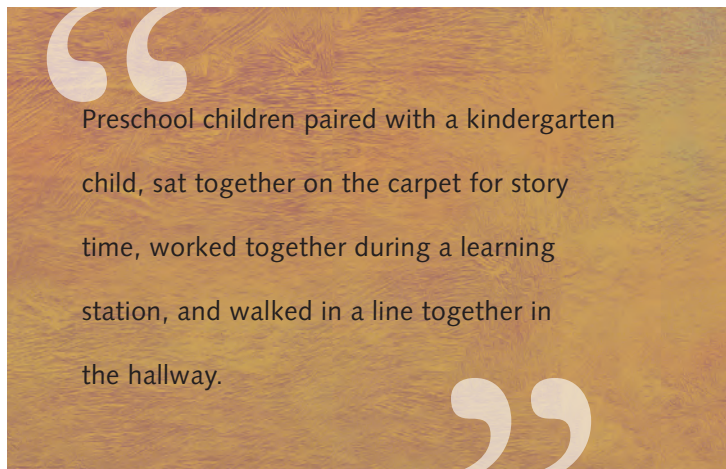
Individual teachers also have the opportunity to create transition activities within their classrooms. Other transition activities that support families include arranging opportunities for families to create social networks with other families going to the same schools, giving books to families to read with their children about going to kindergarten, and providing tips for successful transitions.

One of our most valuable practices is conducting individual meetings with families who have children who need additional support to connect them to other school services and community resources. For example, families with a child on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) receive an extra tip sheet with information about the IEP process and resources like the Oklahoma Parents Center,⁴ which provides individual assistance, workshops, referrals, and more to families of children with disabilities. CAP Disability Associates attend the winter transition events to share information with families and answer questions. Finally, individual meetings are scheduled with families in the spring to help with the transition of services under the IEP, reinforcing the information already received and addressing individual questions and concerns.

One alumni parent, whose child had received special services while attending

4 See <http://oklahomaparentscenter.org/>.

CAP, reported on her experiences at CAP and how it had prepared her family for kindergarten: “I learned a lot about the school system [while at CAP] – rights and what to expect. I knew the elementary school could provide better special education services for my child and I knew to advocate for my child.”



Collaboration with Elementary Schools Receiving CAP Children

Collaboration with the elementary schools that CAP children attend is crucial to successful transitions. But with more than seventy elementary schools in three school districts in and around Tulsa receiving children from CAP schools, these collaborations can be particularly challenging. T&C staff have traditionally focused on collaborations with schools that receive the most CAP alumni. For some years, identifying these schools was based on staff perceptions. More recently, the team has instituted data pulls from both the public schools and a parent survey to determine the schools most likely to receive CAP alumni. As we increasingly rely on data and track elementary attendance more closely, we observe slight changes in the list of top schools receiving CAP students every year.

At each CAP school, a team of staff is identified to lead transition efforts. Staff volunteer to participate based on their personal interest and dedication to the work. Once a list of schools is pinpointed, CAP staff reach out to the schools directly, collaborating with the most influential stakeholders in each school to establish a transition community. Traditionally the groups we have found to be most influential in the transition process are pre-K teachers, kindergarten teachers, community service coordinators or parent facilitators, and instructional coaches. These groups bring specialized knowledge of their systems, enhancing the understanding of each other's programs as well as the ability to build parental and community support. (For one instructional coach's description of her transition activities, see the sidebar.)

CAP STAFF REFLECTIONS ON TRANSITION EVENTS

Instructional coach Stacy Eglinton describes her work at CAP Tulsa and reflects on the importance of transition events for students and families:

I support teachers with planning and scheduling events throughout January to the end of the school year. These events include on-site events, in-classroom events, and field trip events that involve schools that a student may attend the following school year. I also work with our agency transition specialist to coordinate these events, and she supports myself, teachers, and families to plan, schedule, and facilitate these events, as well as act as a liaison between our agency and the public and charter schools.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to participate in different types of transition events, and the value in these experiences for the students is priceless. It not only creates excitement for the students and families to know that there will be something new to look forward to, but it also helps to turn the dialogue between teachers, parents, and students into something real and concrete for the students and families, especially when they are able to visit their future school, take a tour in a real kindergarten classroom, and possibly meet their future teacher, principal, gym teacher, playground auditorium, and the most anticipated – the cafeteria! Students love to grab a lunch tray and go through the lunch line and receive a hot lunch and eat it in the “big kid” cafeteria. Without the collaboration between teachers, school leadership, our transition specialist, and the public schools, these authentic experiences would not take place.

“Without the collaboration between teachers, school leadership, our transition specialist, and the public schools, these authentic kindergarten transition experiences would not take place.”

– Stacy Eglinton, CAP Tulsa instructional coach

Each school transition team meets several times throughout the year, allowing staff to work together to establish a transition plan. CAP Tulsa asks each team to identify past activities and practices, discuss what did and did not work, and outline activities and tasks for the current school year – listing dates, responsible individuals, possible barriers, and follow-up steps. Work is divided into four sections to ensure a holistic transition experience: family-school, school-school, child-school, and community-school. Examples of school-school activities include sharing assessment data between preschool and kindergarten teachers, developing early learning standards together, visiting each other’s classrooms, and learning about curriculum and routines. Parents are welcome to attend planning meetings, and the team shares finalized plans with families.⁵

Olga McKeown, an instructional coach at CAP Reed (one of CAP Tulsa’s early education sites), reported on her experience on the transition team with Lewis and Clark Elementary School, where she builds relationships with the elementary school staff and supports CAP staff on transition events such as library time, cafeteria day, and visits to a kindergarten classroom. She makes a special effort to encourage parent participation in the transition activities:

Transitions work is important because going to kindergarten is an important life event. Preschoolers can feel excited and a bit worried too. Families have similar feelings, knowing their child is going to the “big school.” Preschool teachers want the children in their classrooms to be ready for kindergarten, too. It is a process that is most successful when it is carefully planned out over the entire pre-kindergarten year.

This collaborative structure builds buy-in by allowing the transition teams to decide collectively what will work

best in their school. One transition team decided CAP teachers would complete a Literacy First checklist for outgoing preschoolers. This was a form specific to one district. Completing the checklist allowed CAP teachers to provide individualized information on their students to receiving teachers and helped kindergarten teachers with the number of assessments they complete at the beginning of the school year. This process works, in part, because the teachers decided as a team to implement this practice.

Supports for Teachers

CAP schools provide a range of supports and materials to teachers to support their work with partner schools, as well as with children and families. Meetings are held between teachers to discuss transition activities and kindergarten expectations. Books with related resources are supplied to the classrooms on going to kindergarten and how to make connections.⁶ A handout on summer transition tips and monthly handouts during the summer on transitions activities are provided to teachers and families each year. The Ready, Set, Go!⁷ video series includes a child, teacher, and family version and is provided to staff and families. Teachers are given survey results in which parents identify the transition activities they feel would be helpful for their child and where the child will likely attend school the following year.

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- 5 For additional ideas on best practices, rubrics, and action plans as well as many other resources using the four quadrants (child-school, family-school, school-school, and community-school) mentioned above, see Pennsylvania Key’s *Early Learning in Pennsylvania, Transition Into Formal Schooling Toolkit* at <http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=TransitionToolkit>.
- 6 Favorite books include *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson (<http://enemypie.com/blog1/>) and *My Brave Year of Firsts* and *It’s Hard to be Five* by Jamie Lee Curtis.
- 7 See <http://www.ready-set-go.org/>.

Collaboration with the District Central Office

CAP has a strong working relationship with the three districts in which our schools are located: Tulsa, Union, and Sand Springs. The Union Public Schools superintendent and the assistant to the superintendent for early childhood services currently sit on the CAP board, and the Sand Springs superintendent served on the board for a number of years. CAP and Sand Springs operate early childhood classrooms within the same building, with one leader overseeing both programs. They meet regularly to discuss school operations, transitions, curriculum, and how the two sides of the building are collaborating, as well as to review enrollment and attendance data and child outcomes. We partner with Union Public Schools on a teen parenting program and a workforce development program. The parenting program gives priority enrollment to the children of teen parents in our early childhood program located across the street from the high school, and the workforce development program, Career Connect,⁸ offers our early childhood classrooms for child development associate training for their high school students. Within and outside the partner meetings, data is shared between CAP and the districts. This includes both sides reporting on child outcomes as well as CAP requests on CAP alumni.

Support at the district level is important for transitions, but much of the work happens school-to-school and teacher-to-teacher, often resulting in bottom-up changes and improvements. School transition teams discuss how partners can support each other's efforts; identify barriers to children's transition success, such as dropping off and picking up at the front entrance or the need for school uniforms at the elementary school, and the resources needed to eliminate common barriers;

and collaborate on new initiatives. A spring 2016 project includes gathering CAP and public school teachers to improve record sharing to help prepare kindergarten teachers for their new students. Once determined and tested, a recommendation will be made to leadership to institutionalize the practice. We have also implemented some collaborative enrollment events at select locations, allowing families who are enrolling their school-aged children to complete enrollment applications for CAP at the same time.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA AND EVALUATION

The journey to a seamless transition for the children in our program is an ongoing process of research, implementation, and internal evaluation. T&C staff have worked hard in the past few years to implement internal controls and survey efforts to obtain feedback from parents on transition offerings. The team also regularly reviews data on children and families and analyzes how children are doing while they are with us and, to the extent possible, what those data can predict for future success and areas of need.

As discussed earlier, CAP also collaborates with district partners to collect and assess data on school performance and learning after students leave our program, as well as obtaining data from alumni families to identify areas for improvements in CAP services, curriculum, and practice. A common challenge in obtaining data is the mobility of CAP alumni, both within and across districts. At one partner district, Union Public, only 44 percent of children were still enrolled at Union in fifth grade, seven years after they began the CAP program.

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⁸ See <http://www.unionps.org/union-career-connect/>.

Program Improvement Efforts

T&C staff have worked with CAP's Innovation Lab⁹ on several survey projects to understand the effectiveness of their services. At the winter transition events mentioned earlier, families complete a survey to assess the effectiveness of the service. We also measure how empowered families feel to determine the best school for their child. Roughly half of the participants in the December 2014 sessions reported that the conversations had changed their thoughts on where they wanted their child to attend kindergarten, and 98 percent agreed or strongly agreed they had a better understanding of the enrollment and application process.

Teachers asked families about their plans for kindergarten during the last parent-teacher conferences of the 2014-2015 school year, which helped us identify the schools most likely to receive CAP alumni and target them for partnership meetings and transition events. Data on enrollment in charter and magnet programs, as well as evaluation information on many of the schools, allow us to examine the types of schools our children will be attending. We cross-referenced the data from the survey with various demographic fields and risk factors to identify vulnerable groups that are not fully participating or benefiting from the current transition activities so we can provide them with extra attention in the future. For example, children who enroll at age four were less likely to participate in transition events and less likely to apply for a different elementary school from their neighborhood school than children who entered CAP at age three or younger.

The Tulsa area has several charter and magnet elementary schools. Every year enrollment among CAP alumni in these programs increases as families learn

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9 See <http://captulsa.org/innovation-lab/>.

about the programs and more families apply for admission. Through alumni surveys, we have seen that families who attend charter or magnet programs are more likely to be involved in the school; however, we do not have sufficient data at this time to understand how children perform in charter and magnet programs. As we work towards continued improvements, CAP will be tracking how alumni children are doing in magnet and charter programs around the city.

In the prior year, transition and Innovation Lab staff worked together to obtain information from parents on their child's first weeks of kindergarten. Parents were asked how well children adjusted to different aspects of the new school, whether they felt they had the knowledge and resources to prepare for kindergarten, their participation in transition activities, and overall satisfaction with CAP transition services. The majority of families reported that children adjusted well during the first week and credited the CAP transition services with helping prepare their child and themselves for kindergarten. The families who reported significant challenges were outliers. Families who stated their child was sad and confused during the first week of school were also more likely to report some confusion about their knowledge and resources to prepare their child, participated in fewer transition activities, and reported slightly lower satisfaction with CAP's transition services. Although the survey did not allow for direct cause-and-effect analysis, the results underscore the importance of parents feeling empowered and knowledgeable and the importance of providing transition activities to families.

Understanding Child and Family Progress Data

In addition to better understanding and improving the transition experience, CAP Tulsa is keenly interested in the long-term success of children and families. We work with partners to regularly examine data on the success and needs of children and families after they leave our program.

Every three years, CAP Tulsa requests school data on CAP alumni from Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) and Union Public Schools, the two districts receiving the majority of our children. This data allows CAP to understand alumni performance on state tests, class grades, attendance, grade retention, and participation in English language learner programs, special education, and free and reduced-price lunch. CAP staff analyzes and reviews this information internally, as well as through partner meetings with the public school district, to identify areas for improvements, including the alignment of curriculum and services. For example, CAP Tulsa’s preschool program is focused on the whole child, while TPS’s preschool program is strongly focused on pre-literacy skills, resulting in higher literacy outcomes for TPS preschoolers at the start of kindergarten. We discuss this openly and want to examine if one approach has a stronger impact in the long run over the other. We also believe we can learn from TPS about how to better teach literacy, while TPS can learn from us about the importance of other domains like self-regulation, communication, and math.

To supplement what the agency learned from public school data, we conducted a five-year longitudinal survey from 2009 to 2013, recruiting 244 families in our three-year-old program and surveying them yearly through second grade. Just over 60 percent of families participated in the final year. The Alumni Impact Project (AIP) covered a broad range of indicators from health

to finances to school engagement that were repeated year to year. The agency’s Results Map, which outlines areas the organization believes are critical to children’s and families’ development and success, guided the questions in the survey. CAP staff used the findings to identify areas of need and inform changes to 2-Gen program offerings to families. This has included a financial capabilities offering, an English language program, and a focus on supporting alumni families in the agency’s new strategic plan.

A half-dozen additional open-ended questions were included each year based on the age of the children. Surveys included questions on how CAP could better prepare children for kindergarten; how parents, schools, and the community could better support children in elementary school; advice alumni parents would give to parents preparing for elementary school; and questions on reading progress every year. The information collected from families often aligned with the areas that T&C staff had identified for continued refinements.¹⁰

For instance, in Year 3 of the AIP, when cohort children were completing kindergarten, roughly a third of families provided suggestions to a question on how CAP could better prepare children for kindergarten. Literacy-related items were the most common answer. By cross-referencing data points, we found that AIP parents who reported not reading to their child at home were twice as likely to report their child was behind in first grade reading. CAP renewed efforts to encourage parents to read at home, to help non-English-speaking parents understand the importance of reading in any language, and to provide more books for children to build their home libraries.

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¹⁰ For summaries of the first four years and a full report for the final year (including the Results Map), visit: <http://captulsa.org/innovation-lab/research-initiatives/alumni-impact-project/>.

Another large-scale project initially led by CAP was the implementation of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) in Tulsa. Developed by McMaster University, EDI is a powerful predictor of later school success, examining kindergarteners' school readiness at the school and neighborhood levels in five domains: physical, social, emotional, literacy/math, and communication. Between 2011 and 2013, teachers completed checklists on 5,250 kindergartners in three school districts. The findings allow schools and community partners to identify areas of need and risk. Children who participated in a pre-K program (whether CAP or public school) were half as likely to be "at risk" than children who did not attend preschool, with the best results coming from children who also attended CAP's three-year-old program. These positive impacts of preschool hold in a regression controlling for the available observable characteristics such as race, income, gender, and language at home. Of course, it is possible that some of the difference is due to unmeasured factors such as the level of parent engagement with the child. T&C staff trained individual schools on how to use their school reports to identify areas where children are lagging behind for focus during the early years of elementary school. This information is also useful in conversations with community partners and funders to underscore the importance of early childhood programs and allocation of resources to address needs.¹¹

Physical health and well-being was an area in which CAP children were particularly low. Because of this finding, T&C staff advocated for improved playground equipment to provide challenges that are more physical and encourage more movement during free play. This included

11 For more information on the EDI and Tulsa's assessment efforts, see <http://risktoready.org>.

building tracks around playgrounds to encourage more use of tricycles, walking, and running.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: ENSURING LONG-TERM SUCCESS

T&C staff also take time to reflect on more global issues and on how to incorporate possible solutions into their current everyday practices. The challenge of achieving long-term success and the well-documented fade-out is of concern to everyone involved in early childhood education. There is no question that pre-K and three-year-old programs provide an important boost to children and that children who benefit from a pre-K program are more likely to be ready for school than their peers who do not. However, much like national trends, the significant gains children achieve while enrolled in CAP's early childhood program appear to diminish over time for many.

A Long-Term Strategy: Birth through Third Grade

CAP Tulsa is in the process of finalizing a ten-year strategic framework. Recognizing that early childhood education is essential but not enough, a particular focus of the strategic plan is to build and support a continuum of services for children from birth through third grade. While still focusing heavily on the time children are enrolled in our early childhood program, CAP seeks to elongate the time during which we can positively influence children, both directly and indirectly. These efforts may include a more robust tracking of child outcome data for alumni, maintaining contact and developing support programs for alumni children and families, increasing CAP's capacity to support and serve older children, and partnering

with other organizations that serve children in kindergarten and beyond, including charter schools and after-school and summer program providers.

How Can Districts Support This Work?

Districts play an important role in the successful transition of children to elementary school. This includes working in partnership with early childhood providers and choosing effective policies for incoming families, such as drop-off and pick-up policies, access to teachers, opportunities for families to engage with the school and their child's classroom, and cafeteria experiences, to name a few. At the district level, it is important to have open communication channels with major partners as well as a designated contact person for transition issues. Allowing for school-to-school and teacher-to-teacher collaborations is critical, as this is where much of the work takes place. Providing planning time to teachers and administrators for meetings and encouraging relationships at the local level is equally important. Finally, it is essential to have school administrators in place who understand the differences in child development for the younger ages and training that includes transitions.

Working Collectively toward Seamless Transitions

T&C staff seek to provide a seamless transition to the families at CAP Tulsa with special consideration for children's needs, family input, impact on district partners, and thoughtful examination of data. This work guides our efforts to ensure all children receive seamless transitions that empower parents and create effective school partnerships. We look forward to the journey of continuing growth and learning.

For more on CAP Tulsa, see <http://captulsa.org/>.

REFERENCE

Harper, O. 2015. "Parents as Partners: Creating Advocates for a True 'Head Start,'" National Head Start Association blog (October 27), <https://www.nhsa.org/parents-partners-creating-advocates-true-head-start>.