

What Policy Changes Are Needed?

- Strengthen bonds between preschools and elementary schools. Policies are needed that facilitate communication between preschools and schools. Important topics include consistency in expectations and curriculum across programs.
- Require transition planning teams in localities. Such policies would mandate the formation of transition planning teams in localities involving school personnel, preschool staff, families, agency workers, and community leaders.
- Strengthen bonds between families and schools. Require teacher-training in building partnerships with families, especially those from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
- Provide high quality kindergarten classroom experiences for children. Because all children in the population enter formal schooling in kindergarten, policies must be developed and enacted that insure that kindergarten programs are among the highest quality programs in a school.

Transition to Kindergarten

THE TRANSITION TO FORMAL SCHOOLING is a landmark event for millions of children, families, and educators. But recent research by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) and other investigators indicates that the transition practices commonly used in schools may not be well suited to the needs of children and families.

How do US schools support the transition to kindergarten?

A national survey of nearly 3,600 kindergarten teachers in late 1996 by NCEDL confirmed the results of a more limited 1992 survey. Of the 23 transition practices listed on the survey, the majority of teachers reported using practices such as:

- sending a letter to parents after the beginning of school
- holding an open house after school starts
- sending a brochure home after school starts

The least commonly reported practices included:

- calling the child before or after school starts
- visiting the child's home or preschool program(s)

These results paint a very clear picture of the typical transition experience for children and families. They are most likely to receive a form letter telling them when schools starts, what to bring, and that open house is scheduled for some time near the end of September. They are least likely to receive a personal call or personalized information before school starts.

The most commonly used transition practices by the nations' kindergarten teachers and elementary schools, when contrasted with the policies and practices recommended in *"Ready Schools"* published by the National Education Goals Panel (1997), can be characterized very simply as too little, too late. Commonly used transition activities are low intensity, group-oriented practices that do little to involve families and build partnerships prior to entering school. In short, schools wait too long and do too little to connect with children and families.

Importantly for policymakers, we also asked these teachers to identify barriers to what they thought would be better or more useful transition practices than the ones they currently employed. Teachers identified a number of administrative barriers such as receiving class lists too late to contact families before school, absence of a plan for developing transition policy and practices in their district, and a lack of school system support for effective transition. In addition they noted the lack of funds to support the time they needed in the summer to conduct good transition practices.

References & Resources

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Web sites of interest

National Center for Early Development & Learning: www.ncedl.org

National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education: www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/

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