

Help Children Move From Preschool to Elementary School with Ease



By Margot Chappel

Each year, families across the country take the leap from an early-childhood learning program to elementary school. Prepared families take a poised step forward, confident and knowledgeable about how their child will ease into the school system and develop along his or her learning path. Unprepared families anxiously tiptoe ahead, unsure of what their child will face in a new learning environment.

A child's first day of regular school does not have to be laden with uncertainty. It should be a period of genuine excitement for families and children alike, a time when children explore a new learning environment, develop new social skills, and start a life-long expedition of educational curiosity.

The transition from an early-childhood learning program to elementary school can be made smoother with a clear communication channel between parents, early-childhood learning programs, and elementary schools and a proactive approach to coordinating the transition. Parents play an especially critical role in making the transition successful, and must take the initiative to educate themselves, ask questions, and use existing resources. PTA leaders assist parents by welcoming families to their new schools, getting them acquainted with the additional resources PTA can provide, and helping to make communication with teachers and administrators easier and more productive.

Resources to help parents

In many school districts, resources are available to help families prepare and transition from an early-childhood learning program to grade school. In Nevada, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services offer parents a pre-kindergarten standards

guidebook loaded with interactive activities and information that help parents better engage with teachers and prepare for the next steps. The guidebook outlines how a parent can talk with their child's teacher about development, how parents can identify specific opportunities for communication, and offers questions parents should be asking teachers. These questions include:

- How much time does my child need to spend reading and writing during the day?
- How does my child interact with other children in the classroom?
- What are my child's favorite ways to express himself/herself?
- Which topics does my child enjoy learning about the most?
- What is my child working on with numbers and counting?

Making a smooth transition

In a perfect world, transition resources and more would be implemented and seamlessly accessible in every school district across the country. Unfortunately, there may be major differences between the services offered by early-childhood learning programs, such as liaisons for students who are homeless or speak English as a second language, and those offered in the elementary schools youngsters from these programs will attend.

To bridge this gap, there must be a mutual agreement between administrators of the early-childhood learning programs and elementary schools on a specific transition process, and they must adopt a solid organizational system to guide parents, teachers, and students throughout the transition process. This system should include an initial parent-teacher meeting, a preliminary learning assessment, and an overview of services offered to students and their families. This agreement can build



Parent University and P-3 Improve Transitions for Nevada's Youngest Students

In Nevada's Washoe County School District (WCSD), administrators are finding new, innovative ways to motivate and educate parents, even amid budget cuts. Under the direction of superintendent Heath Morrison, PhD, the WCSD recently launched its Parent University to help familiarize families with their child's school and help them succeed in the educational system. WCSD's Parent University offers nearly 200 classes, including "Navigating the System," "Supporting Learning," and "Leadership and Advocacy." The classes are free and offered year round at times convenient for working parents.

Nevada is also in the process of expanding its P-3 Initiative across the state. P-3 is an integrated approach to education for young children that provides a continuum of learning from infant care to preschool learning-based programs through 3rd grade. Preschool and K-3 teachers and administrators are each engaged with and learning from each other, elevating the ability of both to improve within each grade level, as well as across grade levels. Teachers and administrators are sharing information that assesses each child's unique learning capabilities and learning environments. The three focus areas of the P-3 Initiative are instructional quality in early literacy and math, social-emotional development, and family engagement.

Currently, P-3 is being piloted at Kate Smith Elementary School in Washoe County. The pilot program is in the beginning stages of development, with pre-K through 3rd-grade teachers collaborating during professional learning communities (PLC) meetings. According to Tina Springmeyer, director of Child and Family Services for the WCSD, the remainder of the school year will focus on ongoing professional development. Next fall, pre-K feeder schools for Kate Smith will be invited to join the PLC meetings. This combined professional development will allow for shared expectations of learning between community-based programs and the school district.

off the National PTA's National Standards for Family-School Partnerships (PTA.org/national_standards.asp), which outline a process for welcoming families into a new school, supporting student success, and establishing effective collaboration between schools, teachers, and parents.

To truly understand and participate in the school transition, parents must be proactive on behalf of their children. No time is too early to start asking questions, and no question is a bad question. Parents need to make an effort to get to know their child's new school. Quality parent engagement typically encompasses attending open houses, going to parent orientation nights, setting up meetings with teachers, and engaging with the school community. Additionally, parents must be good listeners. They need to listen to their children, comprehend their unique learning needs, and engage with their child's new school in an open and attentive manner.

This engagement typically exposes common challenges faced in the transition process and sparks a meaningful conversation on how a child can overcome them. The common challenges of a different learning structure and new social environment are typically addressed, as are a child's unique learning needs. No teacher will know a child's specific needs unless his or her parents or caregiver take the initiative.

When it comes to parent participation, there is a major difference between parent involvement and parent engagement. This statement should be a regular mantra for schools, parents, and PTAs alike. Too often, success is measured numerically—how many people are involved with an event, sign up for a service, or contribute to a fundraiser. The focus should be on the quality of the engagement. Truly engaged parents are informed parents who will be in the best position to act on behalf of their child. **OC**

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