



No. 1A • January 1999

# Transition Practices

Excerpts from a paper accepted for publication by the *Elementary School Journal*. The paper, "Kindergarten Teachers' Practices Related to Transition to School: Results of a National Survey," is based on a sample of 3,595 kindergarten teachers. Teachers were asked about their use of 21 practices related to the transition of children into kindergarten in the 1996-'97 academic year and 15 barriers to implementing transition practices. This is a sister *Spotlight* to *Spotlight #1*, "Kindergarten Transitions," July 1998, also based on our national survey.

## Teacher Practices and Transitions to School

OUR NATIONAL SURVEY of kindergarten teachers reveals several key points. First, use of some form of practice to help children make the transition to kindergarten is nearly universal; 95% of the nation's kindergarten teachers endorsed the most frequently reported practice—talking with the child's parent after school starts.

Second, although use of some form of transition practice is widespread, practices that involve school personnel having direct contacts with children or families are the least frequently reported, as are practices that involve contact with children or families before the start of school. The most frequently endorsed practices are those that take place after the start of school and/or involve low-intensity generic contact (e.g., flyers, brochures, group open houses).

Third, as schools (or districts) become increasingly urban and have higher percentages of minority and/or low-SES students, personal contacts with children and families before the start of school become less frequent (except for home visits) and low intensity, after-the-start-of-school contacts (such as flyers) are more common. Thus, children and families who may need the best form of transition practices are least likely to receive them.

Fourth, teachers identify a number of barriers to implementing practices related to the transition to school. The most common are that class lists are generated too late to make contacts with children and families before school starts, summer work is not supported, and a plan for the transition to kindergarten is not available in the school district. Teachers' perceptions that family characteristics are barriers occur with increasing frequency as schools become more urban, have a higher minority population, or are located in high-poverty districts.

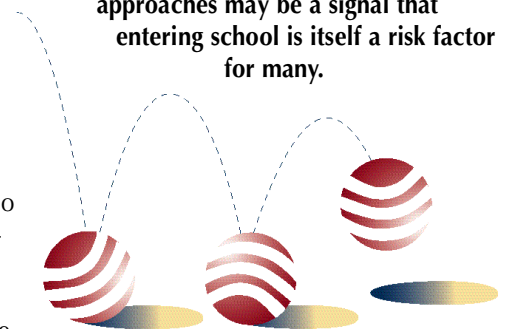
### "Ready schools" movement

By and large the endorsed practices do not conform to standards or principles that reflect the "ready schools" movement such as "Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school," or "Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools" (National Education Goals Panel, 1998).

The practices teachers endorse most frequently do not reflect an emphasis on establishing connections, before school starts, among home, school, child care, and other contexts nor do they support continuity in the child's experience and promoting positive, supportive relationships among the persons involved in the child's care and education. Instead, they reflect a fairly low-intensity, nonindividualized, and impersonal approach that is unlikely to convey little more than information about what to bring on the first day of school or where to find the

lunchroom. Although such information is important to helping the child and family negotiate the entry into kindergarten, it falls short of helping build the kind of supports for the child that can reduce the risk of school failure.

From the perspective of family-school relationships, the practices used most often in the transition to kindergarten signal a shift, in a negative direction, in the quality, nature, and depth of contact. Parent-teacher contact in elementary school is formalized, school-initiated, and involves a high proportion of information about the child's problems. In contrast, in preschools, parent contact with the school is often parent-initiated and involves family support. **The absence of transition practices and policies that conform to "ready schools" approaches may be a signal that entering school is itself a risk factor for many.**



## Transitions in different groups

In urban, poverty, and high-minority areas, the public educational system often has problems capitalizing on families' existing resources and providing additional resources for education and child development. Our group comparisons reveal that the children and families who are likely to benefit most from personalized, proactive, and intense practices aimed at facilitating transition to kindergarten are the least likely to receive such practices. As schools became more urban or had a higher percentage of minority students, or districts had a higher number of families below the poverty lines, rates of implementation for the most intensive transition practices dropped and those for less intensive practices rose.

### Implications and considerations

It is not surprising that the transition practices that reach backward in time, outward to families and preschools, and involve direct contacts are also those more teachers view as being difficult to implement.

Yet these barriers are not insurmountable, and in reporting on them teachers reveal potential methods for improving transition practices. For example, noting that class lists are generated too late or that a transition plan is not available suggests strategies for creating a more comprehensive approach to transition. Districts can experiment with ways to generate class lists and conduct kindergarten registration; they can commission kindergarten teachers, parents, and preschool teachers to formulate transition plans; and they can make transition a target for resources. In fact, in our efforts to enhance transition practices, it is precisely these kinds of innovations that have followed from discussions of barriers.

A cluster of barriers reflecting teachers' beliefs about parents and family factors reveals an area requiring considerable attention. In urban, high-poverty, or high-minority settings, kindergarten teachers report increasing concerns about contacting and visiting parents and about parents' abilities to

bring their child to school or read materials sent home regarding transition.

These perceptions suggest an impasse between transition planning and practice. This impasse is not new. Yet it is **precisely** this impasse that is targeted by transition practices that build relationships between home and school early and before concerns arise that create tensions and mistrust between home and school.

Furthermore, the data on barriers across different levels of demographic indicators point again to the need for collaboration among parents, teachers, principals, child care providers, and others in the formation of transition practices that function effectively in a particular setting. In this way, transition practices can be a process by which a community ensures the successful entry to school for its members.

**The results of this survey indicate that if the national goal of “ensuring that all children enter school ready to learn” depends in part on “ready schools,” then there is considerable work to be done with respect to that aspect of ready schools that ensures “smooth transitions between home and school” and “continuity between child care and school experience.”**

### If you want to know more

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The authors of the paper on which this Spotlight is based are Robert C. Pianta of the University of Virginia and Martha J. Cox, Lorriane Taylor, and Diane Early of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. NCEDL is administratively housed at UNC-CH. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions in these reports do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education [www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education. Permission is granted to reprint this; we ask that you attribute the authors of the paper and the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email [loyd\\_little@unc.edu](mailto:loyd_little@unc.edu)  
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