



# Creating Effective Transitions

## Lessons from Head Start-School Partnerships

By Yvette Sanchez Fuentes and Jessica Troe    December 21, 2015

Expanding access to high-quality preschool programs is a growing focus for policy-makers across the United States. And it should be. Research shows that high-quality early education, such as Head Start, can ensure that children are prepared for kindergarten. Research also demonstrates that early education supports ongoing academic achievement, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, many cities and states have implemented or expanded preschool programs,<sup>2</sup> and the issue gained national traction after President Barack Obama announced a universal preschool proposal in his 2013 State of the Union address.<sup>3</sup> Members of Congress continued this momentum by subsequently introducing the Strong Start for America's Children Act of 2013.<sup>4</sup>

Studies have also found that coordination between early childhood programs and kindergarten through third grade programs is crucial to children's development and long-term educational success.<sup>5</sup> As a result, over the past several years, policymakers have considered ways to effectively support children's transition from preschool programs to elementary school in order to maximize investments and sustain gains in achievement. It can be helpful to examine Head Start for ideas since local Head Start programs are already required to partner with schools to implement transitions and alignment for children and their families.

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### How did Head Start-school partnerships come about?

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007<sup>6</sup> required several changes to the program to ensure coordination with local education agencies, or LEAs, and to promote increased school readiness. The law included a provision requiring Head Start programs—including Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start—to enter into a memorandum of understanding, or MOU, with their LEA—typically the public elementary school that children attend after Head Start.<sup>7</sup>

Local Head Start programs and LEAs must create an MOU that outlines specific processes and activities that support children’s transition from Head Start programs to public schools. They include:<sup>8</sup>

- Transferring Head Start program records for each child
- Establishing lines of communication between Head Start staff and their LEA counterparts to ensure coordination of programs and continuity of developmentally appropriate curricular objectives
- Organizing and participating in joint trainings with staff from Head Start and local schools
- Establishing comprehensive transition policies and procedures
- Conducting outreach to parents and elementary school teachers to discuss the needs of individual children

The main purpose of the MOU is to encourage the coordination and alignment of Head Start programs and LEAs and to formalize existing relationships. This provision in the 2007 legislation led Head Start programs to increase their efforts to build relationships with their respective elementary schools and implement alignment and transition processes to maximize the positive benefits of Head Start programs.

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### What can policymakers learn from partnership implementation?

Eight years after the requirement to implement official legal relationships, understanding of how Head Start programs and local schools are developing and sustaining transition relationships can help inform the broader early education field. To get a better sense of how the requirement is being implemented in communities, the Center for American Progress conducted interviews with multiple Head Start directors and transition managers, or with deputies and their counterparts, in local schools and school districts across the Midwest, the Southwest, and Southern United States.

These interviews revealed a set of best practices and highlighted some barriers and challenges that programs continue to face in implementing these transition processes. As public preschool programs continue to expand around the country, federal and state policymakers can learn from the implementation of the Head Start requirement.

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## Best practices for successful transitions

Interviews with Head Start directors and their public school counterparts revealed a set of practices that they identified as being crucial to a successful transition from Head Start to kindergarten.<sup>9</sup> Many interviewees highlighted the following key components that have helped facilitate successful transitions from Head Start to kindergarten:

- Implement school visits and introduce kindergarten expectations and policies in Head Start programs
- Create a family-to-school relationship
- Build regular communication and records transfer between programs

### Implement school visits and introduce kindergarten expectations and policies in Head Start programs

All program facilitators interviewed expressed the importance of assimilating Head Start children to kindergarten through site visits. Many noted that this process made children more comfortable in their new environment and promoted a more successful transition from Head Start to kindergarten. All program facilitators said that they hold at least one school visit for children in their Head Start program, if not more.

In addition to having children visit the schools, several interviewees expressed the importance of incorporating kindergarten policies and practices into Head Start classrooms. They highlighted the differences between the two classrooms, such as family-style meals versus cafeteria meals, that make it difficult for children to feel comfortable in their new space. Therefore, many Head Start program facilitators interviewed found it important to know what will be expected of children after they leave Head Start. When Head Start teachers and leadership are more aware of what is expected of kindergarten children, Head Start programs can develop practices that are more aligned with these expectations.

### Create a family-to-school relationship

A unique focus of Head Start is encouraging and supporting families to be actively involved in their children's early learning experience and empowering them to become lifelong advocates for their children's education. CAP's interviews with Head Start and public school staff highlighted the importance of family engagement in the transition process, including providing school visits and establishing lines of communication between the parents and kindergarten and school staff. Strong transition practices between Head Start and public school programs have the potential to empower Head

Start parents to continue their involvement in kindergarten and throughout their children’s educational careers. Many Head Start staff discussed initiating school visits and parent meetings to prepare parents for the transition to kindergarten. Additionally, schools prioritized kindergarten registration for Head Start families.

### Build program communication and student records transfers

Transferring student records and establishing lines of communication between Head Start and kindergarten teachers to discuss children’s development and progress were often noted as other important aspects of children’s transition. This process also promotes educational alignment. The Head Start staff CAP interviewed highlighted the need to provide information about individual children to create a “continuity of care” with the school district. This helps ensure that any services that children receive in Head Start—including mental health, disability, and other health services—are carried over to kindergarten. Transferring these records ensures that schools are aware of children’s needs and related services are in place prior to children entering kindergarten.

Interviewees also identified program communication at every level—with leadership, teachers, and staff—as an important component of developing successful transitions. Among interviewees who reported a strong relationship, CAP found that implementing regular meetings between Head Start directors and staff and public school superintendents, principals, and teachers ensured everyone was focused on the same goals, creating a clear process for a successful transition. Many interviewees also noted that having the support of senior staff in the school district is imperative for partnerships to be successful.

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### Barriers to implementation

While the interviewees discussed practices that made the transition from Head Start to kindergarten more successful, CAP’s conversations with Head Start and public school programs also revealed barriers they faced, or continue to face, in cultivating relationships and establishing best practices for the transition process. The interviews identified two main barriers:

- Relationship building between programs
- Difficulties with establishing practices to transition parents

## Relationship building and reciprocal agreements

Many interviewees agreed that creating and implementing transition processes has been difficult but has improved since the implementation of the 2007 Head Start reauthorization. Yet many Head Start providers still noted difficulty in getting full buy-in from public schools because while the federal government requires Head Start to be collaborative, there is no similar requirement for schools. Interviewees identified this asymmetry as a key barrier in successfully transitioning children and families from Head Start to kindergarten.

As mentioned above, several Head Start programs found that, in addition to strong communication, the ability to transfer student records could contribute to a more seamless transition. Due to data privacy concerns, however, this can be a difficult task. A Head Start director from the South noted these privacy issues as a barrier in the transition process but has attempted to tackle this through individual session with parents, teachers, and health consultants.

## Difficulties with transitioning parents

Although many interviewees discussed implementing activities to engage parents in the transition process, others found that establishing these activities was difficult in practice, despite the important role they play in children's future academic success.<sup>10</sup> The Head Start staff interviewed understood the important role of parents in the transition—reflecting studies that show that parent and family involvement in kindergarten is associated with gains in reading and math achievement.<sup>11</sup>

However, some Head Start staff CAP interviewed felt that family engagement is not as robust when children transition to kindergarten and that this continues to be a barrier for some programs in establishing continuity for families. The lack of family support and inclusion during the transition was echoed throughout the interviews. Similarly, public school staff point to the limited capacity of schools as a barrier to initiating more in-depth family involvement, observing that school districts are stretched thin due to testing, grading, and evaluation requirements.

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## How Head Start-school partnerships can inform the policy discussion

As the need for program alignment between preschool programs and kindergarten becomes more of a policy priority, federal, state, and local policymakers can look to the current transition partnerships being implemented by Head Start programs to guide them. In developing policies for transitioning children from preschool to kindergarten, it is important to recognize the need for school visits, family supports, records transfer, and program alignment and communication to create a successful transition. Implementing these alignment and transition processes on a broader scale would ensure that the investments in preschool are maximized and the gains that children make during preschool are continued throughout their time in school—and the rest of their lives.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Hirokazu Yoshikawa and others, "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education" (Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development, 2013), available at [http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb\\_2013\\_10\\_16\\_investing\\_in\\_children.pdf](http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf).
- 2 Invest in Us, "Commitments: Early Learning Communities," available at <https://investinus.org/all-commitments/> (last accessed December 2015).
- 3 The White House, "Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address," Press release, February 12, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>.
- 4 *Strong Start for America's Children Act*, S. 1697, 113 Cong. 1 sess. (Government Printing Office, 2013), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-bill/1697>.
- 5 Bill Graves, "PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know It Works" (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2006), available at <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/PK-3WhatIsItandHowDoWeKnow.pdf>.
- 6 *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*, P.L. 110-134, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (December 12, 2007), available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/law>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Unless otherwise noted, these statements came from Center for American Progress interviews with Head Start directors and their transition managers or deputies and their counterparts in school districts across the Midwest, the Southwest, and Southern United States.
- 10 Sung won Kim and Nancy E. Hill, "Including Fathers in the Picture: A Meta-Analysis of Parental Involvement and Students' Academic Achievement," *Journal of Educational Psychology* (107) (2015): 919–934.
- 11 Carey E. Cooper and others, "Poverty, Race, and Parental Involvement During the Transition to Elementary School," *Journal of Family Issues* (31) (2010): 859–883; Jaime Puccioni, "Parents' Conceptions of School Readiness, Transition Practices, and Children's Academic Achievement Trajectories," *The Journal of Educational Research* (108) (2015): 130–147.