



Smooth transition to kindergarten is key to future success

By Patricia K. Hazen

I If we really learn all we need to know for life in kindergarten,

as author Robert Fulghum said, would it not be wise to prepare and plan for that experience? When someone runs a marathon for the first time, he or she does not register the week before the event, show up the day of the race, and expect success. Nor should we expect children to be successful in kindergarten just because we register them, buy them new shoes, and send them off on time for the first day. Kindergarten provides a foundation on which a student's whole school career can be built. Taking the time to transition children from early learning programs or home to kindergarten with care, can have big payoffs for children and for schools.

All children do not all skip through the doors of kindergarten carrying backpacks filled with the same skills and feelings about going to school. Some may be excited, embracing every new encounter; others may be fearful and anxious of the unknown and spend their time day-dreaming about being home. Experts tell us that transitioning children into school life is a process and it is wise to begin that process long before the first day of school.

School districts in Pennsylvania operate under local control and are therefore primarily responsible for en-

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rolling and transitioning children into kindergarten. However, a smooth transition is best achieved through a collaborative effort among school systems, early learning programs and families. The process typically focuses on four key areas: connecting the child to school; building family and school connections; connecting school to the community; and creating school-to-school connections. Support to coordinate

these transition efforts can be obtained through the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).

OCDEL has been involved in the transition process since 2005 and in 2008, OCDEL began awarding Title I grants to select Community Engagement Groups (CEGs) to offer support in creating harmonious transitions between early learning programs and kindergarten. CEGs are professionals who serve as liaisons and coordinators between the various stakeholders involved in the transition process. In January 2011, 18 CEGs were awarded Transition to Kindergarten grants to develop or further expand comprehensive transition plans from early learning programs to Title I elementary schools. Through partnerships with 123 schools and hundreds of early childhood providers, nearly 50,000 pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children and their families were assisted.

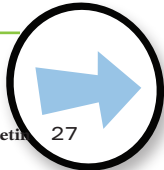
For a young child, the transition to formal school may feel much the same way a first-time visit to a major city does for an adult living in a small town. Both experiences bring new people, unfamiliar practices and exciting activities, but the encounter may also be intimidating and overwhelming. When a child is systematically con-



nected to kindergarten, the new environment becomes a less threatening and a more predictable, comfortable place to be. Examples of ways school districts and CEGs work together to connect the pre-kindergarten child to the new school include: visiting the classroom and meeting the kindergarten teacher prior to the start of school, practicing the bus ride, and introducing preschoolers to people they will see in their new school on a regular basis such as the guidance counselor, librarian, cafeteria workers and janitor.

Helping families to make early connections to school can have lasting benefits for the child. When families are involved in transitioning their child into school, they tend to remain involved throughout their child's school career. This family attachment to the school has been shown to improve a student's school achievement. Beginning with the registration process, CEGs are there to assist schools and families. In collaboration with the schools, CEGs work to ease the kindergarten registration process by removing stumbling blocks and planning early registration events making registration convenient, comfortable and informative for families.

Mary Hall, communication and outreach specialist for Pennsylvania Keys (*PA Keys pro-*





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vides statewide leadership in the development of an integrated and coordinated system of program quality improvements and professional development supports for early childhood education), explains how CEGs can do this. “Many people think that if families know the date and time for registration, the logistics are simple. But for a family not owning a car that may not be the case and the result may be that the child is not registered in a timely manner,” she said. “This can cause a chain reaction. Because there are school buses to transport the child, he or she shows up, but the school did not know the child was coming. The number of students the school prepared for and the number of students showing up differs. That can cause problems with teacher to student ratios, materials, etc. For the child, it can mean that he or she is totally unprepared for entrance into formal schooling.”

Hall goes on to say, “CEGs work to engage families who may struggle with transitioning a child to kindergarten. Last year, one school district serving a very large public housing community solved this problem by working with the CEG to organize early kindergarten registration right in the community center at the housing

complex, creating a win-win situation,” she said. “The school had a more accurate prediction of the number of students who would be attending and the parents received the needed information in advance of the start of school that helped them to better prepare their child for the experience.”

Another strategy to encourage early registration is being used in Allegheny County. Martha Isler from the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC) said, “We have designated April as ‘Kindergarten Registration Month’ and are organizing and coordinating several efforts to stimulate early registration. We have selected three Pittsburgh Public Schools and the McKeesport School District as key target areas for special events for families, advertising and media reminders, and participation in the ‘Kindergarten Here I Come’ activities being held at the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum,” she said. “But our focus is not limited to only those schools – we are also working with about a dozen other school districts and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, where a half-time transition coordinator has been funded by the Heinz Endowments, to hold additional activities.”

Isler goes on to say, “We hope the result of the advertising, media coverage and special events is that the word spreads throughout the region and that we have record breaking early registration rates county-wide this year.”

The role the CEG plays in the transition process often moves beyond assisting with early registration. CEGs also serve as a valuable resource for families; informing them about helpful services offered through the school and in the community that parents may not know about such as parenting classes, literacy workshops, afterschool child-care programs, health fairs and screenings. These services often alleviate obstacles that make educating the child difficult for some families.

CEGs also play an active part to ensure that schools are regarded as a vital partner in the community. When the school is viewed this way, it becomes a comfortable place for families and can further advance their connection to the school. CEGs often work with the schools and community groups to see that this happens by arranging for activities like community fairs and transition camps to be held at the school.

Having continuity between early learning programs and kindergarten makes both experiences more valuable. Research shows that the positive outcomes for children who have experienced quality early care settings continues throughout the school years when there is coordination and alignment between early learning programs and schools and when the family plays an active role in the transition process. CEGs can work with both systems to assist with activities that enable pre-kindergarten children to communicate with kindergarten students through web chats, exchanging letters and pictures, and making actual classroom visits. This not only helps to build relationships between the children, but also builds relationships between the teachers; helping to foster awareness of what is being taught in each environment and what teachers and children can expect of each situation.

In addition to the coordination efforts offered by the CEGs, OCDEL also offers a Tran-

sition Toolkit for professionals working in early childhood settings and kindergarten. The ideas and information in the toolkit come from a review of the national research and a statewide collection of successful transition practices.

For students with special needs, creating an effective transition experience from early learning programs to kindergarten is vitally important. To obtain this extra support, families of students with special needs, who have Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), can turn to their intermediate unit for assistance. Barbara Rothermel, early intervention program supervisor at Intermediate Unit 1, said, “It is so important to coordinate transition from early learning programs to kindergarten for children with IEPs to assure continuity in the child’s education. For the schools in Fayette, Greene and Washington counties, an IU 1 special education administrator meets with school district administrators to individually plan a school age program for each of the 350 students with IEPs moving from preschool to kindergarten.”

Rothermel goes on to say, “We want to assure that the needed services the child is receiving continue without interruption and that all of the gains the child has already made are retained and built upon. In some cases, these early intervention strategies are so effective in getting the child on the right track that the student progresses to the point that special services are no longer needed.”

One of the crucial things Robert Fulghum said we learn in kindergarten is, “When you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.” Perhaps that is exactly the way we should think about the transition process from early learning programs to kindergarten. As we move kids from home or early learning programs to kindergarten, it works best when schools, early learning programs, and families all hold hands and stick together and are supported in doing so. **b**



To contact your local CEG, visit: www.papromiseforchildren.com.
To obtain the Transition Toolkit visit: www.pakeys.org.