

# Transition and Alignment:

## Two Keys to Assuring Student Success



Education Commission  
of the States

## ECS Policy Brief

Mimi Howard, Director, Early Learning Institute  
Education Commission of the States



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## Acknowledgements

For more information about this topic, please contact Mimi Howard, Director, ECS Early Learning Institute, at [mhoward@ecs.org](mailto:mhoward@ecs.org).

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*Education should be structured in such a way that all children have learning experiences that build on those in previous years and connect with those to come, creating a smooth and predictable climb to the top.*

~Kauerz, *Ladders to Learning*, 2006

## Introduction

The Obama administration has taken an aggressive approach to improving schools and increasing positive academic, social and economic outcomes — especially for the most vulnerable students. State and federal policymakers are being called upon to establish comprehensive P-20 education systems that are connected from one stage to the next — reducing the chances that students will be lost along the way or require remedial support to acquire skills or knowledge they could have learned right from the start. Further, the earliest years from birth to grade 3 (P-3) are being recognized as the cornerstone of effective P-20 systems and the foundation upon which subsequent learning must be built. A P-3 approach assumes that the first “section” of the education pipeline:

- Includes both early learning and the early grades
- Attends to critical linkages across levels.

Creating effective P-3 systems (linking early learning and the early grades) is not without its challenges. First, such an approach requires that two traditionally separate learning systems — early care and education and the early elementary grades — be more closely coordinated. In addition, it requires that policymakers and practitioners find ways to fill the gap that has historically existed between school readiness and school improvement efforts.

To ultimately assure that students experience a smooth and predictable climb to the top of the education ladder, state and district leaders will need a clear understanding of the basic ingredients of a coordinated system and what it will take — on the ground in schools and communities — to create one.

The following is an at-a-glance look at two key elements that must be in place to create coordinated systems:

1. Effective transition programs and practices to help the child (and family) move smoothly and successfully from one learning setting to another.
2. Authentic alignment of the basic pedagogical components of early learning and the early grades to create continuous learning and teaching experiences.



To support state and local efforts to strengthen P-3 policy and practice and to increase education quality both before and after children enter school, the administration is making a number of funding opportunities available. Guidelines and priorities for these opportunities underscore the importance of creating better linkages across systems:

- The proposed Early Learning Challenge grants call on states to target children birth to age five by building strong systems that increase the level of children's readiness for school and that link to K-3 through aligned data systems and standards.
- Race to the Top funds call for improved transitions between preschool and kindergarten. Invitational priorities call for "innovations for improving early learning outcomes."
- Innovation in Education (i3) grants ask local school districts to develop innovative models for improving school readiness by increasing alignment, collaboration and transitions across 0-3 programs, preschool programs and K-3.

For either to be effective, transition and alignment are equally important. The most effective transition efforts will be unsuccessful unless inconsistencies and unaligned expectations, curricula, assessments and instructional practices across and within the two learning systems are addressed and improved. Further, while better programmatic alignment across systems can help ease transitions, intentional, ongoing transition programs and practices also are needed to assure children have the individual support they need to adjust to new circumstances and expectations and be successful learners.

# Transition

## What is it?

Transition refers to the totality of experiences and opportunities a child encounters in moving from one program or setting to another. Opportunities and experiences that familiarize children and families with new settings, expectations and relationships can help make connections that ease adjustment and increase the likelihood that families will stay engaged in their children's learning. Effective activities are varied, occur over time, and are intentionally planned. Elements can be tailored to meet the needs of children and families and should be an integral part of the ongoing school planning and improvement process. Examples of child and family-level strategies include:

- Child visits to the kindergarten classroom
- Teacher visits to the preschool classroom
- Teacher home visits
- Workshops and networking for parents of young children
- Attendance at school-wide events for families and children
- "Get ready for kindergarten" sessions before school starts
- Parent-child learning programs held in schools.

Policies and practices put in place at the program level also support effective transitions, help assure continuity across systems and alleviate discontinuities that result from lack of communication and information between schools and early-care and education programs.

Examples of program-level transition strategies include:

- Use of common transition forms across multiple programs and schools
- Creation of transition teams and transition liaisons in districts and schools
- Joint professional development for early education and early grades teachers
- Shared data and common data points across systems
- Transition planning as part of the school improvement process.



Effective transitions should include both program- and child-level elements. They should also provide multiple opportunities and approaches for children and families to be engaged and informed in order to meet all needs and interests.

### ***Why is transition important?***

Moving from home or preschool to kindergarten or 1st grade is considered one of the most critical transition points for children. Young children are highly vulnerable to discontinuities in their environments. When children make the transition to school they must adjust to new settings and situations including:

- New physical surroundings
- New relationships with peers and adults
- New rules and expectations
- New ways of learning.

When transitions are effective they provide the supports children need to make these adjustments. When children make successful transitions they:

- Like school and look forward to going
- Show steady growth in academic and social skills
- Have families who are more actively engaged in their learning.

When transitions are inadequate or nonexistent, children can experience high levels of stress which can interfere with their engagement and academic performance. Ineffective transitions can lead to:

- Chronic absenteeism
- Poor social adjustment
- Failure to make academic gains needed to succeed by grade 3 and beyond.

Good transitions build “transition capital.” That is, supporting children early builds skills and helps prepare them for the other adjustments that occur in their lives.

## Alignment

### ***What is it?***

Alignment refers to the continuous interrelated nature of education programs and practices across early learning and the early grades. It increases the consistency of children’s experiences across and within grades in order to create a continuum of learning. It leads to learning that progressively builds from one year to the next. Important elements include:

- Teachers at every level who understand child development and are prepared to provide experiences that meet the developmental level of the child
- Standards that reflect what children need to know and be able to do at each grade level
- Classroom experiences — curriculum and instruction — that support standards
- Assessments that are based on standards and measure what children have been taught.



Alignment works both horizontally, as the child experiences a single learning level, and vertically as the child moves up through grade levels.

- *Horizontal alignment* highlights the coherence or inter-connectedness between *standards* (what children are expected to know and do), *curriculum* (what children are taught), *instruction* (how children are taught) and *assessments* (what and how children's progress is measured) within a single learning level. Learning is deepened.
- *Vertical alignment* highlights the continuous and progressive nature of learning and development. The skills and knowledge gained in one year serve not as an end point but as a foundation upon which to build additional skills and knowledge in the next year. Gains are sustained.

In addition, aligned experiences include all areas of learning (social, emotional, physical and cognitive). Aligned approaches require that such experiences are of high quality and ensure they are matched to the developmental abilities of individual children.



### Why is alignment important?

- Alignment can increase the likelihood that gains made in preschool do not “fade out” in the early grades. When teaching and learning are of high quality, are matched to children’s abilities and include an interrelated set of experiences, gains made in preschool are sustained and expanded.
- When curriculum, instruction and assessment are aligned with each other and with high-quality standards, schools report higher scores on state performance measures.

### What states and districts can do to improve transition and alignment

The following are a few examples of what some states and districts are doing to increase and improve transitions and alignment across early learning and the early grades.

#### Transition Actions

- *Build “ready schools” capacity*
  - In **Ohio**, with impetus from Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids™ (SPARK), a community-based initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation\* and focused on strengthening readiness before and after school entrance, a partnership between the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Association of School Administrators created a “Ready Schools” resource guide — a guidance document that provides goals, plans and detailed suggestions for the ways schools can ease transitions and support continuous learning. In 2008, elementary schools across the state received funds from public and private sources to pilot the resource guide in districts.
  - The **North Carolina** Ready Schools initiative, a statewide grant program to support district efforts to improve transitions and involve communities in school improvement efforts also grew out of local transition efforts.\* Additionally, the State Board of Education ratified a definition of Ready Schools that includes a focus on effective transitions into school.



- *Implement transition models in schools*
  - Joining Hands is a “homegrown” approach developed in **New Mexico** that creates a framework for effective transitions to elementary school. Joining Hands was replicated across the state as part of the community-based SPARK\* initiative. Joining Hands teams consisting of school and early education staff, parents and community members work together to establish transition plans that meet the needs of students in each community. Joint professional development for early learning and early grades staff is offered routinely. Funding and sustainability strategies include: leveraging the use of Title I funds, focusing on state and federal support for rural education, and incorporating the model into Early Childhood degree programs.
- *Leverage funds to support transition*
  - In Gwinnett and DeKalb counties in **Georgia**, leaders of the community-based SPARK\* initiative worked with district leaders to direct discretionary Federal (Title I) funds toward the implementation of their transition model in all Title I schools. Funds allocated were used to: hire a district transition coordinator; establish transition teams in schools; develop annual transition plans and programs; and place trained parent resource specialists in each school.
- *Engage parents and communities*
  - Countdown to Kindergarten programs in **South Carolina** and **Maryland** target parents and provide resources and information about the importance of home activities that support literacy development and hands-on learning leading up to kindergarten. The Maryland program activities involve multiple community resources and are aligned with the Maryland Model for School Readiness. Programs help children gain confidence when they enter kindergarten and provide parents with tools to advocate for their children within the education system.



## Alignment Actions

- *Comprehensively align standards*
  - **Pennsylvania\*\*** has developed comprehensive learning standards for infants/toddlers, preschool, kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grades and is promoting the use of consistent standards across early learning and early elementary systems. Pennsylvania is the first state to undertake a comprehensive alignment effort, ensuring that its learning standards are aligned both horizontally and vertically from birth through 3rd grade. In addition, the state created assessment tools that measure achievement and quantify the educational gains made by children as they “graduate” into elementary schools.
  - **Arizona\*\*** has a comprehensive set of early learning standards for children age three to five that are used by parents, caregivers, teachers, instructors and administrators as a quality framework for early learning. The early learning standards are aligned with kindergarten standards and provide a link between early learning expectations and school readiness.
  - **Ohio\*\*** has two sets of standards for early learners. Infant and Toddler Guidelines provide information about six areas of development important in the early years. Early Learning Content Standards are aligned to the state’s K-12 system and represent what children should know and be able to demonstrate at the end of the preschool years.
- *Align curriculum, assessments and instruction*
  - The newly released **Washington** Statewide Early Learning Plan calls for “aligned pre-kindergarten and K-3 instructional and programmatic practices.” Strategies include the identification of birth to grade 3 curricula, instructional practices and assessment processes that are research-based and developmentally and culturally appropriate.
  - The **Maryland** Voluntary State Curriculum aligns the Maryland Content Standards and the Maryland Assessment Program. The curriculum documents are formatted so that each begins with content standards or broad, measurable statements about what students should know and be able to do. Indicator statements provide the next level of specificity and begin to narrow the focus for teachers. Finally, the objectives provide teachers with very clear information about what specific learning should occur. The curriculum is aligned from prekindergarten through grade 8.
  - The state of **Connecticut\*\*** conducted an analysis of the alignment between its prekindergarten and kindergarten standards, curricula and assessments. The study enabled the state to identify both horizontal and vertical gaps in alignment.



\*Indicates a SPARK site, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids™ (SPARK), an initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

\*\*Indicates a Linking Ready Kids and Ready Schools Governor’s forum state. Governors’ Forums were supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.



# Conclusion

As educators and decisionmakers work to create effective policies that support transitions and aligned learning across early care and education and the early elementary grades, it will take additional effort to ensure that systems are linked. Linking systems requires more than putting adjoining pieces together. To be effective, new policies must be intentional in their support of all elements of a continuum, so they can be effectively implemented in schools and result in better outcomes for children.



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