

# Right from the Start:

## Guiding Young Children's Transitions in the Early Years



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### Introduction

During the first years of their lives, young children rarely remain in a single learning environment. When these changes take place, both the child and those involved in his or her care experience a series of adjustments.

Parents and children adjust to a new physical and social setting, while teachers adjust to their new students, their families, and all of their personalities and needs. Steps for addressing these adjustments are known as “transition practices.” When children, families, teachers and the varied early learning environments (including child care centers and schools) are better prepared for one another, all benefit— particularly the children, who experience fewer behavioral problems and more positive social relationships.<sup>1</sup>

While New Jersey has strong early learning regulations, standards and guidelines on transition practices, the implementation of those practices varies from community to community, according to interviews, focus groups, and other research that ACNJ has conducted over 10 years of investigating issues related to children from birth to third grade.

In addition, state transition regulations lack the rigorous oversight necessary to ensure compliance.

This policy brief outlines the ways in which transition practices for children from birth to eight years old are approached by the state, through its guidelines and regulations, and by providers and educators in child care settings, preschool, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades, as well as in higher education.



Included in the analysis is a review of the guidelines and regulations, as well as findings from a survey of early education professors, and a parent focus group. Finally, recommendations are provided for strengthening existing practices.

### Transition: What Should It Look Like?

According to Robert Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia and founding director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, young children need their three primary supports to have meaningful connections and interactions:

- Family.
- Child care and preschool providers.
- Elementary school teachers, and leaders.

Giving Every Child A Chance

## New Jersey's Approach to Transition

New Jersey addresses transitions for young children through regulations, standards and guidelines. The state's Department of Education (DOE) regulations broadly define early learning transitions as "an organized system of actions and transactions that takes into account the relationships among home, school and community as the child moves from preschool to kindergarten, through grade three."<sup>iv</sup>

These particular regulations also outline the key players' roles in implementing an effective transition system. The current DOE rules however, begin at preschool and do not include transition practices for children from birth to age three. Moreover, current transition regulations lack the rigorous oversight necessary to ensure compliance.

The state has also developed strong guidance in both standards and guidelines that reflect the entire Birth-8 continuum. The standards include Birth-to-Three Early Learning Standards,<sup>v</sup> and the Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards.<sup>vi</sup> These standards specify the learning outcomes that should take place and include meaningful transitions. There are also guidelines for preschool<sup>vii</sup> and kindergarten.<sup>viii</sup> First-third grade guidelines are in the process of being finalized. All address effective transition practices.

Each of these resources lays a foundation for best practices applicable to children at each age group and learning level and reflects the state's recognition that children of different ages have different needs and that many people are involved in their transitions through these critical early years.

It is positive that these best practices are clearly articulated. However, ACNJ's discussions with many of the critical stakeholders suggest their implementation is uneven, possibly leaving many children and their families without the support they need.

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These relationships should be based on four guiding principles:

- They serve as a bridge between child, family, and those working in each learning environment, with classmates, teachers, parents, and other staff all playing a role.
- They are supportive of each other so that children benefit.
- All young children's learning environments build strength-based relationships with families.
- A child's individual needs are met.<sup>ii</sup>

### Transition Shortfalls

Children can experience environmental transitions early-on in their lives, yet too often, little attention is paid to how children and their families best acclimate to those changes. The important and most recognized transition--between preschool and kindergarten can often be described as "too little, too late and too impersonal."<sup>iii</sup>

Workshops that ACNJ conducted with hundreds of New Jersey elementary school administrators confirmed this. Principals and other school leaders often narrowly defined these transitions to be focused primarily around "events," such as visits to kindergarten classrooms or specific dates to meet a child's new teacher, instead of home visits, and ongoing communications with parents and other caregivers, who are responsible for young children prior to them entering preschool or kindergarten.

## Holding State-Funded Preschool Programs Accountable

In districts that provide state-funded preschool, the school district is required to develop a five-year preschool plan that includes the district's preschool through third grade transition initiatives.<sup>ix</sup> The plan must describe the processes and methods for collaborating with other in-district administrators, informing parents, and communicating with teachers about curriculum and new students. Districts without state funded preschool – which is the majority of New Jersey districts – are not required to develop such transition plans.

### Happenings in Higher Education

To determine how well future teachers are being equipped to provide children with aligned and coordinated transition experiences, ACNJ surveyed nine members of the New Jersey Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NJAECTE), who teach college students in the two certification programs responsible for teaching young children -- preschool to third grade (P-3) and kindergarten to sixth grade (K-6). The following is a brief summary of the survey findings.

#### Defining Transition

When early learning professors were asked to define transition in their own terms, a variety of responses emerged. While some responses described solely event-based experiences, such as having the children visit their new classrooms, others were broader in scope, recognizing the importance of involving families and teachers, and that follow-up communication was essential.

However, when survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of several known transition practices, those receiving the highest ratings were events, including “open houses” and parent-teacher conferences. Practices such as “establishing transitions teams” which develop a systematic approach to local transition implementation, were not given as high a priority.

## Teaching Transition Practices

Despite their recognition of the importance of transition practices, only 55 percent of the surveyed educators said they actually address transition practices in the courses they instruct for future P-3 or K-6 teachers. One respondent acknowledged that although this “sounds like an important topic,” it is not fully addressed in her courses. Another professor explained that educators “don't really pay attention to teaching transition ... because there are so many things [they] are pressured to teach.”

As the P-3 certification does not directly address children from birth to three years old, it is uncertain whether the transition experienced by infants and toddlers as they move into preschool or childcare, is addressed in their coursework.

Although the majority of the respondents did not know how transition practices were covered in the other early childhood certification (P-3 or K-6), a few respondents were familiar and observed that transition is approached differently in P-3 certificate programs than in K-6 certificate programs, mainly in that P-3 programs place more emphasis on interaction with families. According to one educator, “In P-3, there is daily contact with families, so trust is more easily established.”

Education professors view transition practices as highly important, but are not, in general, including them as one of their classroom priorities. As a result, new teachers may not have the foundation necessary to understand and successfully implement meaningful transition for existing and future students.

### Parents' Perspective

In order to attain a better understanding of parents' transition experiences, ACNJ held a focus group with nine Essex County parents who, along with their children, are or have experienced several early learning transitions.





The following is a summary of these parents' transition experiences.



- **Language issues were a barrier.** One parent explained that the transition materials his family received were in English only. The father, who speaks English, took a more active role because his Spanish-speaking wife was unable to meaningfully participate as their son moved from preschool to kindergarten and beyond. The group felt that schools often do not take steps to get pertinent information to parents who do not speak English in a way they can understand.
- **Information was not always shared with parents.** Several parents described that lines of communication between them and their children's teachers were not strong. Information about their children, including readiness for the next year and potential learning issues, were frequently not shared in a timely manner, these parents said.
- **The parents who initiated transition conversations had the most positive experiences.** Several of the parents took the first-steps in developing relationships with their children's future teachers and were able to provide information about their children's personalities and educational needs.
- **"Events" do make a difference.** Parents felt that events, such as "open houses," or "Meet the New Teacher," helped alleviate children's anxieties about changing classrooms or environments and gave the families opportunities to see first-hand their children's future educational environment.

The parents also provided a list of recommendation that would help strengthen the transition processes between learning environments and families.

- **Use "modern communication" more effectively.** The parents unanimously agreed that communicating today is so much easier than in the past and schools should be more intentional on how that is accomplished with parents. E-mails, text messages, and Facebook are far better ways of communicating with parents than sending home paper notices in their children's book bags.
- **Whatever the form of communication, make sure it is "open."** Parents want to be engaged in the transition process, but said they are often not a part of this conversation. They suggested that schools implement transition teams to develop a district-wide early childhood transition plan that can include school staff, members of the early childhood community, and parents.
- **Provide information to parents in their native language.** Parents felt that any documentation of their child's progress should be provided in the language most comfortable for the families.
- **Schedule meetings and programs at times that allow working parents to participate.** Several parents said that they want to be more engaged, but that scheduled events are frequently during work hours and are a barrier to meaningful engagement.
- **Provide parents with transition packages every year.** As students complete a year, providing their parents with information and expectations of the next year would be helpful.
- **Share student portfolios with parents.** By sharing this information, parents can see first-hand how their children are progressing throughout the year and what their new teachers will see of their work when the children move on to the next learning environment.



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## Supporting and Designing Effective Transitions

Designing comprehensive transition plans is a collaborative process best accomplished by using the “team” approach. Teachers, administrators, support staff, families, and the community all play an important role in strengthening children’s transition experiences. Although important, transitions are much more than “events,” such as a classroom visit or a ride on the school bus. The following are just a few examples that can be used to strengthen children’s transitions:

- Child care staff, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, school administrators, and parents/ caregivers should build strong relationships by mutually sharing information about the children and the supports needed to assist them as they move from one early learning environment to the next, such as preschool to kindergarten or first grade to second grade.
  - Child care and school administrators need to provide time for teaching staff to discuss effective transition practices. This should occur among teachers at the same age or grade level and between different grades.
- These conversations should include assessing each child’s progress, as well as using data to evaluate program effectiveness and literacy practices, including sharing information about students’ work or discussing age-appropriate reading choices.
  - Make connections and build relationships among the varied early learning environments to discuss effective ways to strengthen transition practices. Programs that care for infants and toddlers should reach out to preschool programs, which should connect with school districts, especially principals and vice-versa. Regardless of who begins the conversations, the important piece is that they actually take place.
  - During kindergarten intake, school districts should document whether a child attended preschool and where, in order to gain insight as to which students are which attending preschools. This information will help schools identify and consequently better collaborate with preschools for effective transition planning.
  - Relevant information on children’s individual progress, such as through child portfolios, should be provided to receiving schools when children move from one program to another.

## Recommendations

Clearly, New Jersey has recognized the importance of effective transition practices. There are several ways, however, in which New Jersey can strengthen the implementation of effective and successful transition practices from birth through eighth years.

- **Require all school districts to develop preschool or kindergarten to third grade transition plans.** Currently, only districts implementing state-funded preschool are required to develop such plans, even though all schools, families and students would benefit. Extending this requirement to all districts would provide an invaluable layer of accountability and encourage districts to concretely plan for the implementation of the practices most beneficial to young learners.
- **Strengthen teacher training in transition practices.** ACNJ's survey of education professors showed that providing prospective teachers with knowledge of effective transition practices is uneven and not a significant priority. Strengthening these skills before a prospective teacher enters a classroom would provide new teachers with tools necessary for making critical connections with other staff, families, and students.
- **Recognize and engage Birth-3 stakeholders in meaningful partnerships towards effective transitions for children.** Transition should not be narrowly viewed as solely the period between preschool and kindergarten. The transitions made by toddlers into childcare or preschool does not receive the same level of attention, although is equally important.
- **Meaningfully engage parents in transition planning.** No transitions are complete without the voice of parents. Children's successful learning can depend on the partnership developed between the school staff and parents. Their participation can only strengthen those developed plans.



## Conclusion

New Jersey has been a leader both in its nationally-recognized preschools and its significant attention to building effective systems from preschool through third grade. Even with this recognition, transition practices beginning at birth through third grade need to be strengthened in our state. How well children and families are prepared for their next learning experience and how well new learning environments are prepared for those children and their families can make a significant difference in how children adapt and eventually succeed.

- i) *Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Use Of Transition Practices And Children's Adjustment To Kindergarten*, (2008) *Early Childhood Quarterly*, 23, 124-139.
- ii) Pianta, Robert C. (2004) *Going to Kindergarten: Transition Models and Practices*. [PowerPoint slides] Preschool to Kindergarten Transition Conference.
- iii) Pianta
- iv) N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-1.2
- v) N.J. Council for Young Children. *New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards* (2013). Available online at <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/standards/birth/standards.pdf> (last visited on 5/3/15).
- vi) New Jersey Department of Education. *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards* (2014). Available online at <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/standards.pdf> (last visited June 30, 2015)
- vii) N.J. Dept. of Educ., *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* (2010). Available online at <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/impguidelines.pdf> (last visited on 5/3/15).
- viii) N.J. Dept. of Educ., Div. of Early Childhood Educ., *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines* (2011). Available online at <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/KindergartenGuidelines.pdf> (last visited on 5/3/15).
- ix) N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-6.1