PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINED LEARNING

Creating Continuity Across Head Start Programs and Elementary Schools

ACF

Contents

Administration for
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Office of Head Start | 8th Floor Portals Building, 1250 Maryland Ave, SW, Washington DC 20447 | **eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov**

Dear Head Start Colleagues:

I am pleased to introduce a new Head Start resource, *Partnerships for Sustained Learning: Creating Continuity Across Head Start Programs and Elementary Schools.* This *Guide* represents one important part of a larger Head Start school readiness agenda and builds on the concepts and strategies in the well-known Head Start Frameworks for positive outcomes for 3-5 year olds, for programs serving infants and toddlers, and for family engagement.

This is a new resource and focuses on the importance of creating better continuity across Head Start and the early years of elementary school. Research and experience have taught us that when children's experiences build on what has come before and connect to what comes next, they are more likely to be successful long-term learners.

The *Guide* is designed to be used at the local level by Head Start program directors and staff as a tool for working with their elementary school counterparts. The underlying assumption is that programs and practices established at the local level are best suited to meet the unique strengths and needs of the community being served and, therefore, are more likely to be effective. To that end, it places school leaders, classroom teachers and staff, and families squarely at the center of the work.

The *Guide* includes a Blueprint for Continuity that outlines key components, guiding principles, and enabling mechanisms that programs can use to lay a foundation for reaching out to and working with schools. In addition, it provides practical planning tools and concrete examples of ways that Head Start programs and schools can agree to work together to create more continuity.

It is our hope that this will be a valuable resource as you continue to ensure that children are successful learners in Head Start and beyond.

Sincerely,

//Yvette Sanchez Fuentes//

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes
Director
Office of Head Start

Introduction

Partnerships for Sustained Learning: Creating Continuity across Head Start Programs and Elementary Schools (Partnership Guide) was developed by the Office of Head Start. It provides an opportunity to learn about the importance of developing and sustaining partnerships between Head Start, or other early learning programs, and elementary schools.

As part of its overall school readiness strategy, Head Start joins a growing national effort that recognizes the importance of creating more comprehensive systems of education that are linked from one period of development and learning to the next. This continuum reduces the chance that children will be lost along the way and increases opportunities for positive outcomes and success in school and beyond.

The *Partnership Guide* is a starting point for identifying strategies and approaches to promote connections. Partnerships are valuable because they support transitions and increase continuity of children's experiences across the two systems. The end results are sustained learning and school success for children.

The *Partnership Guide* responds to legislation and regulations affecting Head Start. The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 requires that Head Start programs work with their elementary school counterparts to increase alignment in teaching and learning and to smooth the transition of Head Start children into kindergarten and the early grades.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR Parts 1301, 1302, 1303, 1304 and Guidance, 1305, 1306, 1308 and Guidance, 1309, 1310 and 1311) also include many provisions calling on Head Start programs to coordinate with school district administrators and principals to promote the effective movement of children into the school system and to increase the continuity of pedagogy and support services.

In addition, the *Head Start Roadmap to Excellence (2010)*, the quality initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, sets a course for what it will take to reach improved school readiness and to promote long-term success by laying out a set of specific actions. These actions include integrating Head Start into a continuum of high quality early care and education spanning the years before and after children enter school (Head Start–grade 3).

Specifically, the Roadmap addresses "Supporting Seamless Transitions and Continuity through Head Start, Kindergarten and 3rd Grade" and lays out goals for supporting programs to build relationships with public schools.

In addition to addressing the specific expectations for Head Start programs for preschool children, the *Partnership Guide* refers to issues faced by other early learning programs. It contains strategies that could be used by home-visiting programs and family child care networks to build continuity with public schools. The *Partnership Guide* is a relevant resource for the field at large on linking early education programs and the early grades of elementary school. The *Partnership Guide* also reflects the work of national education organizations, including the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2005). NAESP has developed standards and guidelines designed to support principals' efforts to establish partnerships with early learning programs that will lead to more continuous pathways of teaching and learning across systems.

Note: Throughout the Partnership Guide, *the term "early learning programs" encompasses all early learning preschool programs including Head Start. The term "elementary schools" includes kindergarten through grade 3.*

How to Use the Guide

The *Partnership Guide* has an Introduction and three Parts, and includes an Appendix:

- The Introduction links the *Partnership Guide* to school readiness and sustained learning and to legislative and regulatory material.
- Part I responds to the question "What are Partnerships?" This section addresses six elements that are central to understanding the role of effective partnerships in school success.
- Part II explains the Blueprint for Continuity (pg. 6) which reinforces the importance of continuity and describes the guiding principles and key players, the mechanisms, and the three components of continuity: Teaching and Learning, Support Services, and Making the Move to Kindergarten.
- Part III provides guidelines for creating continuity in each component based on the Blueprint. This Part provides examples of partnerships between programs and schools.
- The Appendix consists of tools including worksheets for each Blueprint component, a Partnership Agreement, and a Partnership Planning Form.
- A resource list offers additional materials. Some are pertinent to planning; many resources are available online.

Part I: What are the Elements of Effective Partnerships?

> The most successful partnerships will be formed out of multiple-perspective problem solving, mutual respect, and ongoing commitment to accomplishing a specific goal.
>
> *~Missouri Head Start State Collaboration Office*

As Head Start or early learning programs and elementary schools partner for school success, they will recognize that effective partnerships between their systems of learning are based on six fundamental elements. These elements address roles and responsibilities, processes, and strategies.

Effective Partnerships:

1. Recognize that early learning programs and schools are equally responsible for aligning experiences and increasing continuity across systems.

Research and experience demonstrate that when quality early learning programs in the preschool years are coupled with ongoing attention to creating more continuity across the kindergarten - grade 3 years, readiness gains are more likely to be sustained (Graves, 2006). The likelihood that children will reach third grade with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in later school years depends on whether their experiences in early learning programs, such as Head Start, and the early grades of elementary school are well connected and articulated from one learning level to the next (NAESP, 2005; Reynolds, Magnuson & Ou, 2006).

As noted by Gail Connelly, Executive Director of NAESP:

> *There's no disagreement among practitioners or researchers about the need to improve our nation's lowest performing schools, but we must begin at the beginning. Early learning and elementary school partnerships must be at the heart of our improvement equations. Elementary principals understand the importance of supporting the gains that children make in their earliest years, especially those who are nurtured in early childhood learning communities. (NAESP, 2005)*

Clearly, partnerships create cross-system continuity that benefits children.

2. Encourage two-way planning and communication.

Strong partnerships are built on an authentic two-way dialogue across early learning programs and elementary schools. Partnerships are reciprocal and must build on the strengths and contributions made by both systems to children's long-term success.

Elements of Effective Partnerships

1 Recognize that early learning programs and elementary schools are equally responsible for aligning experiences and increasing continuity across systems.

2 Encourage two-way planning and communication.

3 Focus on partnerships at the local level.

4 Support building continuity across multiple components.

5 Include multiple strategies and resources for multiple players.

6 Recognize that partnership-building is incremental and complex.

3. Focus on partnerships at the local level.

Working together, early learning and elementary school leaders, their staff, and families can design plans that reflect local conditions and build a tailored set of coordinated approaches to support ongoing school success for children. School districts, Head Start, and their early learning counterparts play an important role in establishing policies and agreements that make it possible for partnerships to work in their community.

4. Support building continuity across multiple components.

One component of effective continuity-building is preparing for a smooth transition to kindergarten. However, to promote long-term, positive outcomes for children, continuity-building must address two additional components that span the early learning environments and the school systems: teaching practices and learning experiences, and educational and non-educational support services.

5. Include multiple strategies and resources for multiple players.

Many different approaches and processes can help in the planning and implementation of partnerships. What works in one community may not be as effective in another one. In the course of partnership-building, some strategies may be more effective at the outset and others will be effective later. Likewise, some approaches are effective with administrators and principals. Other approaches may work for teachers and staff, or for families. Strategies can be adapted and modified by the key players to build more effective partnerships and improve continuity across the systems.

Tips for making partnerships more successful

❯ Assume positive partnerships are possible.

❯ Assess your own readiness and capacity to engage in partnerships.

❯ Identify what you are already doing and on what you can build.

❯ Develop a common language focused on teaching and learning.

❯ Plan to start small and choose a goal that is easily accomplished by both partners.

❯ Find out what you can about your potential partners before you meet.

6. Recognize that partnership building is incremental and complex.

For some early learning programs and elementary schools, working together is a well-established tradition. However, for many, the concept of establishing partnerships, building an understanding, and experiencing the give and take of working together—including planning and implementing joint efforts—is new and may seem overwhelming. Often the most effective partnerships take an incremental approach by focusing on a few activities or specific goals at a time.

Taken together, these six elements lay the groundwork for partnership-building between early learning programs and elementary schools.

Through strong partnerships, continuity can be enhanced to support sustained learning and school success for children. The next section, Part II, provides a blueprint for creating and sustaining continuity across the systems of learning.

Part II: Blueprint for Continuity

Continuity in teaching and learning requires a master plan that identifies clear expectations for children at each grade level, aligns these expectations with classroom experiences that facilitate reaching the expectations, and multiple forms of assessment that provide information on whether or not children are progressing toward the expectations set out for them throughout the years from PK (pre-kindergarten) through third grade.

~Bogard & Takanishi 2005

The Blueprint for Continuity provides a framework for planning and implementing the elements of partnerships referenced in Part I. (See the graphic on pg. 6.) The Blueprint identifies guiding principles and key players; components of continuity; and mechanisms for building continuity. The Blueprint answers three important continuity-building questions:

- Who needs to be involved to ensure partnerships work day-to-day?
- How can continuity ensure that all aspects of children's learning and development are addressed?
- What is the best way to build capacity to ensure that established partnerships can be sustained?

The next section of the *Partnership Guide*, Part III—Guidelines for Planning—has practical suggestions and concrete examples to address each of these questions.

BLUEPRINT FOR CONTINUITY

KEY PLAYERS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES	CONTINUITY COMPONENTS	MECHANISMS
Leadership Matters	Teaching and Learning	Professional Development for Teachers, Staff, and Leaders
Teachers and Staff Make Things Happen	Support Services	Organizational Structures
Families Keep the Process Going	Making the Move from Head Start to Kindergarten	Ongoing Assessment of Partnership Progress

Elementary principals must establish a culture of shared responsibility among all partners in the learning community to encourage the connection to families, ensure that appropriate early learning settings are present in the school building, and support instruction that aligns to a continuum of learning from pre-K to grade 3. The payoff for this hard work will be success for children, reduced costs of remediation and retention, and enhanced prospects for all students to graduate from high school with college and career ready skills.

~Pre-K Coalition 2011

KEY PLAYERS need to be engaged. They will be faced with the important job of creating new and mutually-supportive relationships.

Making partnerships work depends to a large extent on the relationships formed by individuals. Effective relationships will move the process and key contributors will include: administrators, principals and early childhood directors; teachers and staff; and families.

Key players to increase continuity include:

- ### *Administrators, principals, and directors*

    WHO? Directors from local Head Start programs, centers, or other early learning programs; education, health or family service managers; elementary school principals; school district administrators; Head Start grantee directors; and others who have the authority and capacity to create the conditions and culture for building continuity.

    WHY? When early learning program and elementary school leaders are equally engaged in and mutually committed to finding ways to create more continuity across programs, the likelihood of success is ensured.

- ### *Teachers and staff*

    WHO? Early learning program and elementary school classroom teachers; assistant teachers; mentor teachers; education supervisors; special services workers and others who play a central role in putting plans into practice.

    WHY? When teachers and staff are given the information, flexibility, and support they need to work together for continuity, plans and ideas become reality. Teachers play a critical and central role in ensuring that what is planned is accomplished.

- ### *Families*

    WHO? All adults routinely caring for children, including fathers and grandparents and kinship caregivers, who keep the process going by informing efforts to meet the needs of individual children and supporting continuous learning.

    WHY? When families are continuously engaged as active partners in every aspect of their child's teaching and learning experiences, they strengthen and support continuity.

COMPONENTS are the focus for continuity-building. Three important components should be addressed comprehensively to ensure children's ongoing success.

The Blueprint for Continuity (pg. 6) recognizes that children's learning and development are an accumulation of experiences over time. It identifies three important components of learning experiences that include: teaching and learning in all settings; access to support services; and the transition into kindergarten. All of these components must be addressed to build continuity. Exposing children to a continuous and well-articulated set of learning opportunities across the educational systems will result in positive outcomes and school success.

Key components for continuity include:

- ### Teaching and learning

  WHAT? Creating new links to build on, sustain, and expand children's learning by connecting teaching practices, standards, curricula, expectations and learning environments, and using data to help drive instructional planning and practice.

  WHY? When teaching and learning address all aspects of development and incrementally build children's learning from one year to the next, children are most likely to make progress.

- ### Support services

  WHAT? Providing needed services that contribute to children's ability to be successful in school.

  WHY? When children sustain access to services they were receiving in early learning programs and are connected to additional educational and non-educational services in elementary schools, their ongoing adjustment and active participation in learning are enhanced.

- ### Making the move to kindergarten and beyond

  WHAT? Focusing on the move to kindergarten as a key transition point and opportunity to support school readiness and family engagement.

  WHY? Children build needed skills and do not lose ground when transitions are jointly planned, are comprehensive and ongoing, and engage families in the process.

MECHANISMS will build capacity. Key players can ensure that efforts are supported by strategies that increase understanding and communication, advance progress, assess what is planned and implemented, and sustain effective protocols and systems.

Continuity cannot be sustained without structures or mechanisms in place. There needs to be an intentional focus on finding ways to build the human and institutional capacity required to turn plans into everyday practice.

As professional development plans are being implemented and organizational structures are put in place, they must be assessed regularly. By noting the progress made and the challenges encountered, adjustments can be made and increased continuity results.

Effective mechanisms for building and sustaining capacity to support continuity include:

- *Professional development*

  WHAT? Ensuring administrators and principals, teachers and staff, and families have opportunities to work and learn together and have access to high quality, sustained professional development that is available across levels, data-driven, and intentionally designed to impact practice.

  WHY? Making joint professional learning communities and high quality professional development routinely available opens up communication, builds shared understanding, and creates more continuity across the systems. Principals play an important dual role by agreeing to participate in joint learning opportunities themselves, as well as by providing support and flexibility for teachers and staff to participate in joint training.

- *Organizational structures*

  WHAT? Establishing cross-systems structures and approaches to working together, such as joint planning teams and shared data protocols.

  WHY? When systems establish common or shared operational structures, they solidify relationships, support sustainability, and institutionalize best practices.

- *Ongoing assessment of partnership progress*

  WHAT? Setting goals, tracking progress and outcomes, and making adjustments.

  WHY? Systems that plan to collect and use data to measure progress on jointly agreed-upon goals and activities are able to maintain a focus on their most important objectives. They also improve communication, identify next steps, expose barriers, and institutionalize best practices.

Part III: Guidelines for Planning

How the Guidelines Are Organized and How to Use Them

The planning guidelines in this section provide flexible guidance, strategies, action steps, and concrete examples for Head Start or early learning programs and elementary schools. They can be modified and adapted to the local setting. Each of three sections focuses on a component of the Blueprint for Continuity. (Refer to the graphic on pg. 6.)

- Teaching and learning. (Refer to pgs. 13-17.)
- Delivery of support services. (Refer to pgs. 18-22.)
- Making the move to kindergarten. (Refer to pgs. 23-27.)

Each section includes:
- A goal statement that identifies the intended outcome.
- The rationale for why building continuity in this area matters.
- "Before You Start," a series of questions that may be helpful to consider before reaching out to potential partners.
- "Partnerships at a Glance," a menu of suggested activities and strategies for programs with various levels of experience in establishing partnerships.

The planning guidelines use a three-stage rubric that acknolwedges that partnerships develop and evolve over time. In fact, each partnership is unique and may include elements from multiple stages simultaneously.   It is important that potential partners assess where they are in the process and choose the activities most appropriate to their level of experience and capacity to engage in shared efforts.

- *Stage 1: Getting Started.* This stage provides examples of how programs and schools can start the process by communicating and networking, exchanging information to build understanding and trust, and identifying shared goals and priorities.

- *Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together.* This stage moves users to the next level of engagement and includes suggestions about working together to create common and complimentary approaches. In this stage, new policies, practices, or programs are tried out, assessed for how well they work, and adjusted.

- *Stage 3: Business as Usual.* This stage assumes partnerships have been put into place and are operating successfully. It also addresses ways to ensure that partnerships are sustained and become part of the institutional culture of systems.

The Appendix at the end of the Partnership Guide *builds on the guidelines in this section and includes self-assessment worksheets and partnership planning forms.*

Laying the Groundwork for Planning

Establishing partnerships and finding ways to increase continuity across systems of learning can present challenges. Taking this step requires members of each system of learning to sit at the same table, come to an understanding about how each system works, and to explore ways to work better together. Partners that see working together as an opportunity to address shared goals, rather than to discuss problems, achieve significant accomplishments.

A good starting point is to look for common features across systems. These can be the focus of future partnerships and the basis for continuity.

The box below includes suggested questions that early learning programs and elementary schools can use to start a dialogue. The questions also can help partners establish common ground and complementary approaches. By setting a common frame of reference, it will be easier to work in a reciprocal manner. The "Before You Start" sections of the three guidelines that follow suggest other questions to initiate discussions.

If you are a Head Start or early learning program: What do you know about elementary schools in your community?

- What elementary schools will children attend after they leave your program?
- What is the performance status of the school(s) children will be attending (high performing, average, failing, or other)?
- Does the school(s) receive Title I funding?
- Does the state or district require the use of a kindergarten readiness assessment?
- Does the state have a set of learning standards for children in kindergarten and grades 1, 2, and 3?
- Does the district/school offer full day kindergarten?
- How are families engaged in schools?
- What services are available for special populations of children?
- Does my community have an operating early learning or school readiness council?

If you are an elementary school: What do you know about the Head Start or preschool programs in your community?

- Where are incoming kindergarteners coming from?
- Does the state have a set of early learning standards?
- Which special populations of children will be coming to kindergarten from programs in my community?
- What do I know about the Head Start or other early learning programs in my community?
    - o Does the program use a set of learning standards?
    - o Is readiness defined?
    - o How are families engaged?
    - o Can children access support services?
- Does my community have an operating early learning or school readiness council?

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING CONTINUITY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

GOAL
Foster children's ongoing learning success by identifying and implementing common elements of standards, curriculum, instruction, and approaches to measuring progress and learning environments. This will increase alignment and continuity across systems for all learners.

RATIONALE
For children to be successful learners, teaching approaches and learning experiences must be aligned—that is, delivered in such a way that they enable children to build on what they have already accomplished and be prepared for what comes next. When standards, curricula, instructional practices, and assessment are linked to one another within a single grade or learning level, they are said to be in horizontal alignment. Curricula, instructional practices, expectations for achievement, and environments that follow continuously evolving yet linked paths across developmental levels of learning are said to be in vertical alignment. Keeping children on track and avoiding loss in learning gains is best accomplished when teaching and learning are aligned both horizontally and vertically.

To experience continuity in teaching and learning, children need to be exposed to:

- Standards that include all areas of development, are aligned across developmental levels, and clearly articulate what children are expected to know and do at each level.
- Curricula that are balanced, intentional, relevant and developmental (New, Palsha & Ritchie, 2009).
- Assessments that measure what is taught, are comprehensive, and are used to inform instruction.
- Instructional practices that include responding to individual children's developmental levels and providing emotional support to children.
- Learning environments that are well-organized, exhibit clear routines, and offer diverse learning activities.

The use of research on best practices and collecting and analyzing data on individual children's strengths and needs are two important levers . They can help drive instructional practice and teachers' planning within and across levels to ensure an aligned, multi-level approach to teaching and learning.

BEFORE YOU START
Early learning programs and elementary schools can ask themselves:

- Am I familiar with my state's early learning and development standards or my state's K-12 standards?
- Does my state/ district/ school utilize a kindergarten entry assessment? Do local early learning programs including Head Start measure school readiness or children's progress before they leave the program?
- What do I know about the structural aspects (class size, child-adult ratio, hours of attendance, and other elements) and the physical learning environment of local early learning programs or elementary schools?
- Has my state adopted the common core standards?

PARTNERSHIPS AT A GLANCE

Following are examples of how the key players in programs and schools can work together using available mechanisms, such as professional development, organizational structures and ongoing assessment of partnership progress. These efforts can help them to build continuity in teaching and learning.

Administrators, principals, and directors

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Agree that creating successful instructional linkages is a shared goal.
- Meet to exchange initial information on educational programs and priorities.
- Attend each other's conferences or committee meetings.
- Visit each other's classrooms to observe and learn more about instructional practices and learning environments.
- Set aside common time for teachers and staff to meet and participate in joint professional development.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Examine standards being used in schools and programs. Identify common links and differences. Share results with teachers and staff.
- Examine each other's literacy, math, and other curricula. Identify common links and differences. Share results with teachers and staff.
- Exchange information and discuss each other's expectations and approaches to measuring student performance. Identify common links and differences. Share results with teachers and staff.
- Involve teachers in setting goals for working together and identifying areas of focus for teaching and learning.
- Create a data exchange process that provides kindergarten teachers with information on incoming students. Ensure that it provides early learning teachers with information on how children are progressing in kindergarten and beyond.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Meet annually to share and update school improvement and school readiness plans. Set shared goals for improving outcomes for children.
- Build on common areas across standards to establish shared goals and priorities for teaching and learning.
- Designate common characteristics of curricula, instruction, and assessments that should be in place across systems.
- Establish early learning program and elementary school joint task forces or committees to formalize connections across systems and prioritize continuity.

Teachers and staff

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Participate in classroom exchanges to become familiar with learning environments, teaching practices, curricula, and program operations in both early learning program and elementary school classrooms.
- Exchange and examine documents and resources that will clarify what is happening in both settings,. These include standards, scope and sequence documents, and curricula.
- Meet to exchange information on kindergarten entrance expectations and Head Start school readiness goals. Discuss how these influence children's classroom experiences.
- Meet to plan ways to work together and learn from each other.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Share information and examine each other's assessment tools. Discuss what is learned from each tool and how valuable they are to informing instruction. Consider what works, what is challenging, what gives you the information you need.
- Consider using similar approaches to collecting student information through observation, such as checklists, anecdotal records, and portfolios. Set aside time to reflect on what observations reveal about the similarities and differences in children's experiences in early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Based on discovered similarities and differences across approaches to teaching and learning, discuss ways to adapt each other's work to be more consistent across levels.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Create a plan for the regular exchange of information and ideas about specific curriculum areas such as math, literacy, and language development. Plan monthly cross-classroom meetings, shared electronic workspaces, and ongoing classroom exchanges.
- Establish vertical teams to engage in ongoing collaborations to assess, reflect on, and improve teaching practices.

Families, with assistance from staff

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Share information and work with teachers to set educational goals for children that reflect their cultural and linguistic needs and competencies.
- Work with teachers to develop plans about how to support learning at home.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Share information and observations about all aspects of their children's development that can inform teaching in early learning and elementary school classrooms.
- Meet with teachers to receive information on how children are assessed and what outcomes have been set for their children.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Be included on decision making or advisory groups related to curriculum and instruction.

Professional development approaches

Stage 1: Getting Started

- Plan joint training on teaching and learning topics of common interest that span early learning programs and the elementary schools. Consider child development, early brain development, planning learning spaces, teacher-child interactions, and supporting social and emotional development.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together

- Plan joint training on specific curricula and/or assessments being implemented in early learning and elementary programs and schools.
- Develop peer learning communities of early learning and early elementary grade teachers.
- Offer joint training on program and school approaches to setting learning goals. Include specific training on how Head Start programs set, measure, and revise school readiness goals.
- Engage in joint training on how early learning and elementary school teachers and classrooms are evaluated and monitored.

Stage 3: Business as Usual

- Provide in-class mentors/coaches who work across early learning programs and elementary schools to support aligned teaching and learning.

Organizational structures that support continuity in teaching and learning

Stage 1: Getting Started

- Establish a regular meeting schedule, procedures, and key players.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together

- Convene regular meetings between early learning programs and elementary school administrators to discuss common issues of teaching and learning, such as the use of assessments, and supporting social and emotional development.
- Develop a shared vision for children's outcomes.

Stage 3: Business as Usual

- Establish joint early learning program and elementary school leadership or planning teams to review current approaches and practices. Work together to find areas where continuity in curricula, instruction and expectations can be increased.
- Build on identified commonalities across standards to establish shared goals and priorities for teaching and learning.
- Designate common characteristics of curricula, instruction, and assessments that should be in place across systems.
- Establish joint early learning program and elementary school task forces or committees. Formalize connections across programs and prioritize increasing continuity.

Questions to consider in measuring progress and assessing understanding of what it takes to create continuity in teaching and learning

- Are standards, curricula, and assessments discussed among early learning program and elementary school teachers and administrators?
- Are data being used by early learning program and elementary school administrators and teachers to discuss instructional practices and plan professional development?
- Are information and training focused on what children need to know and do from preschool through grade 3?
- Are teachers and staff, administrators and principals able to participate in classroom visits and joint planning and professional development opportunities?

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING CONTINUITY IN DELIVERY OF SUPPORT SERVICES

GOAL

Increase continuity of service delivery across systems. This will reduce both academic and nonacademic barriers to achievement and ensure sustained learning.

RATIONALE

Conditions that children encounter outside of school can play a significant role in how well they are able to engage in learning. When barriers to learning are reduced or eliminated, and support services are in place, children are more likely to perform well in school.

Head Start has a long tradition of providing comprehensive support services to children and families as a key strategy for improving health and well-being, thereby increasing school readiness. More early learning programs and elementary schools now recognize that meeting the needs of children helps ensure school readiness and sustained learning. When children make the move to elementary school, it is critical to keep them connected to important family support services.

When early learning programs, elementary schools, and community service providers work together—especially across the crucial time when children and families are moving to kindergarten—the likelihood increases that existing services will be sustained and new services will be accessed. These services often are critical for the support of special populations of children and families, such as children who are dual language learners, children with developmental delays or disabilities, children in the welfare system, and children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

To ensure children and families can access needed services and supports, they must have:
- Information and access to school-based educational and non-educational services.
- Information and access to community-based services.
- Information on health and nutrition resources.
- Targeted support and information to address the needs of children with disabilities.
- Targeted support and information to address the needs of children and families who are immigrants or speak a language other than English.
- Help navigating the service-provision process.
- Targeted cross-system support to sustain existing and identify new services as children transition to elementary school.
- Access to resources and information in their home language.
- Family support to build a sense of efficacy and become confident advocates for children.

BEFORE YOU START

Early learning programs and elementary schools can ask:

- What federally- or state-supported services can I offer to children and families in my program or school?
- What and where are the major service delivery agencies and organizations in my community?

- How familiar am I with the concept of risk factors and how they influence children's learning or development?
- Am I aware of the prevailing social, economic, and environmental conditions affecting families and children in this community?
- What special populations or groups of high need children are enrolled in the local early learning programs or elementary schools?
- How are the needs of special populations of children addressed in early learning programs or elementary schools?
- Do I currently have a way to track chronic absence in my program or school?

PARTNERSHIPS AT A GLANCE

Following are examples of how the key players in programs and schools can work together using available mechanisms, such as professional development, organizational structures, and ongoing assessment of partnership progress. These efforts can help them to build continuity in the delivery of services.

Administrators , principals, and directors

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Meet to exchange information on the services offered in early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Meet to exchange information on populations of high needs children and families in Head Start programs, such as non-English speaking parents, children living with food insecurity, and those with attendance problems and high mobility rates.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Participate on local community councils to increase understanding of available resources and improve communications and collaboration with local service providers.
- Provide release time for teachers and staff to meet together to plan and coordinate service delivery.
- Share information and establish three-way connections (early learning program, elementary school, and community) with after-school and non-school supports and services.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Agree to share family outreach and family support staff to work with individual families whose children will be entering elementary school after early learning programs to provide them with information and provide access to needed services.
- Develop a protocol for exchanging information about existing services being provided.
- Conduct a jointly developed and distributed family questionnaire to determine service needs.
- Develop a protocol for exchanging information about existing services.
- Identify a local data collection partner to map existing community resources and compare to parent identified gaps and additional community services needed.

Teachers and staff

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Exchange information with parental consent about services and supports being offered to children from early learning programs who will be entering elementary schools.
- Exchange information with parental consent about the special needs of individual children entering elementary school to alert school officials to the potential need for services for dual language learners, and those with food insecurity, chronic absence, and health issues.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Include explicit plans for continuity of services in joint transition plans.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Meet with families to discuss needs and inform them of available services that will be available at school entrance and to determine additional services their children may need.
- Offer joint information sessions and training to families on accessing community and school-based services.
- Develop and conduct joint family needs assessments that elementary schools can use to plan services.

Families, with assistance, from staff

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Share information about children's involvement in out-of-school services.
- Confer regularly regarding the needs of individual children and provide information or support for obtaining services.
- Review needs assessments and other sources of information on family well-being to develop a better understanding of prevailing needs.
- Provide information on available resources in the elementary schools children will be entering.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Provide feedback on experiences with services in order to inform improvement.
- Facilitate the creation of family-to family support networks across early learning programs and elementary schools. Families can help recruit other families.
- Ensure that all jointly-developed print materials are written in a language families can understand and use to access needed services.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Develop plans for assessing and addressing the needs of dual language and non-English-speaking families to access school and non-school based services.
- Host parent academies or family leadership institutes to learn about advocating for their children and accessing needed services.

Professional development approaches

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Offer joint information sessions or prepare written resources that describe support services of early learning programs and elementary schools. and available services in the community.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Provide joint training on the impact of chronic absence during the early years on later student achievement.
- Provide joint training on best practices and approaches to identifying family stress and other non-educational needs of families and children.
- Provide joint training on implementing specific family support and engagement models that address non-educational needs of families and children.
- Provide joint training on the research linking family risk factors and student achievement.
- Provide joint training on best practices for reducing chronic early absence through child and family support.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Establish Head Start-school learning communities to enable ongoing communication on key issues and identify areas for additional training and technical assistance.

Organizational structures to support continuity in service delivery

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Establish a regular meeting schedule, procedures, and key players.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Share information and establish connections regarding organizational structures.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Conduct joint population-based school readiness assessments and identify a community-based data partner to link readiness findings to community conditions, such as poverty rates, availability of transportation, or health services.

Questions to consider in measuring progress and assessing understanding of what it takes to create more continuity in support services

- Are opportunities available for families to engage in consistent interactions with program and school staff to discuss issues related to service delivery needs for their children?
- Are early learning programs and elementary schools working together to identify services needed for specific children and families?
- Does staff have access to current demographic information and community needs assessments to help inform their work with families?
- Do families have access to information about services available through elementary schools or community-based organizations?
- Is information available to families in their native language?

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING CONTINUITY FOR MAKING THE MOVE TO KINDERGARTEN

GOAL

Establish cooperative relationships between families and early learning program and elementary school staff. This will ease transitions, better prepare children and increase the children's familiarity with new school environments and expectations.

RATIONALE

For transition to elementary school to be a productive and positive experience, activities and experiences must be both intentional and targeted to the needs of children and families. Practices must incorporate the best of both systems to create a coordinated process that involves families, teachers, school leaders, support staff, and community members. Activities must be varied to meet the needs of all children and families, ongoing to make the greatest impact, and targeted to individuals, as well as to groups of children and families. Ensuring that transition planning and activities are appropriate and culturally and linguistically responsive to the children and families are key considerations across transition strategies.

The role of families in supporting children's move from early learning programs to elementary school is especially important. Family-school relationships established in early learning programs and sustained as the child enters elementary school can have a positive, lasting impact on family engagement and children's learning. An equal exchange of information and an opportunity to share concerns and insights helps to build a foundation for successful transition for children and families. When early learning program and elementary school staff plan and work together to make families a part of the transition process, the resulting continuity of education and care helps to increase families' sense of effectiveness in the process and to ensure continued engagement in their child's learning at home and at school.

Families need opportunities to:
- Learn about the new school environment and expectations.
- Share information and insights about their child with early learning programs and elementary school teachers.
- Be a part of planning the transition from early learning programs to elementary school.
- Connect with other families.
- Link with other parent leaders to sustain established leadership roles through membership on elementary school committees and parent organizations.
- Learn about ways to prepare for transition and support learning at home.
- Understand the importance of a seamless transition from early learning programs to elementary school and the impact of transition on learning.

Children need opportunities to:
- Learn about their new school and school routines.
- Meet their new teachers.
- Maintain connection with their former preschool teachers.
- Practice new skills they will need in elementary school.
- Connect with peers.

BEFORE YOU START

Early learning programs and elementary schools can ask:

- To which elementary school will children be going? From what early learning program will children be coming?
- What information are children and families currently receiving from programs and schools about starting kindergarten?
- What activities and programs are in place in early learning programs or elementary schools to support transitions?
- How are families engaged in the transition process – at early learning programs and at elementary schools?
- What are children expected to know and do when they leave Head Start or early learning programs? What are children expected to know or do when they enter kindergarten?
- Does the elementary school or school district utilize a kindergarten readiness assessment?
- Is there a mechanism in place for exchanging student data across early learning programs and elementary schools?

PARTNERSHIPS AT A GLANCE

Following are examples of how the key players in programs and schools can work together using available mechanisms, such as professional development, organizational structures and ongoing assessment of partnership progress. These efforts will help them support the move to kindergarten.

Administrators, principals, and directors

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Meet to exchange information on school readiness goals and kindergarten expectations.
- Establish common times for early learning program and elementary school staff to meet or participate in joint training focused on building continuity across transition plans.
- Discuss ways and make plans to collaborate to increase kindergarten registration. (Holding registration in centers and schools and distributing print materials explaining kindergarten registration are two examples of steps to increase registration.)

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Participate in transition planning jointly or separately in your own early learning program or elementary school.
- Establish protocols for identifying and placing the highest risk students with highly effective teachers/classrooms.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Agree to make transitions part of the annual Head Start and school improvement planning process.
- Develop protocols and shared data points to facilitate the exchange of data across early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Support the creation of joint transition forms.

- Plan jointly operated summer orientations or kindergarten camps for incoming kindergarten children.
- Support teacher efforts to create more continuity in classroom layout and daily schedules across early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Provide release time for early learning program and kindergarten teachers to make home visits to incoming kindergarten students.
- Support the regular collection of current community-based data on family/child demographics and information on mobility and program-school feeder patterns. Use data to inform transition plans.

Teachers and staff

Stage 1: Getting Started

- Meet to exchange information on school readiness goals and kindergarten expectations.
- Exchange information on current transition activities and approaches used in early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Develop a set of age-appropriate learning home activities to support kindergarten readiness.
- Visit each other's classrooms and buildings to learn about similarities in physical environments and daily routines.
- Share information that will inform the understanding of kindergarten teachers and other staffs about the needs of special populations of children who will be transitioning to their schools.
- Plan classroom visits or family events for children coming from early learning programs to learn about their new school.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together

- Participate in transition planning jointly or separately in your own program/school.
- Establish protocols for identifying and placing the highest risk students with highly effective teachers/classrooms.

Stage 3: Business as Usual

- With parental consent, exchange information on individual children moving to kindergarten.
- Discuss differences in learning spaces and daily schedule and look for ways to make them more consistent across systems.
- Plan and conduct joint home visits to children leaving early learning programs and transitioning to kindergarten.

Families with support from staff

Stage 1: Getting Started

- Access jointly developed information including print materials (in a language families can understand) about making the move from early learning programs to elementary school including for example:
  - * Name and location of the school their children will be attending, contact information and important dates to remember, and when, where, and how to register children for kindergarten.
  - * Information on parent-teacher organizations.
  - * Easy to read/understand information on kindergarten readiness and how families can support readiness at home.
- Take opportunities to participate in transition planning which include, when possible, an introduction to a teacher, principal, or other staff member at the school their children will be attending next.
- Review and sign (if they are willing) consent forms that will allow the transfer of child information from early learning programs to elementary schools.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together

- Link to representatives of school parent-teacher organizations before school starts.
- Understand and use data to describe their children's progress to kindergarten teachers and support staff.
- Participate in jointly-convened transition/kindergarten information sessions.
- Visit the schools their children will be attending next.

Stage 3: Business as Usual

- Access a school-based parent mentor to explain and facilitate both the transition process and family engagement in children's learning.

Professional development approaches

Stage 1: Getting Started

- Plan the following joint training:
  - * Research and best practices for planning and executing effective transitions.
  - * The impact of transitions on children and families and on academic and social adjustment.
  - * Effective approaches to engaging families in transition planning.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together

- Plan joint training on specific issues and topics related to effective transitions for special populations being served, such as children who are dual language learners, migrant students, and children who are homeless, or in the welfare system.
- Conduct joint training on planning and conducting parent meetings and transition activities.
- Engage staff in joint training on how to explain student progress data to families.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Create leadership academies and communities of practice for administrators and principals to address best practices in leading efforts to create more continuity across programs.
- Invite teachers and staff from other early learning programs and elementary schools not involved in joint transition work to attend training on what works and lessons learned.
- Convene an administrators' and principals' roundtable on issues related to transitions.

Organizational structures to support continuity in making the move to school

Stage 1: Getting Started
- Establish a regular meeting schedule, procedures, and key players.

Stage 2: Putting the Pieces Together
- Establish joint early learning program-school transition planning teams.
- Develop a written transition plan that guides children's paths from early learning programs to kindergarten.

Stage 3: Business as Usual
- Create a shared family liaison position to work with families across early learning programs and elementary schools.
- Establish consistent and accessible transition practices that focus on the continuity of each child's learning opportunities across early learning programs and kindergarten.
- Ensure that common or shared processes or resources (such as common transition forms) have been developed to facilitate the exchange of information and data between early learning programs and elementary schools.

Questions to consider in measuring progress and assessing understanding of what it takes to create more continuity in making the move to kindergarten

- Are opportunities available for teachers, families and school leaders to engage in consistent interactions that focus on ensuring that each individual child has a smooth transition from an early learning program to kindergarten?
- Are families engaged and involved in the development of plans and activities?
- Are consistent and accessible transition practices in place that focus on the continuity of each child's learning opportunities across systems?
- Have common or shared processes or resources (such as common transition forms) been developed to facilitate the exchange of information and data between early learning programs and elementary schools?

Conclusion

As work to create effective practices and policies to support continuity across Head Start and other early learning programs and elementary school continues, it will take additional effort to ensure that systems are linked in meaningful ways. Linking systems requires more than simply putting adjoining pieces together. To be effective, efforts must be intentional and build interrelated sets of experiences and expectations that ultimately can result in better outcomes for children.

Early learning programs and elementary schools are well-positioned to assume a leadership role. They can demonstrate effective approaches to building continuity through partnerships that recognize the importance of engaging families, that are aimed at increasing continuity in teaching and learning, and that foster the delivery of support services, and seamless transitions to kindergarten. Successful implementation can lead to models of best practice that will inform the work of other schools and programs and contribute to long-term student success.

The Appendix in the Partnership Guide contains worksheets and tools which are an extension of the planning resources in Part III. They are designed to assist programs and schools in determining how best to establish and sustain partnerships to advance the objective of sustained learning.

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